



## **This Is Your Life Podcast**

Episode 5: “How to Take Control of Your E-mail Inbox”

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Hello and welcome to another episode of *This Is Your Life*. My name is Michael Hyatt, and this is the podcast dedicated to intentional leadership. My goal is to help you live with more passion, work with greater focus, and lead with extraordinary influence.

Before we get started in today’s episode, I have a few announcements I would like to make:

I’m really excited to announce that I’m going to be speaking at BlogWorld in New York City on June 5 through June 7. My new friend, Cliff Ravenscraft, of the [PodcastAnswerMan.com](http://PodcastAnswerMan.com), has invited me, and we don’t have the details nailed down yet (like when I’m going to speak), but we’ll announce it on my speaking page at [MichaelHyatt.com/speaking](http://MichaelHyatt.com/speaking) once we have them nailed down.

The second announcement is that my new book, *Platform: Get Noticed in a Noisy World*, is still on schedule to be published by Thomas Nelson on May 22. Now, get this. I am going to ask you *not* to pre-order it yet. I know that may be a strange request coming from the author, but there is a method in my madness.

We’ve put together an incredible bonus package of seven resources worth \$375.98, and to get this special bonus offer, all you have to do is buy the book. That’s it! I can’t tell you more yet, because we’re still putting together the landing page. But I’ve been working hard over the last several weeks, creating these various programs. Once the landing page is up, you can bet I’ll provide you with explicit instructions on how to take advantage of this special pre-launch offer. So...more to come.

Third announcement: I now have a listener-feedback hotline. It’s official. You can call 615-656-5001 and leave a message or a question, and the system sends me an e-mail with an audio file of your message just as soon as you hang up. If you have an idea for a podcast you would like to see or a question about an upcoming episode, I would *love* to hear from you. Of course, you’re always welcome to e-mail me at [feedback@michaelhyatt.com](mailto:feedback@michaelhyatt.com). Either way, whatever is more convenient for you; I would just love to hear from you and get your input on the show.

Okay, let’s get into this show’s topic. Let me start with a few questions. Do you feel overwhelmed by your e-mail? Do you feel like you’re hopelessly behind and you’re never going to catch up? Do you feel like stuff is falling through the cracks? If so, I have great news! Today we’re going to be talking about how to take control of your e-mail inbox.

Here's the problem: Despite all the current technology and software tools available, many people are falling further behind with each passing day. They just can't seem to keep up with the avalanche of digital messages that are hitting their inbox. I mean, we're inundated with e-mail.

In 2010 (the last year we have stats on) there were 107 trillion e-mail messages sent. That's 294 billion a day, and the ugly part of this is that 89 percent of those were spam.

Smartphones have added to the problem. They may have initially helped because you could send and receive e-mail on the go, but now smartphones mean we can never get away from e-mail. I mean it follows us everywhere.

For example, see if this describes you. Do you ever check e-mail from your smartphone after you're already in bed? Do you ever check e-mail from your smartphone before getting out of bed? Do you ever check e-mail under the table at a business meeting? Do you ever check e-mail while you're at church? Okay, this is the clincher. Do you ever check e-mail while sitting on the toilet?

Social media has created additional inboxes. Now you have inboxes for Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, even Twitter, in the form of replies and direct messages. And if you blog, the comments you receive are additional messages that have to be read and processed.

Let's be honest. When you're not on top of your e-mail, you feel out of control, right? It's like a dripping faucet that gnaws quietly away at your psyche and your self-confidence. It can also torpedo your career since people tend to associate responsiveness with competence. Therefore, becoming an e-mail ninja is an essential survival skill.

But is it really possible to get caught up on your e-mail and stay caught up? Yes! I've done it for years, even as the demands of my career have increased. I'm not bragging; it's just a fact. But I should warn you. There's no easy fix. Taking control of your inbox means changing your behavior. But I promise you, if you're willing to make the investment, it's possible, and it's definitely worth making the investment.

My premise for this episode is this: You can stay on top of your e-mail by practicing four behaviors. Let me give these to you one at a time.

1. **Empty your inbox every day.** This should be your goal. You want to be able to go to sleep with every message processed. Now this doesn't mean you *answer* every message, but it does mean that you've *processed* every message. There's a big difference, and I'll explain what it is in a minute. But again, empty your inbox every day. Your goal is "inbox: zero."

