

# 7 Reasons Why You Should NOT Check Email First Thing in the Morning

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This is a controversial subject and certainly goes against the currently accepted culture of checking email 'first thing' that prevails in most organisations! But getting control of the way you start your day is critical if you want to be truly productive.

Like many busy professionals, you've already learnt how to be quite effective and successful. But if you are in the habit of checking email 'first thing', then there's another level of productivity you can achieve. This article will help make you aware of the consequences of checking email 'first thing' and what you can do to take appropriate action.

If nothing else, this thought-provoking article will get you thinking 'outside the square' (and the inbox)!

Happy reading!

*Stuart*

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## 1: The In-box is NOT your to-do list

Do you start each day with a clear understanding of the most important tasks and activities for the day? Do you know the first thing that should be done this morning? If you do, then go ahead and do it!

This is what distinguishes successful, productive and high achieving professionals from those who struggle to keep up with their workload.

On the other hand, by checking e-mail, you risk getting caught up doing what somebody else (anybody else!) wants you to do. Every time you open an e-mail, consider whether it's more important than everything that's already on your to-do list. If you don't ask this question, you'll find yourself assuming the new email is more important and you'll end up doing tasks for everyone else at the expense of the ones you're responsible for.

Let's be honest, the emails in your inbox are someone else's to-do list, not yours. But who should be in control of your time – you, or the people emailing you?



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## 2: Starting with email makes you REACTIVE instead of PROACTIVE

Managing email effectively begins with having the 'bigger picture' of your overall workload and productivity in mind. By starting your day looking at your calendar, diary or to-do list, instead of your in-box, you'll start the day with a better perspective of your existing commitments and priorities for the day.

Many of these are unfinished actions resulting from emails you received yesterday and earlier!

The in-box need only be accessed at a time of your choosing, when you've set aside a block of time to properly read and process each message. In fact, email is so important these days that we must address it with a clear, focused mind rather than in the distracted manner we so often give it at the start of a busy day or when it arrives as an interruption.

Improving your productivity involves shifting from an in-box-based, interruption-driven and reactive style of work to something that is calendar or diary-based, plan-driven and proactive.

Aim to work on the things that are important to you (regardless of their urgency), rather than simply start the day with the urgent (but often less important) items in your inbox.



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## 3: Ignorance Is Bliss!

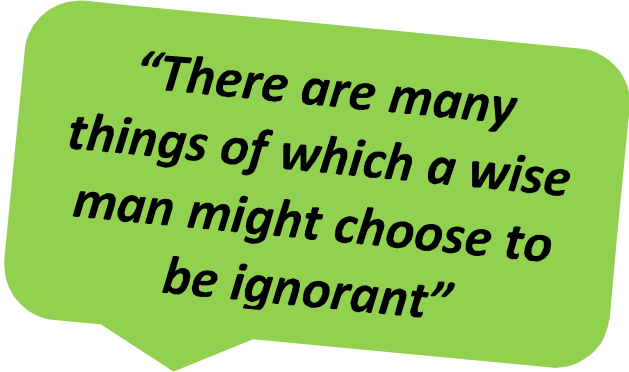
When it comes to email, ignorance is bliss.

That's why starting your day focused solely on accomplishing one or two or even three of your highest priority tasks (before you look at email) will make you both feel and actually be more productive.

Avoid checking email for as long as you can - any new information that arrives via email will only cause you to get distracted, lose focus and be less productive.

We should use what Timothy Ferris calls, in his best-selling book *The Four Hour Work Week*, 'selective ignorance'. This helps us to stay focused on what really matters. If you are blissfully unaware of what fires need to be put out, if you don't know about the special sale that's on today and if you don't see that funny joke your colleague has sent you, are you really any the worse off? You'll find out about these soon enough.

But meanwhile, you will have made progress early in the day on the things you are responsible for, rather than struggling to get them done later in the day, under time pressure and with sagging energy levels!



*“There are many things of which a wise man might choose to be ignorant”*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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## 4: Avoids short-term gratification to achieve longer-term results

Most of the time, when we start the day checking for new messages on email, Facebook or Twitter (or any of the innumerable other ways we can waste time online), we're not really checking for anything truly important.

Isn't it usually the case that we're just idling searching for an excuse to not do the work we know must be done - because it's tough, boring, uninspiring or unenjoyable?

It's in our nature to look for any reason to not get on with the difficult or challenging but often important task. We seek the short term gratification of answering an email or some other interruption and then justify this to ourselves later by saying we didn't get the work done because "I had to answer that question from Jenny" or "I had to dig up a file for Geoff".

But surely you're too smart to fall into that trap? Don't allow yourself the easy 'out' by checking your email at the start of the day (or any random time it arrives) as a way of avoiding an important task at hand. Recognize that the task really does need to be done and that it's easier to do early in the day when you have higher levels of energy and attention. So, 'just do it'.



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## 5: Checking e-mail is an excuse for a lack of priorities

Here's a challenging question for you . . .

