

 THE **EMPOWERED PRODUCTIVITY** SERIES

**IGNITE
READS**



THE HAPPY INBOX

HOW TO HAVE A
STRESS-FREE RELATIONSHIP WITH
YOUR EMAIL AND OVERCOME YOUR
COMMUNICATION CLUTTER

MAURA NEVEL THOMAS

TO:

FROM:



Praise for EMPOWERED PRODUCTIVITY

"Based on what you taught us, and in the days following your training, I was able to get my inbox down from nearly two hundred to zero messages and create a master task list to guide my days. I am thrilled and feel a huge sense of relief. Using Empowered Productivity, I have been able to keep my inbox at zero messages for several days and feel confident that the progress will continue into the future. I'm so grateful that my leadership team invested in Empowered Productivity training!"

—*Dawn Palma, Chief Administrative Officer, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Hydrologic Engineering Center*

"I wanted to thank you for [teaching us Empowered Productivity]. In all honesty, I was a little bit of a pessimist at the beginning, but since have "bit"—hook, line, and sinker. Since...my implementation of your system, I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders that I hadn't realized was there. Your system has changed my life. I feel so much more productive and organized, which in turn gives me a great feeling of accomplishment at the end of the day. Thank you so much for your help! I am a true believer!"

—*Connor Fox, Product Specialist, Medtronic*

"My sixty-four pages of inbox messages is now empty... I have been processing incoming email for a week... My sweetheart wonders if I am the same person! [Empowered Productivity] has been life-changing information for me. Thank you again."

—*Linda Lindquist, Owner, Protect Your PCs*

"[Empowered Productivity] made the whole staff cognizant of how we use email, and the quantity of staff email dropped off considerably right away. So, thanks again for this important and relevant work you're doing. It's changed everything at work (and some things at home!)."

—*Debi Vanwey, Finance Director, Sustainable Food Center*

"I did find [Empowered Productivity] extremely valuable, and it has absolutely changed the way I work. I am more organized, and I am accomplishing a lot more day in and day out for myself, my team, and the organization as a whole. I've made meetings more impactful, I've managed my emails better, I have been able to more effectively work through multiple projects simultaneously, and I still get normal day-to-day activities done. Thanks again!"

—*Sue Godfrey, Senior Manager, CUNA Mutual Group*



THE HAPPY INBOX

HOW TO HAVE A
STRESS-FREE RELATIONSHIP WITH
YOUR EMAIL AND OVERCOME
YOUR COMMUNICATION CLUTTER

MAURA NEVEL THOMAS

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▶ Small books. BIG IMPACT.

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I am so grateful to my mother for her decision to move us close to family when I was a baby. That move gave me a rock-solid group of people who have been such an important constant in my life. This book is dedicated to those childhood neighbors who have become lifetime friends and extended family: Kerrin and the McGillicuddys, Shannon and the Murphys, Dennis and the O’Neills, and also Karen, Kelly, Joyce, Marianne, and Laura. Thank you for being my “village.” I love you all.



TABLE OF

CONTENTS

The Empowered Productivity Series	vii	CHAPTER 3:	
		<i>Processing Email: “Done for Now”</i>	39
INTRODUCTION: <i>Managing Communication and Information</i>	xi	CHAPTER 4:	
		<i>If You Need a Fresh Start</i>	55
CHAPTER 1:		CHAPTER 5:	
<i>Getting Your Email under Control</i>	1	<i>Meeting Management</i>	89
CHAPTER 2:		Conclusion	117
<i>Being Reactive vs. Being Responsive</i>	27	Acknowledgments	124
		About the Author	126



THE EMPOWERED PRODUCTIVITY SERIES

My first book, *Personal Productivity Secrets* (Wiley, 2012), was the first published work detailing my **Empowered Productivity System**, which I had been delivering to clients for many years.