2. **Don't get bogged down; keep moving.** In other words, you have to have a workflow process that becomes for you automatic and second nature. This is key. People often get bogged down because they keep processing the same e-mail message over and over again. They read it. They don't take action.

They let it sit in their inbox. Then, a few days later, they reprocess it. So nothing really ever progresses. Their e-mails just build up in their inbox, and it becomes very disheartening very quickly.

The key is that once you start processing your inbox, you have to move quickly. Read each message once and answer this question: *Is this message actionable?* Now this is a question and a process that I got from David Allen in his book, *Getting Things Done*. You have to ask, *Is this message (the one I'm looking at right now) actionable?* In other words, *Am I being asked to do something?*

Now if the answer to that question is yes, there are only three possible actions:

Number one, *do*. D-O. That's right. Take action on the task *now*. Again, I follow David Allen's "two-minute rule." If I can do what is being requested of me in less than two minutes, I do it immediately. This gets stuff *off* your to-do list before it ever gets *on* your to-do list. This has the added advantage of making you look very responsive.

Number two, *delegate*. Pass the task along to someone else. I'm not talking about passing the buck, but often, someone else is better equipped to fulfill the sender's request.

Dawson Trotman, the founder of The Navigators, once said, "I purposed never to do anything that others could or would do when there was so much of importance to be done that others could or would not do." I tell you, I've made that really a motto for my life. In other words, you have to try to focus on where you add value and offload everything else you possibly can.

Number three, *defer*. In other words, just consciously decide you're going to do the task later. Now this only applies to tasks you cannot complete in two minutes or less or can't delegate to someone else. You can either add this task to your to-do list or schedule an appointment with yourself to complete it. But either way, you defer it.

Three actions when the answer is yes. In other words, somebody is asking you to do something. If the answer is yes, three actions: *Do, delegate, or defer*.

If the answer is no, in other words, someone is *not* asking you to do something, then you have two options:

Number one, *delete*. Yes, you can use the delete key with your e-mail. Determine if you're going to need the information later. If not, delete it. My own assumption is that if it's really important, someone somewhere else in the world has a copy of it.

Number two, you can *file* it. If you think you might need the information, file it, but do not create an elaborate set of file folders. You may disagree with me on this, but I think this is the single most important piece of advice I can give you. Just file everything in one folder called *processed mail*.

If it gets more complicated, it leads to procrastination. Trust me on this. You will have to decide, Should I file this under 'Brian' because it's from him or under 'Kevin' because it's about him? What happens if the e-mail covers more than one subject? Do you make copies of the e-mail and then put one copy under each folder? Things can get complicated fast. Like I said, it leads to procrastination. It's just too much work. Forget about all that.

File your e-mail in one folder and let your e-mail or your system software find it when you need it. The search capabilities of almost every modern e-mail program will enable you to put your hands on any message whenever it's necessary. It may take you a few minutes longer to find a message using this method, but this is more than offset by the hours you waste trying to figure out how to file your messages.

When you first begin processing e-mails as I've described, it's going to feel slow and cumbersome. I mean it's like learning anything else, whether it's practicing scales on a guitar or learning to go through an exercise routine. It feels wooden. It feels cumbersome. It doesn't feel natural. You have to think about each step.

But this won't last long, and it doesn't last long with e-mail processing either. You'll eventually be able to move through these steps without consciously thinking about them or to think about what you're doing. Responding in this manner will become second nature. For example, I can usually process about 100 messages an hour, which is my typical daily volume these days. So that's number two. Don't get bogged down. Keep moving.

**3. Use keyboard shortcuts and avoid the mouse.** Now this is just one of my personal pet peeves, but I think it's a productivity step that's really important. The mouse is a horribly inefficient input device. The good news is that nearly every mouse action has a keyboard equivalent.

In Mac OS X, for example, you can even create keyboard shortcuts for any menu item in any software package. Just check under the Apple symbol up in the upper left-hand corner, System Preferences | Keyboard and Mouse | Keyboard Shortcuts. Again, you can create keyboard shortcuts for any item on any menu in any software package.

My personal goal is to *never* use the mouse. Every time I do, I have to take my hands off the keyboard. It doesn't sound like it would cost you much time, but it adds up.

