



## No Email Friday?

By Christopher Hopkins, Chair, Law Office Technology Committee

Consider a day in your law practice without email. If you are a lawyer who receives 100 or more emails a day, the notion of a day-without-email is either a jarring thought or an impossible oasis from the tide of emails. Do you grab your iPhone when you get up or glance *one last time* at the Blackberry before bed? It is probably a bad habit rather than a conscientious work ethic. You may need better email management.

The concept of “No Email Friday” arose years ago out of technology companies – like Intel, the computer chip manufacturer – when it was recognized that engineers were spending more time tending to emails than collaborating in person or doing substantive work. The idea was to turn off email and let professionals focus on real work and person-to-person collaboration for one day. If you’ve spent a morning plowing through emails, only to return from lunch to see a new batch crop up, you may wonder how “productive” you have been.

Judging from a review of the news stories and blogs, however, “No Email Friday” existed for only a short period of time or, if it still exists at some companies, it lives quietly and without fanfare or propagation. There were no Google hits for law firms with such plans. In short, we may assume that institutional email blackouts every Friday may not be a workable solution. But are there other ideas for email management?

The practice of law involves times when you need to be constantly in touch – phone, faxes, letters, and people lined up at the door – as well as periods when you need concentrated focus to be studious, creative, and industrious. Using email to be productive certainly fuels that outside-world-connectivity but it is a hamper to when you need solitude to concentrate, research, and develop new ideas. You cannot multi-task those brain functions. Interruptions distract the process, causing inefficiency and, quite frankly, not your best work.

**Turn Off Email Notifications.** I have been in lawyers’ offices where Outlook pops up a message each time an email arrives. Turn off notifications on your PC and smartphone. That momentary notification on your screen creates a distraction and requires time for your mind to refocus on the task at hand. The re-focusing is more costly than the “ping” interruption.

**Fall Out of Love With Multitasking.** At some point in the 1990’s, the phrase “multi-tasking” crossed over from the technology sector into the mainstream. Computers are efficient and can handle several processes at the same time (“multi-tasking”) so a human performing the same function must be important and efficient. Actually, that’s quite wrong – hence the pendulum effort of “No Email Friday” also coming out of the tech sector. Don’t allow yourself to detour towards the web or email when you are halfway through drafting a motion or letter.

**Stop Tending to the Garden of Emails.** If you find yourself checking emails at any seemingly idle moment in your life (e.g., before/after sleeping, walking to elevator, at hearings, with your kids) then you may want to reconsider who has control, you or the email. Your brain needs those episodes of downtime without stimulus. Facebooking and Twitter are stimulus and, in the end, probably a fair amount of noise. Allow your brain to rest. Facts will “stick” during that time and ideas

may arise. Even the most occupied lawyers could discipline themselves to check emails once an hour or at set intervals during the day. The next time you receive an email sent to more than one person, just sit back and wait an hour. You will likely find that the last response in the series of emails solves the problem – then you can delete the rest.

**Stop Needless Replies.** We have reached the point where email is fairly reliable, especially inside our own offices. Responses such as “thanks” and “ok” to smaller issues are unnecessary and time consuming for the sender and the recipient. You might protest that such a response is only polite but try this instead: talk to your co-workers and establish a relationship where you do not need to co-dependently confirm emails. You’ve just created a working bond and avoided interruption-and-refocus frustrations.

**Consider How You Handle Email.** This article could have easily been entitled “zero email inbox” since the concept of a perfectly empty email inbox may seem like a constant goal. Once you have disciplined yourself not to vigilantly guard against every incoming email intruder – or, better still, be patient in responding to group emails and let the invaders be vanquished by others’ responses – you need to accept the fact that you will have emails waiting for you. Do not make answering emails an emotional burden nor a scorecard for your day. Make sure you accomplish some “real” work and ensure that email is helping you reach that goal.

A quick test: if the foregoing (a) seems impossible, (b) comes across as solutions for someone who is less busy than you or (c) evokes even a subtle negative emotional response, you likely need to tend to your email habits. Start with a Friday off!

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