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Your Inbox is Killing Your Productivity, Focus and Time: Getting to an Empty Inbox Everyday

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Getting to Zero: Strategies for Emptying the Inbox

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Outlook's Inbox is

- Not a to-do list
- Not a filing system
- Not a calendar
- Not a bookmark list
- Not an address book

4 strategies to deal with every message in the inbox

- Delete
- Do (if the task in the email can be completed in 2 minutes or less)
- Defer (convert the email to an Outlook Task)
- Delegate (convert the email to an Outlook Task and Assign the Task)

An overflowing inbox causes problems

- Which message is important? The inbox cannot prioritize by importance.
- The inbox is cumbersome to filter by task type, importance, start date, or due date.
- Searching and sorting takes longer when the inbox is full.
- We can have problems remembering which message contains a specific task.
    - This requires us to re-open messages to find what we have lost.
- Did I forget an important message?
- An inbox full of tasks is a constant reminder of how far we are from being done.

Having an empty inbox can trigger two responses

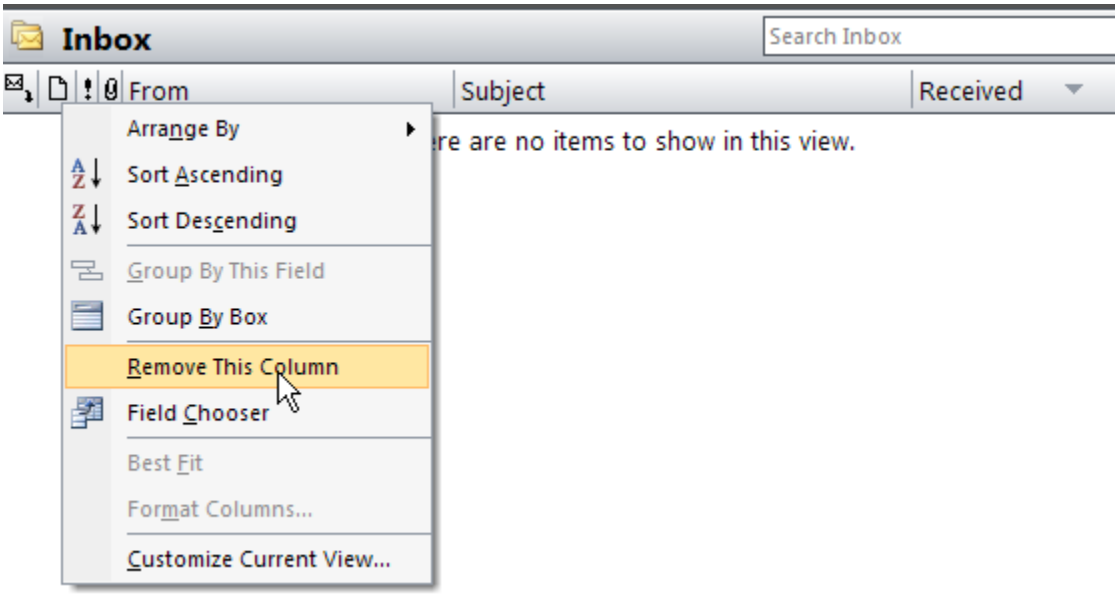
- I am not important, because I do not have any messages.
- Converting email to specific tasks means real work is necessary.

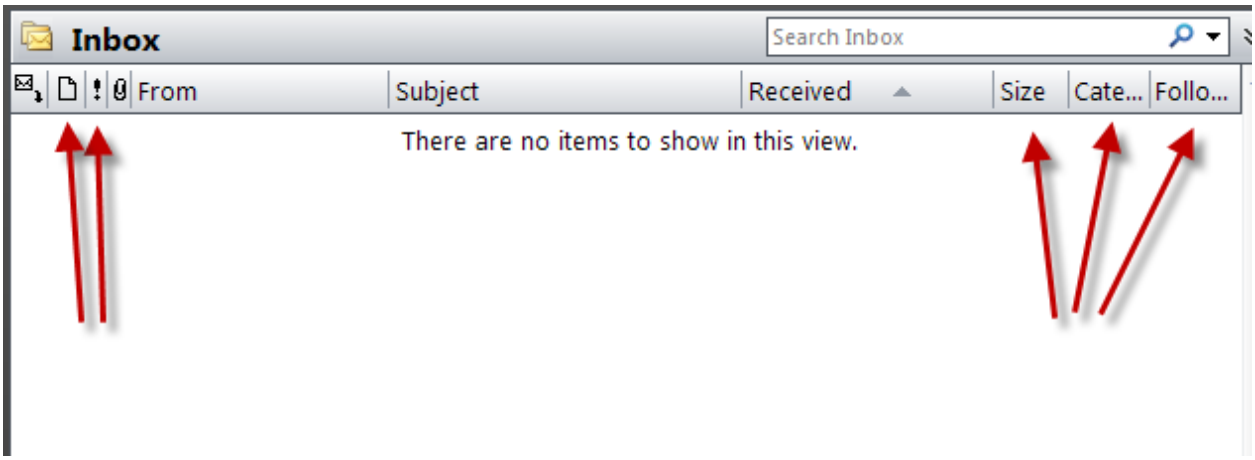
If an overloaded inbox is the problem

- Remove the overload.
- Get to zero messages in the inbox. Not 5 messages, not 10, not 15, but zero.