KeyCue, by the way, that's spelled K-E-Y-C-U-E (I have a link in the show notes) is a Mac program that will help you learn the shortcuts for any program. I don't know if there is an equivalent in Windows. There probably is; you can search Google for it. But it's really worth the investment.

Alternately, you can check the program's Help file and just look up keyboard shortcuts, or if you have to, Google it. But it's worth memorizing the keyboard shortcuts, particularly for your e-mail program. So that's the third behavior. Use keyboard shortcuts and avoid the mouse.

4. Let e-mail rules filter the low priority stuff. If you haven't discovered e-mail rules, you're really missing a great time-saver. Almost every e-mail program out there allows you to create e-mail rules including Outlook and Apple Mail, which is what I use. In Outlook, they're under the Tools menu. In Mail, they're part of the Preferences panel.

If this sounds a little geeky, they're not really that difficult to use. Everything is going to take a little investment to learn how to use them, but it will save you *hours* of time.

For example, I have a rule that moves e-mail messages I am just copied on to a *CC Mail* folder, and I assume that these are lower priority messages, and I don't want them cluttering up my main inbox. I get to them when I can, but it's not a high priority. It's certainly not as high of a priority as the messages that are directed directly to me.

I also get my blog comments via e-mail. I have an e-mail rule that automatically places them in a special Comments folder so I can get them out of my main inbox, and I can process them all at once when I have time. They're not as high of a priority as the messages that are in my main inbox.

I also have what I call a *Bacn* folder, and I spell that B-A-C-N. It's not original with me. This is the stuff you subscribe to like e-mail newsletters, receipts, and other automatically generated reading material. It's not spam in the technical sense because it's not unsolicited bulk mail. You solicited it, and that is why people have moved to that name called *Bacn* for solicited bulk e-mail.

Here's the bottom line: Don't give in to despair. You can keep up with e-mail. You don't have to be a geek, but you have to learn some new behaviors, in particular the four that I mentioned. In the end, a little extra effort will save you time and give you the satisfaction that you're in control of your workflow.

Here's my question for this week: ***What additional tips would you add for taking control of your e-mail inbox?*** If you would like to comment on this episode, go to my blog at [MichaelHyatt.com](http://MichaelHyatt.com). Find the episode with this podcast and you can leave a comment down below the show notes.

From that, let's just take a few listener questions. I had a bunch of them this week.

Via Twitter, Rick asked this: "@MichaelHyatt What to do when you're already thousands of e-mails behind? How to move forward and deal with the existing backlog?"

Great question, Rick. I had several people write in with a similar question. I have a blog post on my blog, which is called, "Is It Time to Declare E-Mail Bankruptcy?" I have a link in the show notes, which you can go to a little bit later and look this up.

Basically, it goes through a series of seven steps that you need to ask before you declare e-mail bankruptcy. I think that's a legitimate, probably one-time option that you can take. Just like in your finances, you probably don't want to be declaring bankruptcy more than once. Hopefully, you'll never

have to declare bankruptcy, but if you're that far behind in your e-mail, sometimes this is the best thing you can do. Catch up, try to get a head start, and get a sense of momentum. Then put in place the behaviors I talked about so you don't fall behind again.

Somebody else did leave a message on my feedback hotline. Unfortunately, I didn't get their name, but the question was this: "Is it good to have a *professional* e-mail and an *everyday* e-mail?" In other words, more than one e-mail address.

Yes, I think so. In fact, I have four different addresses that I use. I don't want to complicate this too much, but let me explain. I use a Bacn e-mail, which is just my Gmail e-mail address. It's a throwaway e-mail address. In fact, I do change it from time to time. I use this e-mail address every time I'm required online to enter an e-mail address, because I don't want people having either my professional e-mail or even my personal e-mail. I want them using another e-mail so I know that this is coming from an automated system. It's not an e-mail address that I've given out personally, but it's something I've entered into a website and that those systems can use. That is my Bacn, again spelled B-A-C-N e-mail.

Then I have a personal e-mail account, which is also kind of my public e-mail account. It's gotten a little simpler since I'm no longer in active management at Thomas Nelson, but I have a personal e-mail address that people can find and they can get to me through this address. It's just [michael@michaelhyatt.com](mailto:michael@michaelhyatt.com).

