CHAPTER

1

Control Your Email

Do you wish you received less email? Sure you do. Do you want to live without the convenience of electronic mail? Of course you don't. The greatest double-edged sword in productivity technology, email both empowers and overwhelms its users. But the most successful professionals know how to control their email instead of letting it run their workday.

On one hand, email enables anyone with an Internet-connected device to send information great distances at the press of a button. On the other, you've got 1,762 unread messages sitting in your inbox, and you don't know when you'll have time to get through them all. *Ding!* Another one just arrived.

Before email became ubiquitous, to send a letter, a person had to commit the information to paper, stuff and address the envelope, affix postage, and drop it in the mailbox. Days or weeks later, the message arrived on the recipient's desk. Today, email offers the same type of text-based communication, just faster and easier, complete with a cute little envelope icon. But the same ways you deal with arriving postal mail don't work on electronic mail. Incoming messages are incoming messages. But email's effect on workers is vastly different from paper mail for one fundamental reason: volume. The speed, convenience, and low

cost of sending email has increased the number of transmissions to levels that turn the postal service green with envy: about 150 *billion* emails are sent daily.

This virtually free and instantaneous message transmission is great for the sender but not for the recipient. The cost and inconvenience of sending postal mail acts as a filter: when that envelope appears in the recipient's mailbox, she can trust that the message is important enough to the sender to warrant the investment.

Electronic mail, however, shifts that burden. With the volume of electronic mail sent each day, the onus is on the recipient — not the sender — to sort through the avalanche of messages she's received. Email overload is such a common malady in the information age that experts estimate it costs companies billions of dollars a year in worker productivity losses.

Some companies and users resort to extreme tactics to combat email overload:

- In 2004, Stanford professor Lawrence Lessig declared "email bankruptcy" when faced with the thousands of unread messages dating back two years that had accumulated in his inbox. Instead of attempting to open them all a task he said would have been impossible he sent an automated apology to his contacts and asked that they resend their unanswered message only if it was still very important.¹ A web search for the term "email bankruptcy" shows that several others followed suit, publicly announcing their email bankruptcy on their web sites.
- Overwhelmed by the effort that writing lengthy responses requires, designer Mike Davidson instituted a personal policy that any message he writes will be fewer than five sentences. Recipients who wonder about the brevity can get more information about the policy, which he includes in his message signature.²
- One cellular company designated a weekly email-free day. Employees refrain from sending or checking email (except from customers) every Friday. Workers report that the freedom from the distraction and interruption once a week helps them accomplish a lot more.³

Anyone who's spent hours processing a backlog of email can understand why you'd take such tactics. It's so easy to let email take the reins of your workday. All you have to do is leave your email software open while you work. Each time it notifies you that a new message has arrived, stop what you're doing, no matter how important it is or how involved

you are, and switch to your inbox. Scan the new message. If it's an emergency, deal with it right away. If not, switch back to the task at hand. Try to remember where you were before that message arrived. At the end of the day, wonder how all those read messages accumulated in your inbox, what you're supposed to do about them again, and where the day went.

This is how most people operate. But there is a better way.

You can reduce the amount of time you spend fiddling with email to less than 30 minutes per day. You can empty your inbox and enjoy the feeling that you're completely caught up every single workday. You can process your messages in bunches, in between other tasks, when your mind is free and clear. You can hear "Thanks for getting back to me so quickly" from your boss and co-workers more and more often. You can elicit the response you need in shorter exchanges. You can keep your inbox free of a festering pile of unfulfilled obligations. You can become known as responsive — and therefore responsible — engaged, and reliable around the office simply by being on top of your email. Soon, wealth, fame, and fortune will ensue.

You can control your email without declaring bankruptcy or refraining from using it just because it's a certain day of the week. Small changes and better habits practiced every day can get the constant influx of communication working *for* you instead of against you. This chapter provides practical strategies for getting your email under control and keeping it there.

NOTE For updates, links, references, and additional tips and tools regarding the hacks in this book, visit http://lifehackerbook.com/. (Append the chapter number — http://lifehackerbook.com/ch1/, for example — to go directly to a specific chapter's updates.)

Hack 1: Empty Your Inbox (and Keep It Empty)

Level..... Easy Platforms . . . All Cost Free

When you can empty your inbox on a regular basis, you've reached the ultimate level of email control. Emptying the inbox clears away that pile of unidentified pieces of information, keeps it from stacking up higher every day, and frees your mind to worry about more important work.

Why an Empty Inbox?

Your inbox is a temporary holding pen for unprocessed messages. An unprocessed email is one you haven't made a decision about yet. When you get into the habit of deciding what to do with a new message within a day of its arrival, move it out of your inbox.

Some people enjoy keeping their inbox full so that they can glance at a list of most recent messages and see what's going on — what they should be working on, what their group is discussing, the latest funny YouTube video that's making the rounds. But just as you'd never leave a physical paper inbox full of documents whose only commonality is that they're *incoming*, so you don't want to leave your email inbox full of messages, either. An inbox full of read messages does you no favors: You have no way to prioritize what's most important, or to access the message contents in their most useful context. For example, a meeting invitation that comes in via email is much more meaningful on your calendar than in your inbox. A web site address you want to visit later would do better in your bookmarks than in your email. A project document belongs in its appropriate folder, not in your email program. Everything should have its own place, and the inbox isn't it.

Furthermore, an empty inbox lightens the psychological load of an endless list of messages staring at you every time you check your email. It creates a clear demarcation between what's incoming and what's been resolved or placed into motion.

This hack introduces a simple, three-folder system that keeps your inbox clear and ensures that every single message you receive is both findable and actionable without cluttering your inbox.

Set Up the Trusted Trio of Folders

The three folders you need to keep your inbox empty and your messages in process are Archive, Follow Up, and Hold, as shown in Figure 1-1.

NOTE Some email programs — most notably Gmail (http://gmail .com) — have a built-in message archive. In that case you don't need to create an Archive label or folder. Simply use the program's built-in archived message storage place (which you can get to by clicking on "All Mail.")

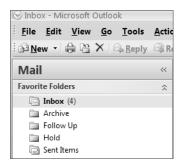


Figure 1-1 Archive, Follow Up, and Hold folders clear your inbox.

The Archive Folder

Most email you receive is stuff you don't need right now but may need to look up later. Archive these messages. The Archive is your long-term email reference library. It's where you place all the messages that contain information you may want to retrieve at some point in the long-term future, including any completed threads, completed requests, memos you've read, questions you answered, and completed project email. Basically, any email exchange that's closed but that you may want to refer to at some point in the future belongs in the Archive.

The Archive is one single folder, with no subfolders. That's a scary concept to those who enjoy organizing information into specifically named folders. However, you're not a librarian, and you don't have time to waste deciding what message should go in what folder. The archive is completely searchable. You can retrieve any message you place there later using the right search operators. For more on plucking messages out of the Archive (without a complicated folder scheme), see Hack 6, "Master Message Search."

