

Deluged by email?



Tomorrow's Cleaning's resident technology expert, Dean Hudson, Development Manager for CleanLink, gives some useful advice on managing email.

Q Do you have any tips for managing email? I spend so much time reading, sorting, organising and replying to them, that I'm getting behind with my 'real' work, despite doing work emails in my own time from my phone. I'm getting stressed out with it, but the emails still keep on coming.

A To the delight of my two young children, I recently read to them the first novel in the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.' My daughter got particularly animated by one chapter, where an important letter inviting Harry to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry had been confiscated by his mean uncle Vernon. Another letter was sent and that, too, was intercepted. More and more letters were sent and confiscated until eventually hundreds of them were arriving - through the letter box and even down the chimney. It was the one that popped out of the toaster, hitting uncle Vernon in the face that had my little girl laughing out loud. He whisked the family off to a small and isolated windswept island cottage to avoid any more post, but despite the surrounding stormy sea and buffeting gale, still, the letter to Harry got through.

I expect you may be feeling a bit like uncle Vernon, and if you are anything like me, you probably have

a multitude of email accounts, both work and personal, all linked to your smartphone that never leaves your side. So don't worry, I don't suggest turning your email or phone off - not even when on holiday - lest you should suffer 'out of the loop stress.' Nor would I label those checking for new email a thousand times a day with obsessive compulsive disorder; cognitive behavioral therapists need to earn a living.

No, my answer is two-fold: choice of response and a to-do list.

Response?

You can control your response to the deluge of letters that come down your chimney. You don't need to read them all (really, you don't). You don't need to sort them all. You don't need to mark them all as 'read' or keep moving them from one box to another (to make things look neat and tidy). You don't need to provide an immediate response, and you are not responsible for the slighted feelings of any sender that expects one - they will be too busy worrying that you must have a real life and that they haven't. And playing with email management tools instead of heeding the above won't solve the problem.

To-Do?

When an email really does require you to act, you can manage the process with a 'to-do' list. But not an ordinary one; they are rubbish because they focus on 'important'

things and before you know it, everything is important. A better way, is to categorise your to-do items according to the physical work activities involved; a subtle but fundamental difference.

Break down your job into its basic physical tasks, and attend to these units of work (as far as is practicable) during pre-allocated time slots during the day. My categories include: reading and writing, people (face to face meetings), telephone calls, programming, thinking and miscellaneous. So, I read or write email during four time slots of a day. Big tasks that need some thought will be channeled to the 'thinking' folder to receive proper attention in due course, whereupon they can be broken down into further physical actions.

This method is not perfect, but it can bring some focus to your work, deterring you from flitting from one thing to the next without getting any real work done.

Now, where did I put my phone?

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