



SEATTLE@HOME

June 20, 2008

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

Get Organized: Taking out the digital trash

Is your inbox an e-mail landfill? Here are some tips on sorting through the garbage

By LAURA LEIST
SPECIAL TO THE P-I

Several years ago I asked one of my clients why she had 14,000 e-mails in her inbox. She told me she didn't know how to delete them. And she was serious.

In fact, many of my clients leave all their e-mail in their inbox -- some, like the woman above, have saved more than 10,000. That is a lot of e-mail.

So as a business icebreaker, when I see thousands of e-mails in an inbox, my first question is, "Do you know where the delete key is?"

This usually gets a good laugh and then we can talk about why there are so many e-mails living in the inbox and why they have not been deleted or moved to subfiles.

While your home computer doesn't appear cluttered from the outside, it can be a digital disaster on the inside. E-mails, files and photos are the main source of the mess, because, with storage space so inexpensive, it's easy to keep everything.

However, just as with the physical clutter, it's important to create a digital organizing system and maintain it. What may work for one person may not work for the next. You must decide what's best for you.

In future articles, I'll discuss systems for organizing digital files, including photos. For today, I'll present four actions you can apply to e-mails to help eliminate digital clutter in your inbox.

Some e-mail service providers limit the size of your mailbox, forcing you to clean out old e-mails to make room for new; other service providers have essentially no limits.

When organizing, don't be seduced by unlimited space. Instead, keep in mind that it's not about the amount of space you have to work with, but rather the development of a system to stay on top of things and be able to retrieve information when you need it.

It helps if you think of your e-mail inbox like you do an inbox for paper. Taking the same actions you would with paper will go a long way toward organizing your e-mail.

Here are four things you can do with e-mail that will create and maintain digital organization:

Delete it

Once you've read the e-mail, and you realize you don't need this information -- delete it, and delete it now. Otherwise, you will have to open it again later, make another decision and take action.

If you have multiple e-mails on the same subject, delete all but the most recent and decide whether you need to file it for future use. There is no point in keeping multiple e-mails with the same e-mail thread when you can keep the latest one, with the entire thread.

Delegate it

Also known as forwarding. If an e-mail requires action by someone else, send it on to the appropriate person. Then usually you can delete it. If you need to save a copy, most e-mail programs will store a copy in the "sent" file, so you can access it there if necessary.

File it

If an e-mail contains information you may need in the future, but does not require any immediate action, put it in a subfile so you can retrieve it later, based on a particular project, person or activity.

For many people, this is the most difficult part in creating an e-mail system because they don't know what to label the folders. Creating a new folder and labeling it is simple, but establishing a labeling framework so that you can retrieve the information easily in the future can be a challenge.

Act on it

This is for e-mails that require a reply.

Typically there are two types that require action: those you can reply to instantly in a few words or sentences, and those that require more time for consideration or research before replying.

After you've responded, you will need to decide if you're going to delete it or file it.

From a personal productivity standpoint and the ability to retrieve information later, using these four actions will help you begin to create an organized e-mail system.

However, as with any system you create, regular maintenance is key.

And getting started is paramount. You don't need to wait until your e-mail inbox is cleared out before implementing the four actions. Instead, start today with the e-mails you receive and, over time, apply these actions to older e-mails.

Laura Leist, CPO, is president and founder of locally-based Eliminate Chaos LLC (eliminatechaos.com). Her latest book is "Eliminate Chaos: The 10-Step Process to Organize Your Home & Life." She can be reached at laura@eliminatechaos.com.