The Follow Up Folder

Messages in your Follow Up folder represent tasks you must complete, whether that's a response that will take more than a minute to write or whether it's another type of action. Each of these messages maps to a task on your to-do list. A message from a long-lost high school friend whom you haven't spoken to in years and a request from the boss to update the quarterly report would both go into the Follow Up folder because you need

to follow up with an action. It's not enough to just move this message into the Follow Up folder; make sure you also enter the task onto your to-do list — so that you'll actually do it.

The Hold Folder

The Hold folder is a temporary holding pen for important messages you'll need quick access to within the next few days. If you're waiting on someone else to get back to you with crucial information, or you're maintaining a thread about a time-sensitive topic, keep it in the Hold folder.

Examples of messages that would go in Hold are a FedEx confirmation number for a delivery that's on its way, or a message from a co-worker that says, "I'll get back to you Tuesday re: The Big Project."

Review the Hold folder once a week, and clear it out as the messages in it become irrelevant — such as when that FedEx package gets delivered or when your co-worker gets back to you.

Process Your Messages

Now that the three folders are in place, it's time to empty your inbox. Whether you're starting with an overstuffed inbox with months' worth of messages or the two dozen that arrived since you last checked, the method is the same. Beginning with the oldest email in your inbox, open the message and do the following:

- Delete it if you don't need it.
- Respond on the spot to quick questions or requests. Then archive or delete it.
- If it requires action that will take more than one minute to complete, move it to the Follow Up folder and add the task to your to-do list.
- If it's an item you're waiting on or may need within the next few days, move it to Hold. If it's time-sensitive (your co-worker promised you the document by Friday, for instance), add a note on your calendar to check in about the item you're waiting for.
- If it's an informational message you may want to refer to later, move it to the Archive.

Wash, rinse, and repeat for every message in your inbox until it is completely empty.

NOTE This exact folder scheme may not work for everyone, but it's a good start on the road to a simple, well-defined processing system. If you tweak and modify this method, just remember: the fewer folders you have, the less thought has to go into dealing with each individual message.

Keep It Empty

After you've emptied your inbox, keeping it that way is a matter of repeating the process a few times a day. Schedule regular email sessions — such as once mid-morning, once after lunch, and once in the late afternoon. Train yourself to follow the golden rule:

Never leave a read email in your inbox.

Make a decision about the fate of every message you read the first time you read it — no excuses. Be ruthless about this new practice. File information that incoming messages contain in its right place: dates in your calendar; project documents in their folder; web site addresses in your bookmarks. Respond on the spot to messages that need a quick yes or no. Never touch an email in your inbox more than once.

Technologist Mark Hurst wrote, "Consider that an incoming email has the shelf life of Chinese takeout in the refrigerator. It's best to eat it as soon as it arrives; within a day is OK, but after that it starts to get funky."

Your First Time

If you're starting out with an inbox loaded with thousands of messages, emptying it the first time can be an overwhelming task. One way to get started with your new good habits *right now* is to move all your existing messages into a separate, special folder (email management expert Merlin Mann calls it the "Email DMZ"⁵).

Resolve to empty your inbox each time you check from this moment forward. Then, during each processing session, *after* you empty your inbox, take on a handful of the oldest messages in your "DMZ" folder as well. Slowly but surely, you'll catch up on the backlog *and* hone your new good habits as you go.

The Catch

Just because you have all unresolved messages filed neatly away in Follow Up and Hold doesn't mean you're free and clear. The trick to this system

is to consistently review Follow Up folder messages (which should be on your to-do list) and Hold folder messages, and to complete the items stowed away there. To keep yourself from getting lulled into a total sense of completeness, you can mark all the messages in Hold and Follow Up as unread to easily monitor the number of outstanding items.

NOTE Special thanks to Merlin Mann, author of the Inbox Zero series (http://inboxzero.com) and "The Inbox Makeover," which appeared in MacWorld magazine (available at http://macworld.com/2005/04/features/tipsinbox/index.php) and which greatly influenced the methods outlined in this hack.

Hack 2: Decrease Your Response Time

Level..... Easy Platform.... All Cost Free

Responding to your email in a timely manner is one of the best things you can do for your career. But no one emerges from the womb with a natural talent for parrying a constant stream of new messages vying for your attention all day long. Email responsiveness is an acquired skill—the one that just may differentiate you from everyone else in the world who's overwhelmed by an overloaded inbox.

Michael Hyatt, CEO of Thomas Nelson Publishers, agrees. He said, "The truth is, you are building your reputation — your brand — one response at a time. People are shaping their view of you by how you respond to them. If you are slow, they assume you are incompetent and over your head. If you respond quickly, they assume you are competent and on top of your work. Their perception, whether you realize it or not, will determine how fast your career advances and how high you go. You can't afford to be unresponsive. It is a career-killer."

Although it's impossible to instantly respond to the dozens of new email messages you receive every day, you can increase your responsiveness rate without becoming a slave to your inbox. This hack provides strategies for responding to your email in a timely fashion without killing your entire workday.

Process Messages in Batches

Your inbox dictates the ebb and flow of your work if it interrupts you every time a new message arrives. Don't let it.

The explosion of email communication and proliferation of email-enabled PDAs has led many Americans to nonstop inbox monitoring. In fact, 41 percent of respondents in a 2005 survey said they checked their email in the morning before going to work. More than 25 percent said they had never gone more than a few days without checking email, 60 percent said they check it on vacation, and 4 percent look at email in the bathroom.⁷

The reality is that checking email adds up to a whole lot of time, much of it wasted. The world will not end if an email sits in your inbox for a few hours.

Schedule two or three "meetings" with your inbox each day at predetermined times to process email. If your job requires that you keep your email program running at all times, set it to check for new messages every hour (or two!) instead of every five minutes. (For more on protecting your sanity from the insidiousness of constant email checking, see Hack 38, "Reduce Email Interruptions.")

The One-Minute Rule

When you've begun an email processing session, start at the oldest message you received and work up. Follow the one-minute rule: if a message will take less than one minute to process and respond to, do it on the spot. One minute doesn't sound like a lot of time, but in reality a whole lot can happen in 60 seconds. Dash off quick answers to questions, follow up with questions on requests, and knock down any "Sounds good" and "Let's discuss on the phone; when's a good time?" and "Received the attachment, thanks" type of messages. If you think that a message needs a lengthy, complicated response, consider taking it offline and making a phone call instead.

Most of your new messages will fall under the "can respond in less than a minute" umbrella, so go ahead and answer them.