Since then, the world of work has continued to evolve. It has left the confines of the office. I write this now in quarantine because of the global COVID-19 pandemic. “Knowledge workers” are required to be more creative and innovative than ever before. But they have less and less time and space to marshal their mental resources in a thoughtful way because of the countless and increasing demands on their attention.

In the decade since I wrote that book, I've been honored to work with some of the world's most influential leaders and brands. That experience has both refined my thinking and given me the opportunity to defend it in some of the country's most prestigious business outlets. The result is the latest evolution of the Empowered Productivity System, which has been put through much more rigorous testing and refining, incorporating input and feedback now from over forty thousand professionals.

This book, detailing the Communication Management portion of the System, is the third in the Empowered Productivity Series from Ignite Reads, after *Attention Management: How to Create Success and Gain Productivity—Every Day*, published in 2019, and *From To-Do to Done: How to Go from Busy to Productive by Mastering Your To-Do List*, published in June of 2021.

I'm confident that the latest version of my Empowered Productivity System, as presented in this series, is the best it's ever been. I'm excited and

humbled to join you on your journey to peak productivity and to help empower **your** ability to achieve the results that are most significant to you, personally and professionally. I look forward to seeing the results as more and more people like you can bring your unique gifts to the world in a way that inspires, motivates, and excites you rather than exhausts, overwhelms, and stresses you.



INTRODUCTION

MANAGING COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

Our biggest productivity hurdle today might just be our communication. Our crazy inboxes, our constant phone notifications. In the modern workplace, we must navigate the “always on” pings from technology that distract us and entrap us in a constant state of task switching. You know how this feels: you’re trying to work on something, but then there’s an email to answer. Then a text message. And oh, look: a social media notification!

Spending your days reacting to these distractions isn't just unproductive. It also means you aren't in the driver's seat of your own life. Constant reaction means relinquishing control rather than being intentional.

In this Communication Management component of the Empowered Productivity System, you'll learn more about how to conquer the distractions caused by information and communication overload. And how to get out from under "communication debt" so you can live a life of choice—one of action, not reaction.

The concept of communication debt seems to have been coined by tech entrepreneur Henry Poydar. To paraphrase, it's that state of feeling like you always owe return communication to someone. It's the subtle sense of anxiety caused by your backlog of communication, taunting you with the little red indicators on the communication apps on your phone—texts, voice-mails, missed calls, social media notifications—plus the mountain of outstanding email piling up in your inbox even as you read this.

This book will also help you enjoy the other benefits that come from managing communication and information effectively:

- ▶ You'll reduce anxiety caused by digital and paper clutter.
- ▶ You'll minimize the amount of communication you send and receive.
- ▶ You'll be able to retrieve information you need quickly.
- ▶ You'll collaborate more effectively.

The first step in managing communication is to tackle your inbox. The strategies that follow will help you destress, declutter, and regain control over your email!



ONE

GETTING YOUR EMAIL UNDER CONTROL

We're starting with email for a reason. It attacks our productivity on a variety of fronts:

- ▶ Too many email messages are unimportant, which makes those that *are* important difficult to recognize.
- ▶ Those unimportant messages steal time that you could be spending on proactive, focused work.

- ▶ The constant stream of incoming emails distracts you and causes you to get stuck in reactive mode.
- ▶ A full inbox weighs on you and creates stress.
- ▶ Email frequently contains tasks you must accomplish, so when you aren't in control of your email, you aren't in control of your workload.
- ▶ Bad email habits impede collaboration and create inefficiency among colleagues, weighing down organizations.

It's important to note that there's no magic bullet for managing email. No app or feature or trick is going to instantly get your inbox under control. But there are four specific reasons that people get buried under a mountain of email, and Empowered Productivity offers a solution for each one. If you follow the steps outlined in this book, you'll soon be relieved of the stress that

an inbox (or inboxes!) with hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of messages is causing you.

