

# E-mail management is all about developing a workable system

I have a confession to make: If my e-mail were a desk, there would be towering piles of papers alongside a three-day-old cup of coffee and a half-eaten bagel.

But my electronic organi-



**SMALL BUSINESS MATTERS**

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zational issue is much easier to ignore than a messy desk. No one's life is threatened by an unstable stack of books, and I can just shut the computer down at night and pretend it doesn't exist.

Still, it eats away at my productivity, chewing up my precious time as much as if it were a physical mess.

Time spent searching for that critical e-mail or looking at the same message over and over could have been spent helping my business to grow.

The organizing experts tell me I'm not alone.

Some of us have too many e-mails coming in. We need to unsubscribe to newsletters often left unread, for instance.

For others, the problem isn't what's coming in, it's what isn't going out.

It's all about habits and systems.

One of the first things small business owners do when launching their company is to set up e-mail. The next thing they should do is to set up a system to handle it and a policy to govern it.

Your e-mail growth could outpace that of your compa-



Source: Cristin Lind

## Five steps to a clear in-box:

(Can also be used for voice-mail and paperwork)

- 1 Can I delete it?
- 2 Can I forward it?
- 3 Can I take action on it in 60 seconds or less?
- 4 Do I need to file it to keep it for reference?
- 5 Do I need to file it to follow up on?

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ny. For most, volume will jump 25 percent to 40 percent a year in terms of the number and size of e-mails, said Arthur Riel, chief technology officer of Lighthouse Global Technologies, a company that builds e-mail storage systems.

There are few legal requirements dictating which

e-mails a company must save, but some messages could prove helpful if a company is sued or needs to sue over something such as a contract dispute. "It's probably a good idea to have some well-defined policy," said Andrew P. Botti, a human resources lawyer.

Decide if you want to keep e-mails for six months or three years, for instance. But, if you keep them for a long time, send them into long-term storage and keep your in-box clear, say the efficiency experts.

"The most important thing to remember is that e-mail is like any business tool and it can be incredibly helpful, but without good habits it can be a big time waster," said Cristin Lind, a Somerville-based professional organizer focused on businesses.

Don't open your e-mail first thing in the morning, she advises. Instead, decide the night before what is the most important thing you need to accomplish and do that first.

"It's easy to use e-mail as a way to avoid more pro-

ductive work," Lind said.

Set aside time during the day to cull through your in-box rather than checking it constantly. And set up a system.

Clutter — digital as much as physical — results from postponed decisions and a lack of systems.

"One bad habit people get into is looking at e-mail without doing anything about it," said Sally Brickell, co-owner of Squared Away.

When you open an e-mail, take out the information you need. Write down the contact or add a task to your to-do list.

Of course, many of us will first need to create such lists. After all, an overflowing in-box might very well indicate a broader organizational challenge.