Respond to Task Requests – Before the Task Is Done

If someone asks you to complete a project or task, it's natural to think, "I don't have time to deal with this right now, so I'll just leave it in my inbox to handle later." There the message atrophies for weeks, and a month

later, you've never gotten back to the sender and the task still isn't done. That's the quickest route to Irresponsible ville.

When asked to do something via email, respond right away with the following:

- Questions you may need answered to get started
- A request for the task completion deadline
- How busy you are and when you think you'll be able to get started
- The next time the requester can expect to hear from you regarding the task

An immediate response that says, "I'm booked solid for the next three months. What's your deadline? Drop me a note in September if you're still interested in having me work on this" — effectively, "no can do" — is much more professional and appreciated than no response at all, or a three-week delay.

Don't Leave It in Your Inbox

Touch a message once in your inbox and commit yourself to taking it to the next step, whether that's dashing off a reply or moving it into your queue for a next step. But whatever you do, don't scan messages in your inbox and just leave them there to scan again later. It's a waste of time to repeat the same action again (and again).

Hack 3: Craft Effective Messages

Level..... Easy Platform.... All Cost Free

The old computer-science adage, "Garbage in, garbage out" (GIGO), means that if you give a computer the wrong input, it returns useless output. Humans are much more forgiving than computers, but in many ways GIGO applies to email correspondence as well. The clearer your email messages are, the more likely you'll get the result you want quicker — whether it's a response, a completed task, or an informed recipient.

A recent survey of workers at big companies reveals that employees waste anywhere from half an hour to three hours a day processing poorly

written messages.⁸ In an ineffective email message, the sender's expectations aren't clear, the most important information is hard to find, and the body of the message is too long and difficult to read.

You spend at least a couple of hours a day reading and responding to email. How much of that time could be saved if all the messages you sent and received were to the point and free of any unnecessary information?

This hack covers ways to get the most out of email you send with the least amount of time, energy, and work.

Composing a New Message

Keep in mind the following simple strategies for whittling the messages you send down to their most effective state.

Determine Your Purpose

Every email message has a very specific purpose. Either you are conveying information or requesting action from the recipient. Before you click that Compose button, know what you expect to get out of the exchange. If you don't know your message's purpose, don't write it.

If you need to flesh out your thoughts by writing, send the email to *yourself*. Then follow up with anything you need to ask or tell others.

Use an Informative Subject Line

First impressions are pretty important in a world in which two dozen different things are already competing for your email recipient's eyeballs and attention. The first thing your correspondent will see is the subject line of your message. Boil that line down to a few words that convey your message's purpose. Think of yourself as a newspaper headline writer, tasked with telling the whole story in just a few words to grab the reader's attention.

Remember that your recipient will use subject lines to scan and sort her inbox, track conversations, prioritize tasks, and absorb information at a glance, so make your subject lines amenable to that.

Here are some examples of bad subject lines:

```
Subject: Hi!
Subject: Just wanted to tell you...
Subject: Can you do me a favor?
Subject: IMPORTANT!!!
```

None of those subject lines gets specific about the content of the message. Yes, this message may be IMPORTANT!!!, but what is it regarding? A "favor" might range from lending the sender your stapler to donating your kidney. One might want to "just tell you" a lot of things, from "I like your tie" to "I hear you're getting fired tomorrow."

Some examples of good subject lines include the following:

```
Subject: Tomorrow's managerial meeting agenda
Subject: Questions about Monday's presentation
Subject: QUESTION: May I quote you in an article?
Subject: FYI: Out of the office Thursday
Subject: REQUEST: Pls comment on the proposed redesign layout
Subject: IMPORTANT: Must fax contract before 3PM today
```

Notice the optional use of prefixes (FYI, REQUEST, IMPORTANT) that convey the message type before addressing the content in the rest of the line. You can even shorten them to Q: for Question, REQ: for Request, and IMPT: for Important.

If your message contains several requests for action or info related to different topics entirely, break it down into separate messages. That will help get each point addressed in specific, relevant conversation threads.

Be Succinct

The purpose of writing an email isn't to hear yourself think; it's to elicit the desired response from the recipient.

The shorter your email, the more likely it is that it will be read and your request filled. No one wants to muddle through a long, wordy missive picking out the questions, task requests, and important points. Respect your recipient's time and expect that your message will be skimmed quickly. Get right to the point and hit Send. Everyone appreciates brevity.

NOTE Lots of email-savvy folks send subject-only messages to convey very short bits of information. For example, a blank email with the subject line, FYI: Out of the office for the rest of the afternoon [EOM] (where EOM stands for End of Message) says all that it has to.

Put Your Messages on a Diet

If you're sending messages to people outside your corporate network, where download speeds and email software may differ from your environment,

eliminate unnecessary attachments and HTML elements that may weigh down the message. Here are some tips:

- If you're attaching photos, be sure to rotate them to the correct orientation and resize them. (See Hack 51, "Batch Resize Photos," for a quick way to make your photos better suited for email.)
- Don't assume that everyone has HTML email enabled; many folks (including myself) disable HTML email to avoid marketing trackers and long message downloads.
- Don't assume that your message looks the same way in your recipient's software as it did in yours; all email applications format messages differently.
- In some email software, a long web site address that wraps in the message may be unclickable. Use a service such as TinyURL (http://tinyurl.com) to shorten that address before you send your message.

Facilitate a Complete Response

A few line breaks can go a long way in a message that contains a set of questions, important points, or task requests. Use line breaks and bullet points liberally to make your message easy to read and respond to.

For example, the following message intersperses information with questions in one continuous paragraph:

```
Hi, Becky,
Got your message about Tuesday, thanks! What's the conference room number? Turns out I'm going to drive instead of take the train.
Will I need a parking pass? Also, I have the PowerPoint presentation on my laptop. Is there a projector available I can hook it up to, or should I bring my own?
```

It would be a lot easier for Becky to see the bits of the message that require a response if it were formatted this way:

```
Hi, Becky,
I'm all set for Tuesday's meeting. A few questions for you:
* What is the conference room number?
* If I drive, how should I get a parking pass?
* Is a projector available that will work with my laptop?
```

The second version clearly delineates what questions the sender needs answered and makes responding inline to the questions much easier on Becky.

Make It Clear Why Everyone Got the Message

Messages that have several recipients in the To: field can spread accountability too thin across a group of people. If everything thinks, "Someone else will take care of it," nothing will get done. As a sender, include multiple recipients on a message only when you absolutely must — and then make it clear in the body of the message why everyone is receiving it, as in the following example:

```
To: Victor Downs, Lorrie Crenshaw, Kyran Deck
Subject: Staff luncheon confirmed for June 18th

We reserved a room for 40 at Lottie's for 1PM on Tuesday, June 18th.

VD: Will the shuttle be available for transportation that day? Please let Kyran know.

KD: Please send out a staff-wide email invite with directions and shuttle information by the 4th.

LC: FYI, we'll have to cancel our weekly meeting.
```

Don't Forget the Attachment

It's too easy to dash off a message saying "the file's attached" and then never actually attach the file. The Bells & Whistles plugin for Microsoft Outlook (free trial, \$29.95 per license, available at http://emailaddressmanager.com/outlook-bells.html) notifies you when you try to send a message with the word "attached" or "attachment" in it and no file is attached. The Gmail Attachment Reminder Greasemonkey user script, available at http://userscripts.org/scripts/show/2419, does the same for Gmail users.