Your Inbox Is for Receiving Messages, Not Storing Them

Part of the problem with the stress of email is that we're so used to it, we are often convinced that it isn't there. It's hard to recognize the magnitude of the stress we're under until we're not under it anymore. I often speak with people in my engagements who say, "Yes, I have thousands of messages in my email inbox, but who cares? I know what's been dealt with." This means they are using their inbox for storage. But your inbox is not for storing messages; it's for receiving and processing messages.

Let's consider for a minute your physical mailbox at your home or office. I know that a lot of snail mail isn't important anymore, but if you're old enough to remember when everything important came in the mail, or if you can imagine the world before electronic

communication, when everything was delivered as physical mail, let's do a little exercise.

Picture the physical mailbox at your house or office. Imagine that every day, you got the mail, opened it, looked at it, and then put it all back in the mailbox. Tomorrow, your letter carrier comes and puts that day's mail on top of the mail you've already looked at. Then imagine this process happens day after day after day. (Yes, you'll have to imagine your mailbox is much bigger than it actually is.) You've looked at all the mail, you've noted the bills that need to be paid and the other correspondence that needs attention, but it's all piled in with everything else, including a lot of junk mail. Maybe you throw some of that away, but there are some catalogs and flyers that you think you might want to check out sometime, so those are in the pile too.

After a month or two of all your new mail being piled on top of your opened mail and things you might want to look at someday, are you really sure you're on top of everything that needed attention? Wouldn't

you be a little concerned that you might have missed something important? Doesn't the pile just get more daunting (and more cluttered) with each passing day?

It's not a perfect analogy, but that's mostly what it's like when you use your email inbox to store messages you've already looked at. I'm not saying you shouldn't save whatever messages you want to save. I'm just saying you shouldn't store things that you've already read **in your inbox**. Here's the way most people deal with their email in my experience:

- 1 Read every message as it comes in, or as soon as you can.
- 2 If it's definitely junk, delete it.
- 3 If it doesn't require a reply, leave it in your inbox and move on to the next message.
- 4 If it needs just a quick reply, send that, leave the

THE HAPPY INBOX

message in your inbox, and move on to the next message.

- 5 If it needs a more lengthy reply or maybe contains other tasks you need to complete before you can reply, mark it as unread or flag it so you know you need to deal with it later.

I call this behavior “skim and skip.” Now I have three questions for you, and you need to be honest with yourself when you consider your answers:

- 1 Do those five steps above mostly describe how you deal with your email?
- 2 When you see it in black and white, does it really seem efficient to you?
- 3 How many times do you read the same message over again?



There is a better way, and the first step is recognizing that storing all messages in your inbox—read, unread, not requiring action, maybe requiring action, and definitely requiring action—is a big part of the problem.

Instead, start thinking about your email inbox as the place where incoming messages land, and your goal for your inbox is to read those messages, make a decision about them, and move them out of your inbox as quickly as you can. This doesn't mean you have to complete all the required actions that every email demands. It just means you have to capture the necessary actions in the correct place (usually your task manager—check out the prior book in this series, *From To Do to Done*, for more on this) and then move the email **out of your inbox** to an appropriate storage location.

You Don't Filter

The second reason that most people find themselves buried in email is because we all get more than we

could ever read, so for greater efficiency, we need to filter the messages in a way that makes them more manageable.

Chances are your inbox holds a wide assortment of email, from spam to newsletters to discount offers to important communications from your boss or colleagues. With all these different, and varied, messages vying for your attention, it's overwhelming to sort everything out and take appropriate action.

The second step of communication management in the Empowered Productivity System is to make smarter use of email filters. The email we receive can fall into one of four categories:

- 1 Spam
- 2 Unwanted "robomail" (mass messages sent via an email marketing service)
- 3 Wanted robomail

- 4 Work (real messages from individual people addressed specifically to you)

The following is advice for automated handling of each type to save you time and effort.

1. SPAM

I'm sure you have an idea what spam is, but let's define it in the context of Empowered Productivity. Spam is malicious messages from unscrupulous companies that don't follow laws and norms of ethical marketing. They try to trick you into giving out sensitive information, add malware or spyware to your computer, infect your computer with a virus, or use other malicious or underhanded tactics. Sometimes we lump other kinds of messages into the category of spam, but in this context, I mean messages that truly aren't legitimate and that you never want to receive.

