

Never Check Email First in the Morning

By Barry D. Caponi

How much do you accomplish each day? Do you turn work around quickly or does it get backed up on your desk, the victim of multiple distractions throughout the day? The most valued employees get things done despite the distractions – and there's no bigger distraction than email. Let's face it; email has many drawbacks despite all its benefits. It saps our energy, drains our creativity and often keeps us from doing what's really important. "It is the world's most convenient procrastination device," cautions Julie Morgenstern, founder of Julie Morgenstern Enterprises, Inc. (www.juliemorgenstern.com) and author of *Never Check E-mail in the Morning* (Simon & Schuster, 2004). Here, she says, is how to take control of this communication behemoth.

1. Avoid email for the first hour of the day. Most people start their workday by checking their email. Then, before they know it, a good half hour (if they're lucky) or more has gone by as they send out a few quick messages, reply to inquiries and so on. Change the rhythm of your workday, says Morgenstern. Devote the first hour of your day to concentrated work, to your most critical task. Don't even open email to see what's there, she cautions, or you'll open up all sorts of different drawers in your mind that will distract you from concentrating only on your real work.

2. Focus on your most critical task. Each night ask yourself this question: If tomorrow flies out of control, what one task would I be thrilled to get done? Put another way: What can I do to earn my salary by 10 a.m.? Deciding on your first, most critical task at night accomplishes two things. First, it prepares you to walk in the door the next day and get immediately to work without wasting time. Second, it lets you begin work knowing what needs to be done. On your drive to work, you'll be thinking about that task and how to approach it. Even in your sleep your subconscious mind will be crafting solutions. "Turn off your email alarm, turn on your voicemail and walk into your office with a single focus – completing that critical task," says Morgenstern. "Don't drop in on a friend. Put on your blinders and tear into your task. The energy you'll feel from accomplishing it will fuel you all day long."



3. Manage your email. Now that you've finished your critical task you can take a look at email. Here are some tips for controlling the barrage of messages.

- Turn off the audible and / or visual notifications of new email and check email at designated times of day – 10 a.m., 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., for example.
- Process emails fully during those times. Delete what you can; respond immediately if you can do so in less than two minutes. For anything requiring thought or research, schedule a specific time later in your day to take care of the matter.
- When you can, say what you need to in the subject line and leave the body blank. For example: Please schedule staff meeting for Friday 11 a.m.
- Set filters on your email to presort by sender so you can process emails in priority order. Then deal with different categories of email at different times of day.
- Remember that email is no substitute for human contact. If it can and should be said in person, handle it that way.

Conclusion

If you are like me, the most important task I have to do is the one I will find excuses not to do: make appointment setting calls. I need to devote only thirty minutes a day to this responsibility, but it is amazing how the end of the day can creep up on me without having gotten it done. Take at least one distraction out of the way and follow Julie's advice and don't check email first thing in the morning.

