Survival Guide for Scientists

Writing – Presentation – Email

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EMAIL GUIDE FOR SCIENTISTS

3.D Acting on received emails

You only have to react to emails that have survived all the spam filtering and the personal filtering you have added yourself.

3.D.1 No action required

Emails that you receive are either informative or they require action on your side. After you have diagonally read an informative email you can just store it in your archival system.

3.D.2 Single action required

Writing and sending an email can be done in half a minute. After that the monkey is on the back of the recipient: "John, can you send me a concept for our new proposal asap". This half-minute action on the side of the sender might require a couple of days work for the receiver.

You must discourage people sending you these types of emails.

The Golden Rule is: "Always stall your actions".

Any quick response on your side will trigger another response, and so on. If you stall, you might be lucky and the sender might already have found another solution.

If the requested action is reasonable, leave it in your inbox or file it with your other tasks. In that way it will show up in your normal To-Do list.

3.D.2.A No more Mr. Nice Guy

Refuse to acknowledge having received an email. Even if requested by the sender. Or, if you really have to do it, do it very, very late. If you are lucky, somebody else has already solved the problem. Remember: "Being a nice guy will result in an ever increasing work load".

3.D.2.B Action is writing email(s)

If part or all of the expected action is writing emails, turn to the section on writing emails in this guide.

3.D.2.C Deadlines

3.D.2.C.1 No deadline

If the email you receive contains a requested action without a deadline you might have a problem. The best thing to do is to file it on your To-Do list in a subfolder called something like "Wait and see". Do not work on it until the sender starts to complain about not having received your reaction yet. Remember: "Always stall your actions". Explain that you did not realize that the deadline was so early. Make clear to the sender what, according to you, is a reasonable deadline. After having received a clear deadline, you can reclassify it on your To-Do list with the known deadline.

3.D.2.C.2 Unreasonable deadlines

Many emails that require action on your side will have a deadline associated with it. The most important thing is that you determine yourself if these deadlines are reasonable. If the requested deadline is unreasonable, then you have got two options: (i) you immediately reply that you will not accept the deadline and that you will not carry out the requested task. The problem is now back

where it belongs. Or, (ii) you reply with changing the deadline to a later, reasonable deadline. And you tell the sender you will wait for his approval of this postponement. Do not work on the task until you got the approval for your new deadline. To my regret, I have the experience that people always accept the new deadline. So you have to do the work anyway. But this time with less stress.

3.D.2.C.3 *Extremely unreasonable requests*

I know from experience that many organizations and their managers do not have their priorities and administration straightened out. The only way to solve that problem for them is to put their coworkers, clients and subordinates under stress.

There always will be an 'unexpected' visit from the American ambassador, or from a Minister of Education of China (China must be very big given the number of Ministers of Educations that are visiting the world).

There is always some middle-level manager that has forgotten about his duty. There always will be some unexpected pot of money and you have to put in a pre-proposal ASAP.

It all boils down to the fact that you will get an email, or fax, summoning you to send the same day, or the next day a couple of pages by email.

This email has cost the manager half a minute and requires hours of unexpected work on your side. There is only one remedy: plainly refuse to do the job. Teach them a lesson.

3.D.3 Multiple actions required

Getting an email that requires multiple actions on your side is a nightmare. In the first place, tell the sender to send only emails that contain one requested action per email the next time. He'd better send you five emails each containing a separate action, than one email containing five items.

You must put the separate actions separately on your To-Do list. For many scientists, their email box, with possibly some subfolders, *is* their To-Do list.

One possibility is to split the multiple-action email, by forwarding the email several times to yourself. You must edit the email in such a way that each forwarded mail contains just information about one single action.

Another possibility is to put several items one by one on your To-Do list (for instance with *Outlook*) and cut and paste the relevant parts of the original email into these notes, and then you treat them one by one.

3.D.3.A Action for more people

The worst that can happen to you, is that you are not the only recipient (more names in the *To*-header) and the message requires actions on the sides of more people. This ambiguity always creates trouble. Either all the recipients hope and expect that the other guys will do the work. Or two people do the same job.