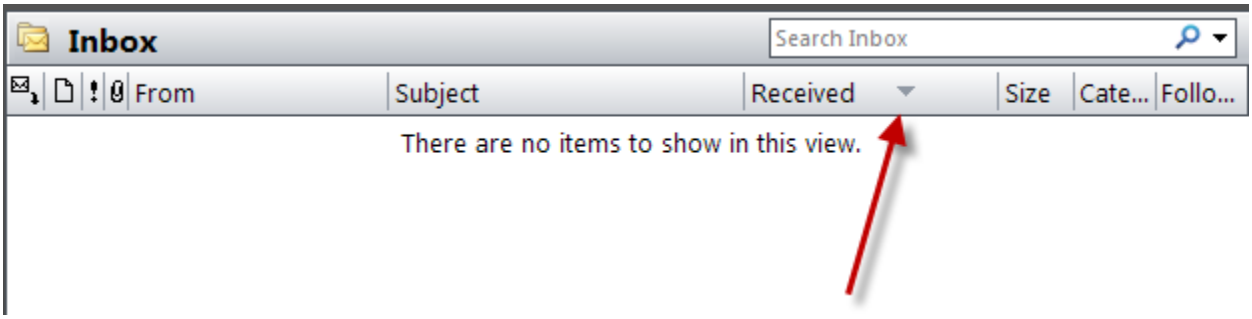
First step: eliminate unnecessary columns from the inbox

- Remove columns, specifically importance icons, message size, categories, colors, and flags.
    - We want to focus on an individual message, one at a time.
    - Removing unnecessary information allows us to focus.
    - Right click those items, and then choose Remove This Column.



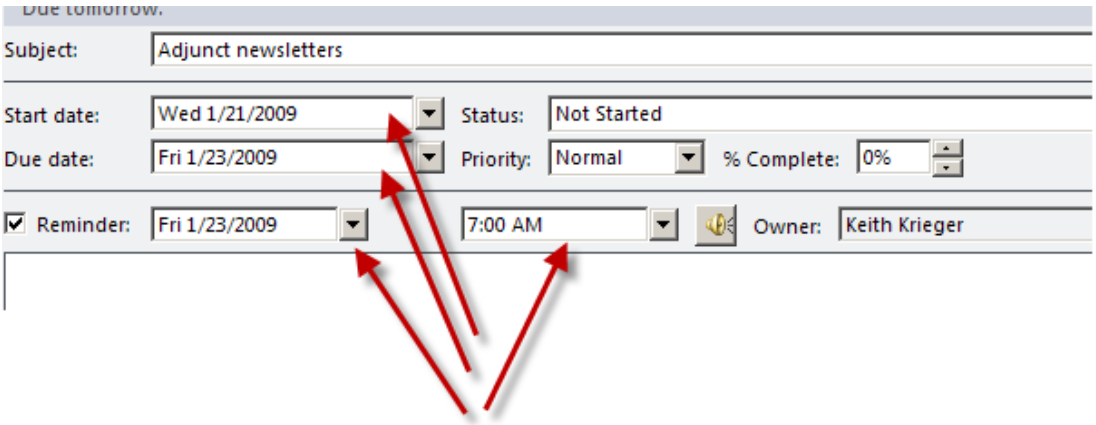


- Focus on each message by turning off all previews
    - Choose View>Reading Pane>Off, and View>AutoPreview.
    - Previews allow us to procrastinate and put off dealing with the message content.
- Sort the inbox by received date, ascending.
    - Click the Received button to change the sorting, or
    - Right-click the Received button, and choose Sort Ascending.
    - Focusing on the oldest message first helps avoid working only on newly arrived items.



Process messages

1) Read personal messages first, and then delete them.
2) Delete spam.
3) Delete or move the FYIs and CCs messages to a folder. Reading those messages is optional.
4) Execute the 2-minute Do messages, then delete or file the message.
    a) By replying to the sender that the task is complete, we can delete the message.
5) Move big tasks to Outlook's Task list.
    a) Open the message, scan for information, and then close the message.
    b) Drag the message to the Task button or Calendar button.
    c) Set a start date, a due date, and a reminder date and time.



    d) After creating the task, **delete** the message from the inbox.

6) Delegate the task to someone else
   a) The process is the same as creating a task, except we assign the task to someone else.
   b) Click the Assign Task button
      i) Add the person receiving the task assignment
      ii) Show recipient how to update progress.

Newsletter strategy

- Read quickly, keep for reference, and then delete.
- Alternatively, copy and paste relevant content to a document outside of Outlook.
- Do not save the newsletter to read later. We typically never get around to reading them.

3 ways to move towards an empty inbox

- Difficult approach
  - Working from the oldest message, apply Delete, Do, Defer, or Delegate.
  - Apply this to all messages in the inbox.
- Moderately difficult approach
  - Set a recurring, daily task to process a set number of the oldest messages daily.
  - This approach takes longer, but is more manageable.
- Easy approach
  - Select everything in the inbox, and delete them.

Change the focus

- Reveal Outlook Today to focus on tasks and appointments.
  - Choose View>Toolbars>Advanced.
  - Outlook Today is the first button on the left.
  - You can set Outlook Today to start when Outlook starts.
- For the task list, change the view to show start dates and due dates of the current date **only.**
- The shorter the task list, the more likely we are to finish.

Further Reading

Hurst, M. (2007). *Bit Literacy.* New York: Good Experience Press.