

MANAGING E-MAIL OVERLOAD: DON'T PARDON THE INTERRUPTION

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This article is Part 2 of a three part series on "Managing E-Mail Overload." Part 1, titled "Managing E-mail Overload: Reducing Volume by Being Mindful of Others," can be found in the March/April 2010 issue of The Advocate (pages 42-43).

As I noted in Part 1, a study showed that a person whose work is interrupted takes 15 minutes to get back to productive work. This article provides tips and tricks you can use to reduce the "interruptions" caused by email.

Schedule your email

When I was a young attorney, an older, more experienced attorney, told me of how he only takes/returns phone calls in two blocks during the day, staying focused on work the rest of the day. Under his plan, unless it is an emergency, he is "unavailable" to take calls except between 10-11 a.m. and 3-4 p.m., allowing him to focus on work uninterrupted. It is something he has to discuss with his clients...letting them know that he works more efficiently and thoroughly for them if he isn't constantly interrupted by phone calls. He also guarantees to clients that he will call them back within a few hours. For him and his clients, it is a system that works really well.

Why not apply the same teaching to email? Think of how much more focused your work would be if you didn't pause every 5-15 minutes to quickly respond to an email you just received. Think of how much more efficient (and productive) you could be if you did that. The benefits of doing it substantially outweigh the drawbacks.

For example, you could set up a system where you only check your email when you first get into the office, and then every couple of hours during the day. You could also include a reminder in your email footer regarding how you handle email, for instance: "I usually check my e-



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mail every few hours. I typically respond to the e-mails I receive within 24 hours. Please call me if your matter is urgent and needs my immediate attention."

Have a conversation with your clients

How many of you have your email program (or Blackberry) checking for new messages every 5 minutes? Do you realize that means that you effectively check your email over 100,000 times a year? Do your clients REALLY expect you to check your email 100,000 times a year? Do your clients REALLY need you to respond to their emails within 5 minutes of receipt? Do they REALLY expect you to check your email late at night? Do your clients like that other clients constantly interrupt the work you are doing for them, causing their work to not have your full attention or efficiency?

Part of being a good attorney is having conversations with your clients about communication. Don't presume that your clients "expect" you do act a certain way without discussing it with them. Have an honest conversation regarding this with your existing clients...you'll likely be surprised by what they tell you.

Constant interruptions

You wouldn't tolerate one of your staff members interrupting your work every five minutes...so why do you let your email program do it? Learn your email program's settings regarding how often it checks email for you and what pop-up messages/balloons it gives you every time you receive an email. Then, consider changing those settings to reduce the number of interruptions you receive a day.

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button to check for new messages manually) and I disable all pop-up notifications regarding "new" emails being received.

Sure, there are times when you are waiting on a very important email that must be immediately review/responded to, but typically, email can wait. Trust me, the less interruptions you have, the more efficient you'll be.

Your assistant as your client's assistant

Not all of the questions your clients ask you are "legal" in nature, but they are questions that your clients need answered (e.g., status updates). Thus, you should encourage your clients to contact your assistant for simple questions and invest in training your assistant to answer simple questions and to know when to forward the question on to you. I use my email footer to help reinforce this concept, including text that reminds the reader that: "My assistant is [name]. Please feel free to contact her at [email address] or [phone number] if [he/she] can be of assistance to you." You'll be surprised how many of your clients take you up on the offer and contact your assistant instead of you.

By reducing the number of daily interruptions email causes each and every one of us, we can each be a little more efficient and focused, benefiting both our clients and us.

About the Author

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