If you got such an email, you must immediately straighten out the situation: just send an email to the sender with a cc. to all other recipients and tell him that his email is unclear. And make obvious that you will not undertake any ac

tion until you get an email with only yourself in the *To*-header with the message body only containing the requested action you are supposed to carry out.

3.D.3.B Response forms

You will regularly receive response forms and surveys from newspapers, employers, science supporting agencies, companies, etc. Just never fill out these forms. Even if they phone you to remind you of their imposed deadline, tell them you won't do it.

The only thing that can happen to you when you do fill out request forms is that you get more of those forms. Those surveys are hardly ever going to be used for something useful. When all the items have been gathered and could be implemented, a new manager has taken over with totally new and 'fresh' ideas.

3.D.3.C Endless actions

Sometimes people have read one of your papers superficially and they want to start a scientific discussion with you. This is endless. It will never stop. Only embark on discussions with scientists that know what they are talking about.

Try to divert the start of a long series of time-consuming scientific discussions by pointing out the right textbooks and papers that first should be read. Get one of your colleagues to take over the discussion ("My colleague X at *MIT* knows much more about the subject", with a *Cc* to colleague X). If you want to delay your main competitor you can also refer people that want to start an eternal debate to this competitor (supply them with his email address).

6 ARCHIVING EMAILS

Emails you have received or sent in the past, may contain vital information. Be ing able to quickly retrieve data present in old messages will be crucial for your functioning.

This email archive should be arranged in a set of hierarchical folders. If you devise a well thought-out structure, that structure can be kept year after year. *Microsoft Outlook* outperforms all other email clients in this respect. The flat structure offered by *Google GMail* does not provide this necessary structure, however fast their email search machine is claimed to be.

6.A Keeping old emails

Given the very low price of disk space these days there is no need whatso- ever to delete any old emails out of economy reasons. You can – and should – keep all your old emails. Organize them in hierarchical folders. Many modern email clients offer this facility.

6.B Archiving formats

There is no standard file format for the archiving of email messages. The best type depends very much on the way your email client saves your email mes- sages.

6.B.1 Ideal format

The ideal saving format – at least in my opinion – would be to have for each email message a separate directory containing the full email message (including all message headers, but stripped from its attachments) as a single ASCII file and in addition containing the attached files accompanying it as separate files.

My ideal has as a possible problem that it might be somewhat slower to find a particular old email message or one of its attachments. But the good thing is that the email archive remains readable forever and the readability is not connected to any proprietary file format that might become obsolete, of some commercial email client. *Eudora* (an email client that is sadly no longer being developed) has a way of saving messages that comes a long way towards my ideal.

6.B.2 Proprietary file formats

Email messages, including their attachments, are sent around the world as ASCII files. The first thing commercial companies do when developing email software is to turn these universally readable ASCII email messages into a proprietary object file format that can only be read and maintained with proprietary software from this one and only company. It is capitalism, all the way.

6.B.3 *Outlook* format

An extreme form of using a proprietary file format is the way *Outlook* does it. It keeps all the email messages, together with their attachments, in one file (a pst file, pst stands for *personal store*).

There are many disadvantages to this system. I will describe them in some detail. Many of the disadvantages hold for other programs with similar philosophies.

6.B.3.A Pst files

One drawback with the *Outlook* system is that you need *Outlook* to read and maintain your old emails. Who knows what will happen in ten years from now. *Microsoft* has already recently introduced a new pst format; to force you to regularly buy new software versions of *Outlook*.

In the future, old versions of *Outlook* might not be able to read new pst files and vice versa. Then it does not matter that you have them backed up nicely. Unless you keep on buying the new software versions of *Outlook*, your backed-up emails will become out of reach.

The pst file has a complicated internal structure. This had a lot of disadvantages. First you need the program itself to read the files. Furthermore it is very vulnerable. One mistake in the structure can be enough to destroy the whole file (with years of emails in it). For this reason *Microsoft* supplies repair programs for pst files.

Any slight change, as a matter of fact even reading it, changes the pst file. As a result the whole file (easily 200 Megabytes) has to be synchronized and backed up again. Horrible.