*“Why do you check e-mail first thing in the morning?”*

To be honest, many times it's probably because you lack real clarity about the important tasks and activities you should be working on. By checking the inbox first thing in the morning you are immediately prioritising the 'new' ahead of all those **important** things you already have a commitment to (many of which arrived by email yesterday or earlier).

By default, what we are saying is that whatever is new, bright, shiny and seemingly urgent is more important than the things I have already made a commitment to getting done; many times, tasks that arrived via email yesterday or last week.

So the real problem isn't so much that you're checking e-mail first thing, it's that you've considered checking e-mail as a high priority activity simply because you haven't decided what your real high priority tasks and activities are! When

you don't have a clear list of priorities, checking e-mail becomes an **urgent** activity that tends to be done at the expense of **important** ones.

Now, of course, most of us do need to check email relatively early in the day, but it shouldn't be first thing! We should, instead, check and clarify the important tasks and activities we are already committed to for the day. You may even get a few processes started on one or more of these tasks (as important work often needs to be brokered back and forth with others) and then check what new inputs have arrived via email overnight, or early in the morning, that need to now be integrated with the workload you already have.

It's good to ask ourselves “what should I be doing if I got no new email this morning”.



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## 6: Your morning energy and alertness should be directed to higher priorities

Many of us complain about the amount of time that is wasted on phone calls and meetings. But how much time do we waste on e-mail?

If you were asked how long you spend looking at e-mail first thing in the morning, there's a good chance that you don't know (or you'd underestimate the amount of time).

The problem is that, while we think that checking e-mail only takes a few minutes, we can so easily get sucked into other, often low priority, activities that result from opening our e-mail. How often do you start the day with email and find it's half an hour, half a morning or even half a day before you sit back and say to yourself "now, what I am supposed to be doing today?"

Each of us has a limited amount of energy and a limited number of truly productive hours each day. For most of us, it's some time in the morning (early, mid or late morning) and this 'peak energy' time is best used for our highest priority tasks and activities – we should not let e-mail suck us in early in the day and cause us to spend time on it that would be better spent on things that really matter.

Start your day focussed on your highest priorities (rather than on the inbox) and you are much more likely to achieve the results and outcomes by which you will be judged and rewarded (by yourself as well as others).



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## 7: Controls unmanaged and unspoken expectations

Many of us protest that we ‘have to’ check e-mail first thing as “others expect a response from us early in the morning!” But is that really true?

Yes, there are some requests that require a prompt response, but that happens much less frequently than we usually think! But also ask yourself “why it is that others expect a response from you early in the morning”? Do you think it might be because you’ve always responded first thing in the morning and now you’ve built up that expectation in others?

You see, the more often you check e-mail, the more often people will expect you to check it. The quicker you respond to people, the more they will grow to expect it (and the more e-mail they will send you). But if you simply stop checking it first thing in the morning, others will learn to not expect it anymore. If you respond less quickly (but with thoughtful and well-structured messages), others will expect to have to wait (and be content about it).

Sure, it will take a week or two for others to adjust but after a short while they will fit in with your changed (and more productive) practices. Who’s in control of your time – you or everyone else who sends you an email?



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## Exceptions and Variations

Of course there are some occasions when checking email first thing might be appropriate. Here are a few suggestions;

- 1: If you work across time zones and need to review overnight email before you can start your work
- 2: You're in a customer-focused role requiring fast response to customers (ie: external)
- 3: You're in a support or admin role requiring fast response to colleagues (ie: internal)
- 4: You can check email on smartphone or iPad while travelling on public transport to work
- 5: When you'll be away from computer for the day, a quick check in morning can give 'peace of mind'

You can probably think of a few others to add to these. If so, jot them down below;

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## Action steps

If you're now convinced that NOT checking email first thing is a good idea, here are a few actions to help you escape the 'addiction' of checking email 'first thing';

1. Change the default view in your email software so that opens to the calendar rather than inbox view when you fire up the computer each morning. See [here](#) for details
2. Schedule when you will check e-mail – this helps resist to temptation to check it first thing as you already know when you will get to it
3. Manage expectations to take away the unspoken pressure (from ourselves as well as others) to be available first thing
4. Identify and schedule 1, 2 or 3 high priority tasks to be done before you allow yourself to check email
5. Work on something important for 30-45 minutes, and only when you've completed a high priority task, then check email. If you can stand it, wait even longer. As long as you're ignorant of everything else that's going on in the inbox, you can stay focused on what you need to work on. Yes, this means you won't know what fires need to be put out, you won't know about the latest political drama and you won't know about that funny joke your mate just sent you. But, as Timothy Ferriss says “sometimes you have to let small, bad things happen to make progress on big, important things”!

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You can view an on-line version of the slideshow on this topic at <http://www.slideshare.net/steuart/taming-the-email-tiger-slideshow-v14-march-2013>

Love to hear your thoughts and feedback on this fascinating subject. Let me know what you think via;



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All the best!

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