Replying to a Message

Nothing's worse than sending an email with three questions and getting back the answer to only one. To avoid unnecessary email back-and-forth, answer all the messages that require a response as thoroughly as possible.

Respond to Individual Points Inline

For email that includes lists of questions or response-worthy points, press the Reply button and include your comments inline — that is, interspersed within the original email — to ensure that you address every point. For example, Becky might reply to the earlier message this way:

```
Hi Rich,

Rich Jones wrote:

> * What is the conference room number?

It's room 316 in B Building.

> * If I drive, how should I get a parking pass?

Park in the west lot and give your name at the booth. The guard will issue you a guest pass there.

> * Is there a projector available that will work with my laptop?

Yes, there is - a member of our tech team will be there to help set you up.

See you then,

Becky
```

Task Requests

When you receive a request for action, don't delay your response until you're ready to complete the action. Instead, review the request and respond with any questions you need answered before you can get it done right away.

For example, if you receive the following email:

Subject: REQUEST: Please comment on the redesign layout proposal Let us know what you think about the new font choice and background color.

you might respond right away:

```
Subject: Re: REQUEST: Please comment on the redesign layout proposal

Tamara Smith wrote:
> Let us know what you think about the new font choice and background color.

Can you send me a link to the new proposal?

Also, when is the deadline for final comments?
```

Lead by Example

You may be a master at writing effective email, but communication is a two-way street. Lead by example when you receive poorly written messages. When you respond, edit an email's unspecific subject line so that further correspondence on the topic is easily identifiable in your inbox. Break up someone's run-on message into chunks and respond inline. If the purpose of the message is unclear to you, respond with the question, "What's my next step regarding this?" If someone sends you a rambling, five-screen description, reply briefly: "Sounds good." These strategies train others to not expect long messages from you in real time and to craft better subject lines and task requests.

Don't Respond in Real Time

Although some folks may live and die by the "Bing! You have new mail!" of their email client, email was never meant to be instant, real-time communication and shouldn't be used as such. If someone needs to engage you at this moment in time, he can call. Otherwise, create the expectation that email to you will not get answered on the spot.

Even if you are checking your email in real time (and you shouldn't be unless you don't want to get anything else done), don't respond to non-emergency messages right away, especially from co-workers. It sets an impossible expectation for the future. Settle on a reasonable maximum response-time goal; for example, commit to responding to email within four to six hours on business days, or within 24 to 48 hours at most.

Get Outside the Inbox

Tone-deafness is the biggest pitfall of textual communication — especially quick, off-the-cuff methods such as email. The sender's facial expression or tone of voice doesn't come inside her email messages, and feelings can be hurt, recipients can be offended, and messages can be taken the wrong way. In fact, the American Psychological Association published a study that shows emailers overestimate their ability to convey their tone by about 25 percent when they press the Send button, and overestimate their ability to correctly interpret the tone of messages others send to them as well.⁹

Some issues are too complex or sensitive to be communicated via email. Know when it's appropriate to just pick up the phone and call someone or visit in person to convey a message and answer questions on the spot.

Know When Not to Say a Thing

Even though email correspondence *seems* private, it's not. Copies of every message you've ever sent out were made on servers across the Internet, and business email is saved on your employer's server as well. A recent study shows that about one-third of large companies in the United States actively monitor their employees' email. ¹⁰ This number will only go up as liabilities and privacy issues related to email increase.

Keeping that in mind, never write email when you're upset, emotional, stressed, tired, hungry, drunk, or otherwise impaired. After an email is sent, there's no taking it back, and every email you send is written documentation that can be used in court or to support a case for promotion or firing. Never say something in an email that you wouldn't publish in a company newsletter, say to a newspaper reporter, or announce at a meeting.

If an email upsets you or you're feeling a rant coming on, write it in a text file, save it, and give yourself time to think things over. Later, go back and edit or start all over on a more composed note.

Hack 4: Highlight Messages Sent Directly to You

Level..... Easy Platform.... All Cost Free

When you're faced with an inbox full of new, unread email, it's nearly impossible to determine which messages need to be dealt with right away and which can be put off until later. You get CCed on memos and included on large mailing lists, or receive company- or department-wide notifications. When you're pressed for time, those types of messages are all good candidates for later reading. But what about those few messages addressed *only* to you?

Email overload expert Itzy Sabo says,¹¹

Such messages are most likely to be more important than the rest of the stuff that fills up my inbox, because:

They have not been sent to a bunch of people, but specifically to me.

They are therefore more likely to relate to my area of responsibility.

They are also more likely to require action.

If I don't answer, nobody else will.

Microsoft Outlook: Color Me Blue

Using Microsoft Outlook, you can make those important to-me-only messages jump out of your inbox with one simple setting. Choose Tools ⇔ Organize, and in the Using Colors section, click the Turn On button next to Show Messages Sent Only To Me In Blue, as shown in Figure 1-2.

Then, messages sent only to you will be a different color than the others. During your email processing sessions, you'll do well to deal with the blue messages first. (Of course, you can use the color drop-down list to select a different color for your only-to-me emails if you want.)



Figure 1-2 Organize your inbox by highlighting messages addressed only to you.

All Other Email Programs: Create a Not-to-Me Filter

Most modern email applications have a rule or filter feature that matches incoming messages against criteria you define and performs some action. Create a not-to-me filter that de-highlights lower priority messages or even moves them to an Inbox–Low Priority folder. See Hack 10, "Filter Low-Priority Email Messages," for more on using email filters to automatically clean out and prioritize your inbox.

TIP Gmail can indicate messages sent only to your address with the right-angle quotation mark (which looks like a double greater-than sign, or >>) pointing to the message subject. Messages addressed to you and other people get a single greater-than sign (>). Messages without your address in the To: field — such as to distribution lists — have no indicator near them. In Gmail's Settings area, turn this on under Personal Level Indicators.

Hack 5: Use Disposable Email Addresses

Level..... Easy Platform... Web Cost Free

Much of the junk email you receive is from spammers who bought or scraped your email address from a web site where you registered for membership. Most registration-based web sites require that you use a legitimate email address; often, you have to retrieve an email from that address's inbox to complete registration.

If you hate the idea of giving your email address to any web site that asks for it and you want to protect your email address from junk mail and spam, use a disposable email address instead.

