



Heresy: Using Outlook email as a to do list

For years now I've been told whatever you do, don't use email as a to do list. I've been told it's inefficient, that email is not meant for this and a variety of other reasons. For a quick review of articles where you can read about why it's a horrible idea check out the top google searches [Lifehacker.com](#), [Zenhabits](#), even productivity guru [Tim Ferris](#) says don't do it. You can look at some very good personal productivity books that back this idea up. [18 Minutes](#) and [Getting Things Done](#) both say you need to separate them using either software or a variety of special lists. For years, I've tried to follow this method and you know what happens? I fail and I fail miserably. I end up with to do's scattered in Outlook, Clio.com (my practice management software), my iPhone's reminders as well as lists in Evernote and pieces of paper and sickies on my monitor and through my office! It was not the most organized method to do to do lists.

I finally gave up. I took a look at the constant in my life, the one "list" device that I always have. At home, on the road, in my office, on my ipad the one constant is email. I am checking it multiple times a day and with my iPhone, I always have it with me. When I grab my Ipad or go to my laptop at the office, my email synchs and the emails are there! This being the case, I've decided to ditch the rest of the software and so called "fixes" and simply use my email as my to do list.

I now have a new daily goal and that is that at the end to have an empty email inbox. It has taken me nearly 10 years of receiving email to accept that having 300+ emails is a completely inefficient system as well as causes stress regarding lost email. For the past several month or so I've tried to reach this goal and it has changed my practice. Now, I'm not waiting until the last minute to get things out any more, I see it in outlook, do it and then get the joy of hitting delete. Less stress, happier clients, better work product isn't that what we all really want? (oh yeah..and with real-time billing my numbers are up, less missed time).

Project Management It Isn't

I know, I know, but what about long-term projects? That's my one exception, and I've adopted the [18 Minute](#) rule which says if it isn't done in 3 days it should not be on a to do list. For(those long term to dos' I create and put in a different folder in Outlook. You do need to be careful here because you don't want to put deadlines such as court of appeals due dates, SOL's, or other longer term to do's or else you will not reach your goal of a clean inbox. But for what I do (short track litigation) it works great. When the Judge wants a memo in 7 days, findings in 3 days, or a reply motions in 5 days is often done in a day or two! For this short track stuff it works great, so look at your practice area to see if it might fit.

Going from 200 emails at any given time to 0 requires a paradigm shift and it can be hard to do. I've found that there are a few tricks which seem to let you reach your goal:

- Focus on just 1 email at a time.
- When you start the task, finish it. Don't get distracted until that email can be deleted.
- If you've no reason to put it off, don't! It will not easier to do in a few hours or days...or weeks it will be harder.
- Don't delete your trash (great for searching if you need it and with todays computers, it doesn't affect performance until you hit crazy numbers)
- Set up "Rules" (here is the [official](#) way to do it by Microsoft) so some items go in folders automatically.

- Use folders for bigger projects.
- “Spam” the spam so you don’t have to see it in the future.

I don’t pretend to be a guru as far as productivity goes but, if you read [my last post](#), you know I do like to read my business management/personal productivity books and after trying many, many systems I’ve found one that works for me and I hope it works for you.

When Jason is not writing about how to be the most productive lawyer on the planet he is practicing family law in Mankato, Minnesota and [blogging](#) about family law issues.