I also have a professional e-mail address, which is my Thomas Nelson e-mail address. Since I'm still the chairman, though I'm no longer the CEO, there's professional e-mail that I get there at my "work" address.

Then I have a super top secret private e-mail address that only my assistant, my managers, my close personal friends have, and it's also the e-mail address that my assistant Tricia uses when she forwards e-mails in my public folder that I need to address personally. I'll talk more about that in just a minute, but I do have a private e-mail address that I don't give out publicly. I'm very selective. There's probably not more than 50 people who have that e-mail address because I want to keep my e-mail manageable and just a small number of e-mail messages in that folder.

Justin wrote via e-mail and he said, "Do you have a system for allowing your administrative assistant to filter all e-mail and respond on your behalf?" Yes, I do. Tricia actually looks at all my public e-mail, all my Bacn e-mail, all my professional e-mail, and I don't look at that at all. I only look at the messages that she thinks warrant my personal attention. She redirects those using Apple e-mail so they come to my private e-mail inbox, and then I can address them. She filters through them. If there are kind of routine questions or issues that she can address and handle on my behalf, she does that.

Now let me tell you an important distinction. She doesn't act as though she *is* me. Even though she's responding on my behalf, she's responding as Tricia, my assistant. I just feel like that is too disingenuous for her to try to act like she's me. I don't want that. I want her to respond using her own

name, but on my behalf. Very important distinction. But I think if you do have an assistant, and if you have a volume of e-mail that warrants it, I think that's fantastic.

For years, as the CEO of Thomas Nelson, I didn't have a private e-mail address. I just handled all the e-mail that came in, and I was able to manage it. Then, ultimately, it got to the point where I could be directing my attention to things that *only* I could do, and in that time, I had Vicki (my assistant then) do a similar kind of process, but it has worked very well for me.

I found that most CEOs, most executives, most small business owners that have an assistant, work with some type of system where they have a private e-mail where they're only looking at a subset of all the messages they get. I mean, let's be honest. The volume of e-mail people are getting today makes it very difficult to handle on your own, particularly if you have serious other responsibilities in a corporation or a church or even a nonprofit.

Chris sent me a question via Twitter and he said, "@MichaelHyatt Podcast question. Are salutations and valedictions still required in the modern e-mail world?" Well, I didn't know what a valediction was, I'm embarrassed to say, until I looked it up, until I Googled it. But it's basically the farewell, the sign-off at the end of the e-mail.

I don't think it's really necessary. I think if it's your style to be really short... There are people I know in my life that I deal with, very busy people, bestselling authors, etc., who omit the salutation and the valediction. They just give you the straight message, and that's fine. I mean, I'm personally never offended by it.

I don't know if it's a throwback or I'm just a little old-fashioned, but I still like using a salutation by addressing them by their first name, or if it's appropriate, their last name, and then a valediction at the end of it. I think that's great. I usually just sign off "kind regards" or in some cases "sincerely" or "warm regards," whatever, but I just think it kind of warms up the e-mail and makes it a little more personal. But that's just me. If you want to cut those off, and if you think it warrants it, and if it makes it makes it faster for you to get through more e-mail...fine.

By the way, I have the valediction just sort of as a default in my signature. Unless I override it, it's going to say "kind regards," comma, and then "Michael" and then all my different ways to contact me. That's just part of my signature so it's really not that big of a deal.

David wrote in with a pretty complicated question. He said, "Hello, Michael. Your Twitter feed and blog is one of my favorites. I'm sure I'm not the only one, but I reached a point of 'I hate e-mail' several years ago." He said, "I recognize it's a necessary evil though, and in many ways, it's a killer app because it's so technology agnostic, and even folks new to technology tend to grasp very quickly."

He says, "I've had a non-junk mail volume exceeding a thousand per day for a long time." Let me just say, *Wow*. That's a huge number of messages, and I would just say what could you do to reduce that volume? I don't know. There may be nothing, but I would certainly give some thought to that.

He continues, "With Google Apps and Mac Mail with smart folders, this is manageable. On a mobile device, it's a different story. Other than the Gmail app on my iPhone, do you have any suggestions of effectively prioritizing and managing an inbox from an iPhone in a way that can seamlessly transition to the desktop later?"