Given their vulnerability, you have to backup the pst files regularly. And frequently you should convert them into ASCII. I have to live with *Outlook*, but to be on the safe side I often use *Eudora* to import my pst files and convert them into readable ASCII files. The disadvantage of this is that the conversion is not full proof.

6.B.3.A.1 Two versions of Outlook

Keeping an old version of *Outlook* together with a new version is not an option for beginners. In the first place the old version will probably mess up your file associations (when clicking on a pst or msg file, the old version opens these files rather than the new version).

Keeping two versions of major applications, like *Outlook*, is dangerous as it might mess up the common files – usually called dll's.

It gives rise to what developers call *Windows* 'dll-hell'. Dll's are called daemons in *Unix*. Keeping twoversions of Outlook is disabled in *Outlook 2007*.

6.C Filing system

The more attention you give to the filing system of your messages the better you can retrieve them later. But it requires discipline. Think deep about the folder structure.

6.C.1 Sent emails

For some psychological reason people take much more care of archiving received emails than of retaining old sent emails. However, it is essential to keep copies of all sent emails. Archive sent emails in folders, with names denoting the received month (like "03_February", the "03" ensuring the folders will be displayed in chronological order and the leading "0" ensuring that all folders names are vertically aligned).

Do not classify your sent emails according to subject. This is very time consuming and not worth the trouble.

6.C.1.A.1 Attachments

If you sent an email with an attached document, you must have a copy of that document in your file system.

If your email client keeps in its records a separate copy of the attached file, your sent archive will easily clog up (easily hundreds of Megabytes that you have to synchronize daily). I think you should regularly strip the attachments from the sent emails.

6.C.2 Received emails

File only those received messages that contain real information. Not the "it is coffee-break" stuff.

6.C.2.A Attachments

Different programs have different philosophies about what to do with received attachments. Some programs put them in separate folders. Other programs keep them with the email.

6.C.2.A.1 Saving with attachments

Programs like *Outlook* keep the received attachments with the email. This is principally the best solution as they constitute one unit. If you file your emails in a systematic way there is no need to save the attachments separately. You can move your email around in your email-filing system and the client will always be able to trace where it put the attachments of a particular email.

6.C.2.A.2 Saving separately

If you want to save the attachment somewhere in your file system (like in "d:\data\docs\", you easily end up with multiple copies of the same (usually large) file. In this case you had better delete the attachments from the email after you have saved it separately.

The location where you saved the attachment must be very logical. Otherwise later you will run into great difficulties when you want to read the old email again and cannot locate its attachment anymore.

It is much better to have a system where you do not need to save the attached file separately. Just make the incoming emails, with attachments, part of your data filing system.

Documents without accompanying email can best be filed by sending them to yourself as an attachment.

6.C.2.A.3 Version control

The problem with keeping all the attachments with the received email mes sages, is that you might end up with multiple versions of the same manuscript. Just file them together in one folder and delete the attachments of all but the latest version when the manuscript has reached its final form.

6.D Finding

It is a challenge to retrieve an old email out of a collection of thousands of emails. But often you will need to do just that. Many email clients allow you to search through (old) messages using a search wizard with search masks (date, subject, etc). They are useful, but often a little crude and impractical (certainly with *Outlook*).

You could consider using free indexing software (like Google Desktop). Or better use a superior, non-free, product, like dtSearch Desktop. This program indexes your whole computer, on a scheduled time, requested by you. With superb finding filters you can find anything on your computer. *dtSearch Desktop* can search through *Outlook* folders.

The downside of using indexing programs is that you have to do the indexing regularly, preferably once per day. These indexing applications monopolize your computer, so you'd better do it at unproductive times (idle time of computer or at night).

http://desktop.google.com/en/
http://www.dtsearch.com/

6.E Backing up

If you have a network drive, your data will be backed up by your employer.

If you use a large-capacity USB device as your primary data source, there is no reason for extra backup. You always have at least three versions of your data: on the computer at work, on your computer at home and on your USB device.

Regularly, for instance yearly, 'freeze' old folders in your email-filing system.

That is to say do not add any new information to them. Just make new folders. If your client allows it (*Outlook* doesn't) make them read-only.