Email hosting providers, software, apps, and cybersecurity features are getting better and better

at preventing these messages from ending up in your inbox, so you may never see them. If you do, you should report them to your company IT department or your email hosting provider. If you're ever suspicious about a message, even if it seems to come from someone you know, don't click any links! Reach out to that person via a different medium and confirm they sent it.

2. UNWANTED ROBOMAIL

Robomail is a term used to describe automated marketing messages. They are mass mailings sent via email marketing services that are usually triggered by an action you've taken, such as making a purchase, taking advantage of an offer, or requesting information or support assistance. Sometimes people you meet at business functions will also add you to their newsletter list without asking, which is rude, but usually not malicious. Many people offhandedly refer to messages in this category as spam, but they aren't. You can tell the difference because a legitimate marketing message

from a reputable company will have an unsubscribe link somewhere in the message. Technically, reputable companies shouldn't send you marketing messages without your permission, but the definition of permission is applied broadly.

I'm sure you get plenty of these messages that you don't want and you don't read. These messages fall into the unwanted robomail category. There are a variety of techniques you can use to automatically prevent these messages from ending up in your email inbox:

- ▶ Click the unsubscribe link in the message. These are usually handled by a third-party email marketing service that will automatically prevent future messages from that company being sent to you.
- ▶ Use an unsubscribe service. These are increasingly popular and can work well. You can do an internet search for the term and find a comparison page to evaluate them or post on social media to ask your

friends and contacts what services they use. You'll probably have some tech-savvy friends who have tried many and can make a good recommendation for you.

- ▶ Create a rule in your email application so any messages coming from that specific email address or that domain (@xyzcompany) will automatically be diverted to your Trash folder.

For information on unsubscribe services I use and recommend, and instructions on creating rules in the most popular email applications, visit maurathomas.com/control-your-tech.

You might find that just one or some combination of these techniques is necessary. For a while, it will take an extra few seconds per message to deal with unwanted robomail, but after a few days or a week, the number of messages you receive in this category should drastically decrease, providing a big return on that time investment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Maura Nevel Thomas

is an award-winning international speaker, trainer, and author on individual and corporate productivity and work-life balance, and

she is the most widely cited authority on attention management.

She helps driven, motivated knowledge workers control their attention and regain control over the details of their life and work. Maura has trained over

forty thousand individuals at over two thousand organizations on her proprietary Empowered Productivity System, a workflow management process for achieving significant results and living a life of choice.

Maura's clients include the likes of Dell, Old Navy, the U.S. Army, L'Oréal, the American Heart Association, NASA's Johnson Space Center, and Adobe. She is a TEDx speaker, successful entrepreneur, a Certified Speaking Professional from the National Speakers Association, and author of *Personal Productivity Secrets*, *Work Without Walls*, *Attention Management*, and *From To-Do to Done*. She is a media favorite, featured regularly in a variety of national business outlets, including the *Wall Street Journal*, NPR, *Fast Company*, *Entrepreneur*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and the *Huffington Post*. She is also a regular contributor to both *Forbes* and the *Harvard Business Review*, with articles there viewed over a million times.

Maura earned an MBA from the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts and

MAKE PEACE WITH YOUR INBOX

Suffering from never-ending email? Eliminate that subtle sense of anxiety caused by your backlog of email, along with all of the taunting little red indicators on the communication apps on your phone—texts, voicemails, missed calls, social media notifications—plus the mountain of outstanding email piling up in your inbox even as you read this.

Want to get rid of that feeling? Get ready to dive in and live free of communication clutter! Positive results include:

- Reduced anxiety caused by digital and paper clutter.
- An ability to retrieve information you need quickly.
- The opportunity to spend less time managing communication clutter and more time working toward your goals!



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