Web-Based Public Email Addresses

Several services, such as Mailinator (http://mailinator.com) offer free, public, disposable email addresses. Choose any email name at the mailinator.com domain — such as goaheadspammer@mailinator.com or joe@mailinator.com — and use it to register at a web site. Then, visit Mailinator.com to check the public inbox, which doesn't require a password.

CAUTION Remember, anyone can check the joe@mailinator.com inbox, so make sure nothing too personal winds up there!

Dodgit (http://dodgit.com) offers a service similar to Mailinator, with the capability to check all public email accounts at dodgit.com via RSS. If you use the Bloglines (http://bloglines.com) RSS reader, you can also create an unlimited number of disposable email addresses there to receive newsletters, mailing-list messages, and other low-priority mail inside your newsreader.

For more on RSS, see Hack 82, "Subscribe to Web Sites with RSS."

Multi-Domain Email Addresses

If you host your email at your own web site domain (see more on that in Hack 7, "Future-Proof Your Email Address," later in this chapter), you have a limitless supply of email names available to you; really, anything

followed by @yourdomain.com. Each time you sign up for a web site, use a unique name that you can block or filter later if you start receiving spam.

For example, if my real email address is <code>gina@example.com</code>, I might register at Amazon.com using the <code>amazon.com@example.com</code> email address, which also comes to me. If Amazon sells my address and I start receiving spam at <code>amazon.com@example.com</code>, I can block further email to that address and I'll know it was Amazon who sold me out. (This is just an example. In all the years I've been a registered Amazon.com user, I've never received spam at the unique address I use there.)

NOTE For more on how to avoid signing up for a web site at all, see Hack 53, "Bypass Free Site Registration with BugMeNot."

Hack 6: Master Message Search

Level..... Easy Platforms ... All Cost Free

In an earlier hack, you created an archive of closed messages for later reference, and your Archive folder has no subfolders in it. That makes a lot of compulsively organized people who like to have a folder for every sender, project, and day of the week very anxious. But in contrast to paper documents, you don't need folders to find where you've stored messages. As long as you know a few key characteristics of the message you're looking for, a well-crafted query can pluck out the email you're looking for immediately — without traversing a six-folder-deep hierarchy.

In the physical world, you can't throw years' worth of letters, cards, and memos into a drawer and then pick out the one Tom sent you about that fabulous rental he got in Key West back in 2003 in seconds. However, that is absolutely possible with an email folder containing thousands of messages.

Search Criteria

Most email programs have message search built right in. Not surprisingly, Google's web-based email product Gmail has the strongest searching capabilities on the market; undoubtedly, other email software makers will follow suit in the near future.

For example, your search for Tom's message might look like Figure 1-3 in Gmail's Search Options area:



Figure 1-3 Searching for a message from Tom that contains the phrase "Key West."

You can do even more complex queries with Gmail's advanced search operators. For example, if you wanted to search for messages from Tom or Kelly that have the phrase "Key West" or the word "rental," use the OR operator (also signified with the pipe |). As with a Google web search, enclose phrases in quotation marks. The entire query can go into one search box and will look like this:

```
From: (Tom | Kelly) ("Key West" OR rental)
```

You can exclude terms as well. For instance, if you wanted to see all the messages from people except for Joe at a specific company (at the example.com domain), you could search for

```
From: (*@example.com AND -joe@example.com)
```

A summary of all Gmail's search operators is available at http://mail.google.com/support/bin/answer.py?answer=7190. Here's a sampling:

OPERATOR	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
from:	Specifies the sender.	from: Amy Returns messages from Amy.
to:	Specifies the recipient.	to:Jonah Returns messages addressed to Jonah.

(continued)

(continued)

OPERATOR	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Subject:	Searches the subject line	subject:lunch Returns messages with the word <i>lunch</i> in the subject line.
OR	Searches for messages with either term A or term B. OR must be in all caps. A pipe () works in place of OR.	from:Jonah OR from:Amy Returns messages from Jonah or from Amy.
-	Excludes a term from the search.	Java -coffee Returns messages containing the word Java but not the word coffee.
has:attachment	Searches for messages with an attachment.	from:david has:attachment Returns messages from David that contain any kind of file attachment.
filename:	Searches for an attachment by name or type.	filename:poem.doc Returns messages with an attachment named poem.doc. filename:jpg Returns messages with
п п	Searches for an exact phrase (capitalization isn't considered).	"Nice job" Returns messages that contain the phrase nice job or Nice job. subject: "dinner and a movie" Returns messages containing the phrase dinner and a movie in the subject.
()	Groups words; used to specify terms that shouldn't be excluded.	from: amy (dinner OR movie) Returns messages from Amy that contain either the word dinner or the word movie.

OPERATOR	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
		subject: (dinner movie) Returns messages in which the subject contains both the word dinner and the word movie. Note that AND is implied.
after:	Search for messages sent after a certain date (date must be in yyyy/mm/dd format).	after:2001/09/11 Returns messages sent after September 11, 2001.
before:	Search for messages sent before a certain date (date must be in yyyy/mm/dd format).	before:1997/05/17 Returns messages sent before May 17, 1997.
		after: 2007/06/01 AND before: 2007/07/01 Returns messages sent after June 1, 2007, but before July 1, 2007. (Or messages sent in June, 2007.)

When you use these operators, a well-crafted query can turn up messages with specific attributes from your Archive folder — or entire email archive — in seconds.

To search email messages in Microsoft Outlook or Mozilla
Thunderbird using operators like Gmail's, consider using the free Google
Desktop Search (http://desktop.google.com). See also Hack 12,
"Instantly Retrieve Files Stored on Your Computer," for more on using
Google Desktop Search.

Saved Search Folders

Another efficient digital filing technique is to save a search as a folder. No more dragging and dropping messages by hand; you can create a virtual email folder defined by search criteria.

For example, during the writing of this book, I created a Book email folder that contained all the correspondence between my publishing company, Wiley, and me.

To do this in Thunderbird, execute a search from the upper-right corner search box. Then, from the drop-down list, choose Save Search as a Folder and edit your criteria. In my case, any message whose sender or recipient contained the phrase wiley.com or my agent's email address should be included in my Book folder. The query is defined in Thunderbird, as shown in Figure 1-4.

Then, the Book folder appears in my folder list as usual, except a small magnifying glass over the folder icon indicates that it's a saved search. When I click the folder, Thunderbird updates its contents with all the messages that match the search.

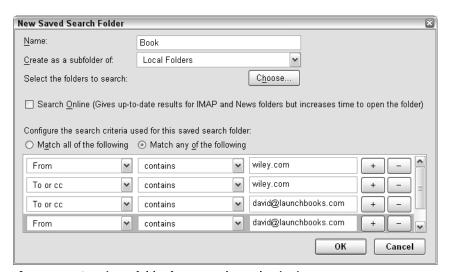


Figure 1-4 Creating a folder from saved search criteria.