Well, honestly I don't because I don't use my smartphone (in my case it's an iPhone as well) for doing heavy e-mail processing. I'll respond in a pinch, but I like to wait until I get back to my laptop or at least my iPad so I can go through my normal workflow and my normal processing. I'm just faster that way. I'm very careful about not doing it routinely on my mobile phone. I don't really have any good suggestions for you how to have a system that would work seamlessly with your desktop later.

David also continues, "By the way, I switched from a BlackBerry to an iPhone for the same time window spent managing e-mail. I'm sending about 30 percent fewer e-mails because the iPhone is that much less efficient with an onscreen keyboard versus tactile. Navigating through messages is also painfully slow compared to keyboard-based navigation. I'm seriously considering switching back to a BlackBerry or adding a BlackBerry to my hip just to be able to manage e-mail more effectively. Do you have any other thoughts on mobile efficiency?"

Well, I would have to say, David, that I do agree that a BlackBerry is much more efficient with e-mail. I haven't used one since the first iPhone came out, but I can tell you that's one aspect of the BlackBerry...the *only* aspect of the BlackBerry...that I miss. It was very fast for processing e-mail. I find that the iPhone keyboard, you know, I'm constantly messing up. Although, the auto-correction has gotten better. But I don't have another recommendation for you.

Again, I don't process a lot of e-mail on my iPhone, so it's not a big problem for me. I do use a lot of other apps on my iPhone so it's worth having the iPhone. Personally, I wouldn't think about going back to the BlackBerry, but again, that's just me. I'm pretty tool-agnostic as well. I say use whatever works for you.

John wrote in, and he said, "In Gmail, do you ever delete e-mails, or do you just let them accumulate as Google wants you to do?" Well, my e-mail accounts are hosted on Google, all of them except the Thomas Nelson account, and I do delete them. I don't let them just accumulate. I do archive everything else because I figure it really doesn't cost me anything, and I might want to get back to it later, but I do delete some e-mails as well.

John continues, "Have you found a way to create multiple signatures in Gmail like you do in Outlook..." In my case, I do it in Mail. "...for cookie cutter responses?"

I have another blog post where I talk about using e-mail templates to say no. I have a ton of e-mail templates that I use and that Tricia uses that are sort of canned responses to the typical questions that we get on a regular basis. I use e-mail signatures in Apple Mail for that, but I've not found a way to do that in Gmail because I use Apple Mail to even manage my Gmail accounts. I'm not using the browser-based interface. I really don't know what's available there, so I am afraid I can't be much help to you.

Bob wrote in, and he said, "Hi Michael. I saw your Tweet about the podcast on managing e-mail. My question has to do with the amount of time spent working with already processed e-mail. I get the principles of processing, but then I wonder if I spend too much time getting back to actionable e-mails. What's normal for you? Thanks."

What he's talking about is, remember when I was talking about processing e-mail and sometimes you can process it in two minutes or less, and I was encouraging you that if you could do that, do it; don't put it on your to-do list? I think what Bob is talking about is those messages where you *can't* do it in less than two minutes, and you're putting it on a to-do list somewhere. (I use, by the way, Nozbe as my task list manager.)

Well, I think it depends on the kind of message it is. I mean, if it's something that's high priority, I like to get the high-priority stuff turned around the same day. But if it's stuff that's really not that urgent or if it's something from an acquaintance that I don't really know and I'm not really in a business relationship with, I take longer than that.

People who submit guest posts, for example, to my website, I only process those once a week. (By the way, I'm pretty behind on those right now. I mean, I hate to say it, but it's the truth.) But they are lower priority for me, and so I dragged them into another folder. I have a to-do list item in Nozbe for me to look at those. I need to go through those, but my intention is to do those once a week. I think it really depends on the priority of it.

I really hope this will help you manage your e-mail inbox better. I *really* think it's possible. I really think you can take a lot of the pain out of e-mail processing, and you *can* take control. You can get ahead. You can, once and for all, tame this and let e-mail not dominate your life.

Well, that's it for this episode of *This Is Your Life*. If you've enjoyed this podcast, please subscribe to it at [MichaelHyatt.com/ThisIsYourLife](http://MichaelHyatt.com/ThisIsYourLife). That way you won't miss a single episode.

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Until next time, remember: Your life is a gift. Now go make it count!