



Business demands are an everyday reality for OneLaw Director Phil Johnson. He has turned his email inbox from a distraction to a well-oiled machine that helps him prioritise and get work done quickly. Effective inbox management frees him up to focus on what's important - and he can help you do the same.

We all deal with demand for our time, and it's how we manage this that makes or breaks our work-life balance. As a director of two technology companies and an active investor in multiple start-up businesses, I understand the busy lifestyle of those in the legal industry.



Over the years I have developed an effective set of strategies to deal with the substantial amount of information that I deal with every day. I would like to share some of these with you.

- Phil Johnson, OneLaw Director

The ideal state

At this point in time I have 15 emails in my inbox, my to-do list is under control, and I am meeting my self-imposed communication and response timeframes. Oh, and I don't have a PA, and I haven't offloaded all my emails elsewhere.

How did I achieve this?

I am always looking for ways to be more efficient in my working life. Taking charge of my inbox was a big undertaking, so I have created a four-step system that allows me to do just this:

1. Take control of your inbox
2. Smash that "to do" list
3. Stay on top
4. The new proactive you



Removing the electronic demand drivers helps you focus on a better outcome for your day.

4. Use rules: Most email platforms have very sophisticated rule engines that are really easy to use. You can automatically process emails into folders, delete stuff and move items, all using powerful rules that are designed to help you cope with the load.
5. Automate the Cc: I work on the theory that if it is not addressed directly to me then it is not something I need to deal with right now. All emails that I am Cc'd on automatically go into a folder for later reading.

PHASE ONE: TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR INBOX

Taking control of your inbox is possibly the single most important first step you should take.

When appropriately structured, your inbox can function as an excellent to-do list. The key is to use it solely to store stuff that requires your attention.

1. Reduce the clutter: Ruthlessly unsubscribe from all those lists you are on, or use rules to redirect anything that is not related to your core focus. Your inbox should not be a messy bedroom, it should be a clean functional office.
2. Pick your platform: Surprisingly perhaps, I do not use email on my phone. I use my diary and my notes, but no email because it can be incredibly distracting and encourage short responses without reasonable consideration.
3. Change your social etiquette: Have you ever been having coffee with someone who can't leave their phone alone? How many times do you let your device get in the way of a great conversation?



PHASE TWO: SMASH THAT “TO DO” LIST

Once you have your inbox under control (say less than 50 e-mails), you can start using it to prioritise your time. Every message in your inbox is something you need to deal with by responding, acknowledging or planning.

1. Use the right click: By “right clicking” on an email you open a world of possibilities. You can move it somewhere, set a flag for importance, trigger a reminder time or date, convert to an appointment, apply rules to the sender or change the email to a task.
2. Have an action plan: Try to have a simple action plan for everything that is in your inbox. When you are processing your emails, set a positive action for each and every one of them.
3. File or remove it: Once you have dealt with your email, file it immediately and effectively. Don't leave it in your inbox. It is easy to set up new folders that enable you to quickly refer to communications at a later stage.



4. Trust the search: Most email systems have very powerful search facilities. Learn how to use these properly and you don't need to worry so much about where you put stuff.
5. Don't procrastinate: By all means set priorities, but don't get into the habit of procrastinating over that item that has been sitting at the bottom of your inbox for months.
6. Use the same rules for yourself: If you think of something that you need to do, then send yourself an email. Put what you need to do in the subject line and then deal with it like you deal with all the others.



5. Don't over commit: As a company director, I have learned over time not to apply the blow torch to myself or those I work with. Business moves fast, but not so fast that you need to be connected and available 24/7.
6. Reward yourself: If you are on top of things then take a break, have a coffee or go for a walk. You should not feel you need to allocate the extra time that you have won back.

PHASE FOUR: THE NEW PROACTIVE YOU

By this point you should have an inbox that is under control and a task list that does not rule your life.

PHASE THREE: STAY ON TOP

Once you have put a lot of effort into organising your inbox you will want to keep it running smoothly. Reverting to old habits is common, so it's important to push through and make this work for you.

1. Remove distractions: Like I said earlier, I personally don't use e-mail on my mobile as it makes me highly reactive and distraction driven. Consider doing the same - it has changed the way I work with my team (and my family).
2. Create clear time: Have regular times when you process your email. Remember, if people want you urgently they will call you.
3. Communicate your strategy: Everyone you work with will need to be aware that Cc'd messages will be considered in due course and you don't immediately respond on your mobile.
4. Elevate the urgent: Use your newfound email rules to identify urgent emails and permit these to circumvent all of their rules.



It is important to make the most of the breathing space that you have created to be a manager, partner, parent, mentor and all of those other lofty goals that you may have set yourself.

My day job involves building technology driven business strategies for organisations, and as such it is vital that I have clear space to think, plan and write.

My other day jobs revolve around being an aware and compliant company director and an intelligent investor.

This simple organisational strategy helps me achieve those goals, and I hope it helps you achieve yours too.

Phil Johnson

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