Microsoft Outlook 2007 also offers saved search folders. In the Mail Folders bar, right-click Search Folders and choose New Search Folder to create one.

The advantage of saved search folders is that one email can live in any number of saved searches, as long as it fulfills the criteria. Folder deletion just removes the query — not the messages themselves.

After this book is completed, I'll delete that folder — but all the messages will remain in their original locations.

Hack 7: Future-Proof Your Email Address

Level..... Easy Platform... All Cost Free

You probably have as many email addresses as you do pairs of socks, but you don't want to change them as often. In fact, switching your primary email address can be a big inconvenience that leads to missed messages and lost relationships. You give your email address to countless friends, relatives, and web services, and publish it on mailing lists, web sites, and documents forever cached in search engine indexes. But if your email address is tied to a former ISP, the company you used to work for, the university you attended, or the embarrassing handle you chose in college, switching to a new address can become a necessity.

If you're thinking about changing your primary email address, you've got many choices. Before you commit to your next unique identifier on the Internet, check out some do's and don'ts for future-proofing your email address.

Don'ts

- Don't use your company's or school's email address for personal use. Someday you will graduate or leave your current company, and you don't want to leave your email messages behind, not to mention try to make sure all your contacts' address books are updated. Certainly your company or school email address is appropriate to use for company and school correspondence, but as your primary individual address, not so much.
- Don't use the address your ISP gave you. You upgrade to broadband and RoadRunner gives you a free name@yourstate.rr.com email account. Nice, right? Wrong! Someday you will live in another state and use another ISP, and that address won't work anymore. Pass.

Do's

■ Use an address that is accessible from anywhere. More and more, you will use multiple computers at home, at work, and in public

places. Make sure you can securely access your email from any-where, and choose an address that enables you to do so. Many popular web-based email services use SSL logins and have easy-to-use dynamic interfaces (such as Google's Gmail), so use an address at one of them or that works with one of them. You can even use email forwarding to, say, send a copy of every email you receive and send to a web-based account for online searchable archives from anywhere.

■ Choose an easy-to-remember name you won't regret down the road. Remember when qtGrrl81 was an email handle that made you proud? Well, now that you're a freelancer soliciting business or applying for jobs, you want something more professional. Choose an email address that will be easy to remember and recognize, and one that won't make you cringe when you have to recite it over the phone to your mutual fund company.

Bottom Line

You want an email address that will stick with you for years to come. The most ideal (and most costly) solution is to register a domain name and set up an email address at a provider (such as yourname@yourname.com). Your provider goes away and you can move that domain to a new provider, no address change required.

NOTE Lifehacker.com readers make email hosting service recommenda-

tions at http://lifehackerbook.com/links/emailhosts.

For those who don't want to plunk down the cash for their own domain and email provider, any of the popular, free, web-based mail services are a great option. Gmail and Yahoo! Mail are two free, take-it-with-you web-based email providers. Your best chance for getting the username you want is probably at Gmail, which was most recently launched.

The problem with depending on a free web-based service for your email is loss of control. If Gmail changes its domain, decides to start charging, has server problems, or goes away (all unlikely but possible scenarios), you're affected without much recourse. In a pay-for situation with your own domain name, you can change providers and only you own your data if something goes wrong.

A service called Google Apps For Your Domain (https://www.google.com/a/) lets you use your custom domain with Google's email service, Gmail, which gives you the best of both worlds. If at some point in the future you want to move away from Gmail, you can simply remap your domain to another service without changing your address.

Hack 8: Consolidate Multiple Email Addresses with Gmail

Level..... Medium Platform... Web Cost Free

After reading Hack 7, you've decided to move all your email online to Google's web-based service, Gmail. Great! But what about messages still going to your old email address(es)? Fear not. Gmail is not only an email host; it's an email client that can fetch mail from any number of external services and consolidate it all right there in your Gmail inbox. You can avoid having to tell all your contacts to update your email address again and you don't miss a single message in your transition to Gmail.

Receive Messages for Other Addresses in Your Gmail Inbox

You have two ways to receive email from other addresses in Gmail: use Gmail's Mail Fetcher feature or forward your other addresses' mail to Gmail automatically.

Option 1: Set Up Gmail's POP Mail Fetcher

Most likely, your former email provider offers POP (Post Office Protocol) access for retrieving messages for it. Gmail's Mail Fetcher feature can retrieve those messages via POP and display them in your inbox along-side messages that come directly to your Gmail address. You can fetch email from up to five other email addresses via POP in Gmail.

To use Gmail's Mail Fetcher, your old email account must offer POP access. Not all free addresses offer POP, but most do. Check the other account's settings or contact customer support to find out whether POP

access is available on your non-Gmail account. You'll need four settings: the POP server address, the port, and your username and password. Also, if you haven't already, you'll need to sign up for a free Gmail account at http://gmail.com.

After you're logged in to your Gmail account, configure Mail Fetcher to retrieve messages from your old account. Here's how:

- 1. From the top of any page within Gmail, click Settings.
- 2. Click Accounts.
- In the Get Mail From Other Accounts section, click Add Another Mail Account.
- 4. Enter the full email address of the account you'd like to access, and click Next Step.
- Gmail will fill in the username, POP server, and port fields when possible, based on the email address, as shown in Figure 1-5. Enter your password.

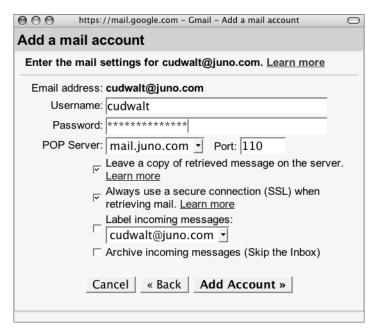


Figure 1-5 Retrieving email via POP for a non-Gmail address.

- 6. If Gmail will be the single place you check mail, deselect the box labeled "Leave A Copy Of Retrieved Message On The Server." If you want to access the other mail from other software (or if you're just using Gmail as a backup), do select this box. You can also set options to use SSL (a secure connection) to retrieve mail (some servers support this, others don't). And you can choose whether to label or archive incoming messages.
- 7. After your options are set, click Add Account. Gmail will issue an error if your username, password, or other settings are incorrect. When Gmail can fetch messages successfully, it will give you the option to set up a custom From: address. (See the section "Write Messages from Non-Gmail Addresses," later in this chapter, for more on that.)

After you set up Mail Fetcher, Google will check your other account(s) on a regular basis, and new mail will appear automatically in your Gmail account.

NOTE Gmail checks for new messages at different rates, depending on previous mail-fetch attempts. You can't customize the default frequency of mail fetches.

