

E-mail Management for Program Managers

The amount of e-mail we receive at work can be overwhelming, and seems to just grow and grow. Efficiently managing e-mail communication is important for effective work and project management; failing to do so can quickly become a major distraction, detracting time and attention from you and your team's other important work.

A useful technique for e-mail management called the "4D Method" was designed by the [Microsoft Corporation](#). Although, originally developed for Microsoft [Outlook](#) users, this simple technique can be adapted for any type of e-mail account.

The key concept in the "4D Method" is to **make an immediate decision on how to handle every new e-mail message.**

Think of all the times you have had to re-open, re-read, and re-close the same e-mail multiple times. It may not seem like much, but these unnecessary and repetitive actions eat up a lot of your productive time and derail your train of thought. This adds up to a lot of distraction, with very little benefit in return.

To save time and maximize the productivity of your e-mail usage, your goal should be to read an e-mail message only once before taking action on it. This means that you must decide, early on, where to put your e-mails and what to do with them.

When a new e-mail comes in, you must immediately decide whether to:

- ✓ **DELETE** it
- ✓ **DO** it
- ✓ **DELEGATE** it
- ✓ **DEFER** it

These are the 4 "Ds" of the "4D Method."

OPTION 1: DELETE it

Time management experts estimate that roughly half of your (non-spam) inbound e-mail can be immediately deleted. This suggestion can make people feel uncomfortable. "Deleting" sounds so final... especially when there's a chance that you may need it again at a later time.

This hesitation is perfectly natural. But you must separate yourself from your emotions and ask yourself objectively "How much of this information will I actually ever need again?"

If you are – in fact – using a large portion of the e-mails that you retain, this is a good sign that your current system is working well for you. However, most people are keeping much more historical e-mail than they will ever need.

Ask yourself the following questions when deciding if an e-mail needs to be DELETED:

- ✓ Is this message important for a project that I'm currently working on?
If the answer is NO, then you should DELETE it immediately. Why keep it if you don't need it?

- ✓ Can I easily get this information from somewhere else?
If the answer is YES, then this message shouldn't be in your Inbox. DELETE.
- ✓ Will I require any of this information within the next 6-12 months?
If the answer is NO, then DELETE the e-mail.
- ✓ Am I required to keep this information on file? If the answer is NO, then get rid of it.

But if the answer is YES, then you should probably keep it in a better place than your Inbox. In Outlook, you can create folders and a system to file e-mails you need to retain outside your Inbox.

OPTION 2: DO it right away

If you've determined that the e-mail in question isn't worthy of deletion, then ask yourself *"What do I need to do with this e-mail now?"* and *"Is this something I can do in about a minute?"*

If it's something this simple that can be completed in about a minute, then it doesn't really make sense to file it away or close it.

If you try this technique, you will be surprised by how much work you can quickly get done. Once you get the hang of it, you'll likely be able to handle about 30% of your e-mail in this manner.

OPTION 3: DELEGATE the task to someone else

If you find it impractical to delete the e-mail or do the work immediately, then try to see if you can DELEGATE the task to another person.

If this is the case, try to DELEGATE the work immediately. After that, DELETE the message or move it to a "reference" folder in case you need it again in the future.

OPTION 4: DEFER until later

If this e-mail can't be DELETED, DONE, or DELEGATED, then that must mean that:

- ✓ some sort of action is necessary...
- ✓ which will take more than a minute...
- ✓ and that you're the only person who can do it.

If you've been applying this technique properly, you should find that only about 1 in 10 e-mails fall into this category.

At this point, you need to either turn the e-mail into **a task** or **an appointment** in your schedule or task list.

This can be easily done in Outlook by dragging any e-mail message onto your task list (in order to create a new task) or by dragging the message over to your calendar (to make an appointment).

Make this a daily habit

If you make a habit of the 4D Method every day, you'll find that you're able to handle large amounts of e-mail, very

quickly and easily. You'll be more productive and have more free time, with less effort.

Schedule Checking Your E-Mail Less Often

In order to maximize your efficiency even further, exercise a bit of self-control and check your e-mail less often. Check your e-mail no more than once or twice per day (It's very rare that an e-mail will ever be so urgent that it can't wait a few hours). You can schedule when you will check e-mails and inform important colleagues and co-workers of this change. Note, e-mail is not an efficient or reliable way for getting in touch with someone immediately.

In many cases, people who receive anywhere from 50-100 e-mails per day can manage their e-mail with the 4D Method in less than an hour.

According to studies, business e-mails can be addressed by following "D" actions by percentage:

- ✓ 50% can be filed or deleted immediately
- ✓ 30% can be completed or delegated within a few minutes
- ✓ 20% can be set aside as a "To Do" list item or an appointment for later

Although this method requires some discipline on your part, over time it will begin to feel much more natural and effortless.

Finally, A fifth "D" to consider...

DISCOURAGE unnecessary e-mails (politely)

You have probably seen the e-mail signature that asks *"Please consider the environment before printing this e-mail."* Arguably, as valid a sentiment is *"Please consider the rampant proliferation of e-mail before replying to this e-mail or writing more e-mail."*

Do you have e-mails that unnecessarily respond to ones you have sent, sometimes saying *"thanks," "you bet,"* or *"☺?"*

These quickly become e-mail box clutter. Politely conveying to your regular colleagues and co-workers that such e-mails are unneeded—and asking everyone to agree to stop them—can be an effective strategy for saving time and decreasing unnecessary e-mails for everyone.

To avoid any misinterpretation that you are being unfriendly, consider doing this at your next face-to-face meeting, as opposed to by e-mail.

Also, do not do this via e-mail signature. Using e-mail signature messages is difficult. Many believe that there are few—if any—good reasons to add a boilerplate personal signature message to your e-mail messages. It is safer to leave them off. You will never offend someone by the lack of a signature message, yet almost anything you do write could be misinterpreted as annoying or condescending.

This factsheet is adapted from material by Patrick Jobin of Storage Pipe at nirmaltv.com (<http://www.nirmaltv.com/2010/02/09/the-4d-method-for-e-mail-management/>) and by Dave Johnson on CBS MoneyWatch (http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505143_162-57457814/why-e-mail-signatures-are-dumb/).