Option 2: Forward Messages to Gmail Automatically

If your old address doesn't offer POP access — or you have more than five addresses that you'd like to consolidate in Gmail — you can set your former address to automatically forward messages to Gmail instead. The exact way to do this differs, depending on your email account, but if your provider offers auto-forwarding, this feature will most likely be listed in your account options area.

For example, to auto-forward email from your Hotmail email account (which does not offer POP access), click your account options, and under Manage Your Account, click Forward Your Mail To Another E-Mail Address. There you can set your new Gmail account as the destination address, as shown in Figure 1-6.

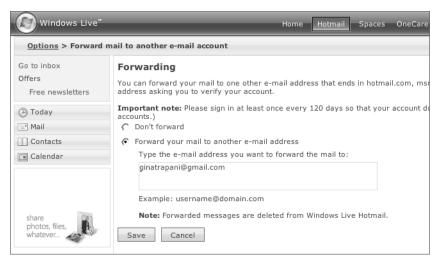


Figure 1-6 Automatically forwarding Hotmail email to Gmail.

Write Messages from Non-Gmail Addresses

Now that you have email addressed to several different accounts arriving in your single Gmail inbox, you may want to use those various From: addresses when replying to those messages. For someone who maintains several different online personas — but accesses them all in Gmail — the option to use various From: addresses when sending mail is crucial. Here's how to set up multiple From: addresses after you're logged into Gmail:

- 1. Click Settings along the top of any page and then select the Accounts tab.
- 2. Click Add Another Email Address in the Send Mail As section.
- 3. Enter your full name in the Name field, and enter the email address you'd like to send messages from in the Email Address field.
- 4. Click Next Step >> and then click Send Verification. Gmail will send a verification message to your other email address to confirm that you'd like to add it to your Gmail account. If you are already receiving this mail in Gmail, it will appear in your inbox. Click the link in that message, or enter the confirmation code in the Accounts section of your Gmail account, to complete the process.

You can add several possible From: addresses to your Gmail account, as shown in Figure 1-7.

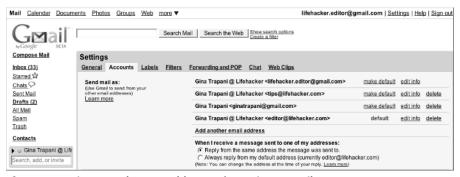


Figure 1-7 List several From: addresses for a given Gmail account.

Set one of your addresses as your default for receiving new messages. You can also set the From: name and a different reply-to address if you'd like (by clicking the Edit Info link).

After you've verified that you want to add the address to your account, you can start sending messages using your custom From: address. When you click Compose, you can choose the From: address to use from the drop-down list, as shown in Figure 1-8.

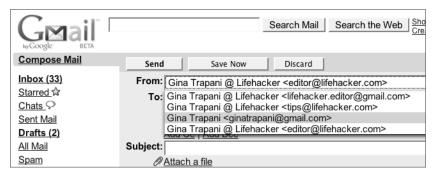


Figure 1-8 Choose the desired From: address from the drop-down list.

NOTE To help prevent your mail from being marked as spam, your Gmail address will be included in the email headers of your message in the Sender field. Most email clients do not display the Sender field, although some versions of Microsoft Outlook may display "From customaddress@domain.com on behalf of yourusername@gmail.com."

Hack 9: Script Repetitive Responses

Level..... Medium

Platform.... Windows XP and Vista, Mac OS X, Unix (Thunderbird)

Cost Free

Is there an echo in your Sent email folder? Do you consistently receive messages that ask the same questions or require the same type of information in response? To knock down repetitive email quickly, build a set of scripted email responses that you can drop into emails quickly, personalize if necessary, and send off without spending the time composing the same information every time. With a set of trusty scripted templates, you can whip through tedious, recurring email like an expert air-traffic controller in the busy airport of your inbox.

The Quicktext Thunderbird extension saves collections of reusable text snippets that help you compose personalized replies to those tiresome email messages with a few keystrokes.

Thunderbird — see Hacks 48 and 49, "Reduce Repetitive Typing with Texter for Windows" and "Reduce Repetitive Typing with Texter Typing with Text Typing with Typing

In contrast to other text saver utilities, Quicktext is specific to email because it recognizes variables that reference message details — such as the recipient's first or last name, the subject line, or attachment filenames. Quicktext replaces these variables with the right info for speedy yet personalized responses. Easily reply to Lucy Wood's message with a "Dear Ms. Wood" or to Robin Cullen's email with "Hi, Robin" using one keyword or click. No name-typing required.

Here's an example: You have a computer for sale and you post an ad on a message board or in the local newspaper. Within a day, you have an inbox full of messages inquiring about it. You can dash through those messages with Quicktext. Just follow these steps:

- 1. Download Quicktext from http://extensions.hesslow.se/quicktext. Save the .xpi file to your computer.
- From the Thunderbird Tools menu, choose Extensions. Click the Install button and browse to the .xpi file you saved. Click Install Now. When installation is complete, shut down Thunderbird and start it again.

- 3. Click the Compose button to start a new email message, and then click Tools ⇔ Quicktext.
- 4. Click the Add button, choose Group, and enter **computer sale**.
- 5. Click Add again and choose Text. Call this script **lowbid**, and in the Text section on the right, enter your snippet (see Step 6). Also set the keyword to **lowbid**, as shown in Figure 1-9.

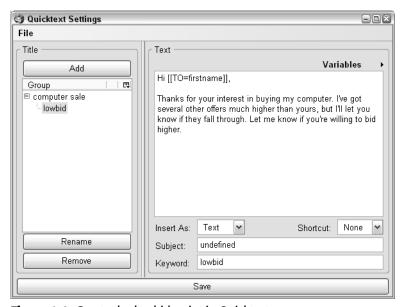


Figure 1-9 Create the lowbid script in Quicktext.

6. Set the text to the following:

Hi [[TO=firstname]],

Thanks for your interest in buying my computer. I've got several other offers much higher than yours, but I'll let you know if they fall through. Let me know if you're willing to bid higher.

7. Create any more Quicktexts that might apply to computer-inquiry responses. For example, create one called **more info** with the keyword **moreinfo** that reads as follows:

Hi [[TO=firstname]],

Thanks for your interest in buying my computer. It's a 700Mhz IBM Thinkpad with 32MB of RAM and a 3GB hard drive. Let me know if you need any more information.

- 8. After you've set up your scripts, go to a message about the computer. When you press the Reply button, you see a drop-down list of the Quicktext groups you set up. The computer sale and greetings Quicktexts are shown in Figure 1-10.
- 9. Insert the appropriate reply either by selecting it from the drop-down list or by typing the keyword lowbid, in this example and pressing the Tab key. Your response, complete with the recipient's first name, is automatically inserted into the message body.

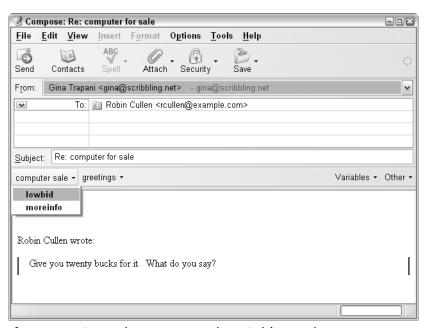


Figure 1-10 Composing a message using a Quicktext script.

Quicktext can also reference snippets within other snippets. For example, you could set up a group called **greetings** that contains two snippets:

personal, which is set to

```
Hi, [[TO=firstname]],
```

business, which is set to

```
Dear [[To=firstname]] [[To=lastname]]:
```

Then, in other snippets, you can reference one greeting by using the [[TEXT=greetings|personal]] variable. See the Quicktext homepage (http://extensions.hesslow.se/text/3/All+Tags/) for the full list of variables.

Hack 10: Filter Low-Priority Messages ("Bacn")

Level..... Easy Platform.... All Cost Free

You're head-down at work on that important presentation that's due in two hours. BING! An unopened envelope appears in your system tray.

"You have 1 unread message."

Maybe it's your co-worker with game-changing information about the presentation. Maybe it's your boss asking to see you right away. You switch and take a look at your inbox. Oh. Aunt Eunice forwarded you a picture of a kitten in a tutu. Again.

Millions of email messages course over the Internet per second, and a bunch of them land in your inbox. Your spam filter helps shuttle junk mail out of sight, but what about messages from CC-happy co-workers, Aunt Eunice's forwarded emails, Facebook friend notifications, Google Alerts, and mailing-list messages that clutter your inbox with low-priority noise? A group of web users coined the term "bacn" to refer to this "middle class of email" that's "better than spam but not as good as a personal email" In other words, they're messages you want to read eventually, just not right now. Clearing away the bacn automatically can help you drill down to what's important more quickly.

NOTE Bacn (pronounced "bacon") is an Internet slang term cooked up by a group of web users at PodCamp Pittsburgh 2. It means email that you want to read, but not right away.

Filter Bacn

Set up rules — also called email filters — to make low-priority messages skip your inbox and file themselves away someplace less urgent. A mail filter is a list of conditions you define that trigger an action on an incoming

email message. Filters can be as simple as "Delete any message from annoying.person@example.com" or much more complex, such as "Any message that doesn't contain any one of my five email addresses in the To: field and does not have the word URGENT in the subject line should be moved to the Not Important folder."

The steps for creating a mail filter or rule vary depending on your email software. The following examples use the excellent, free, cross-platform email program Thunderbird, available at http://mozilla.org/products/thunderbird.

To configure your email filters in Thunderbird, choose Tools \Leftrightarrow Message Filters and click the New button. Figure 1-11 displays a rule that files Aunt Eunice's forwarded messages and any messages from a mailing list to a folder called Later.

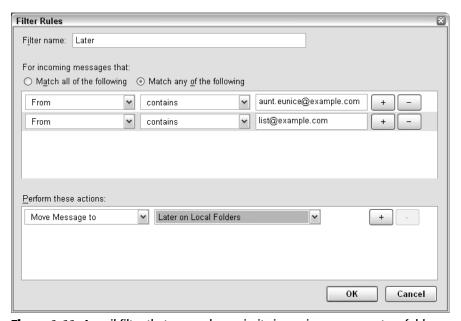


Figure 1-11 A mail filter that moves low-priority incoming messages to a folder called Later in Mozilla Thunderbird.

Filter CCed Messages

One of the most common misuses of email — especially in an office situation — is carbon copying anyone and everyone even tangentially

related to the topic of a message. It's safe to assume that messages not directed to you (that is, your email address is not in the To: line) are less urgent and more informative; CCed messages most likely don't require a response or action on your part. On a day when you're firewalling your attention to include only the most important disruptors, set up a rule that shuttles email you've been CCed on out of your inbox and into a separate folder for searching and browsing later.

To do so, first create a CC folder in your email program. Then set up a rule (filter) to say, "If my email address does not appear in the To: field, file this message," as shown in Figure 1-12.

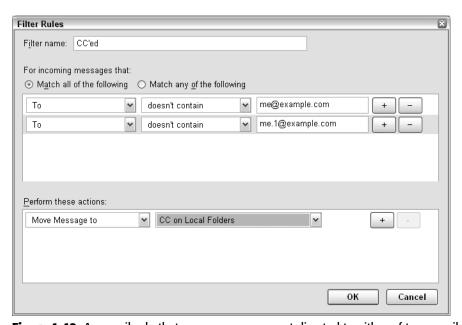


Figure 1-12 An email rule that moves messages not directed to either of two email addresses to a folder called CC.

NOTE Hack 6, "Master Message Search," provides tips for digging up messages based on specific criteria.

When the filter is enabled, all new messages that arrive without your email address in the To: field are automatically filed in the CC folder.

References

- Michael Fitzgerald, "Call It the Dead E-Mail Office," Wired (http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2004/06/63733).
- 2. Mike Davidson, "A Lo-Fi Solution to Email Overload: Sentenc.es" (http://www.mikeindustries.com/blog/archive/2007/07/fight-email-overload-with-sentences).
- 3. "Companies limit email use to boost productivity," Quad-Cities Online (http://qconline.com/archives/qco/display.php?id=351875).
- 4. Mark Hurst, Bit Literacy (Good Experience Press, 2007), 24.
- Merlin Mann, "Fresh Start: The Email DMZ," 43 Folders (http://www.43folders.com/2006/01/04/email-dmz/).
- 6. Michael Hyatt, "What's the Secret to Your Success?," Working Smart weblog (http://www.michaelhyatt.com/workingsmart/2006/02/whats_the_secre.html).
- 7. "Got Two Extra Hours For Your E-Mail?," The New York Times, November 2005 (http://nytimes.com/2005/11/10/fashion/ thursdaystyles/10E-MAIL.html?ei=5090&en=eb222acdf706a35d& ex=1289278800&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss&pagewanted= print).
- 8. Center for Media Research, Research Brief (http://centerformediaresearch.com/cfmr_brief.cfm?fnl=050921).
- 9. American Psychological Association (http://apa.org/monitor/feb06/egos.html).
- 10. "Companies Read Employee E-Mail," Reuters (http://wired.com/news/wireservice/0,71071-0.html?tw=rss.index).
- 11. Itzy Sabo, "Small Change Makes Big Difference to Email Prioritization: How to Color-code Your Messages," Email Overloaded weblog (http://itzy.wordpress.com/2005/12/27/how-to-color-code-your-messages/).
- 12. Eric Weiner, "Move Over, Spam: 'Bacn' Is the E-Mail Dish Du Jour," NPR (http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14032271&ft=1&f=1006).