You're listening to You've Got This, episode 357.

Welcome to You've Got This, a weekly podcast for higher education professionals looking to increase their confidence and capacity for juggling the day-to-day demands of an academic life.

I'm your host, Dr.

Katie Linder.

On this episode, I am responding to a listener question about email management.

Now this person wrote to me and asked last year you did an episode about how you handle 40 plus meetings a week.

What about email?

Any strategies that you've tried over time and or have landed on?

It is my biggest time suck whether I try to stay on top of it or let it go.

Okay, so I was digging through my archives and the last time I addressed this on the podcast was way back in 2018.

2018, so it's definitely time for an update.

I also did have a blog post in 2021 about how I use email folders.

So I will link to that in the show notes for this episode.

And I'll also give a quick update on how I'm using that now.

Like many of you, I get a ton of emails every day and I've never counted or averaged them, and I actually am not sure I want to know how many are coming into my inbox, but it's a lot and it's constant like like this listener is describing.

And at my work, we use Microsoft Outlook for our email.

And I also use the mail app on my Mac, which is something that I use at home and I use at work.

And I would say, although I attempt to do inbox zero pretty regularly, it's pretty tough to achieve for my work email.

And so the modified goal I've given myself is to try to get my email down to an amount that I can see on my screen without having to scroll.

And with my screen and my app, this is basically about 10 emails in my inbox at any given time.

So I do have some key strategies for email management that I will share.

And there's four main ones that I'm going to talk about on this episode.

The first one is my folder systems, because this is a pretty big thing that I'm doing regularly.

I'm going to talk about the specific email triage times that I use throughout the day and how I do that.

Um, talk about some of the communication I use outside of email, because that does help to bring the email inbox amount down, and then also talk about email rules, um, that you can create for auto filing.

So let me dig into each of these in more depth.

So I mentioned that I use an email folder system, and this is the main way that I get to that smaller amount in my inbox.

So I am one of those people.

This probably doesn't surprise you since I'm a complete.

I do look at every email that comes into my inbox.

Like there, there's just such a wide range of things that I'm getting at any given time that are either like institutional updates or their emails I get from specific faculty that are looking to get answers to specific questions.

I have a lot of documents that I review throughout the day that I get via email as like a shared document, and I have to go in and make edits to things.

So I am constantly getting emails that I feel like I need to review pretty much everything that comes in.

So everything does get kind of opened and glanced at at the very least.

And if I can respond to it immediately and it doesn't take much time, then I will often do that.

If I'm kind of in between meetings, and I'll talk about that in a minute, you know, and I have a few minutes, then I will try to, you know, get through and, and, and file some of these things.

When something is filed, that typically means that it either one needs no further action from me and just kind of goes into my archiving system or two, I have it on another list somewhere.

So if I know exactly what the thing is, like I need to review a document and I know that it's from a specific person and I put it in their folder, that's like their name, then I can put it on my list, you know, review this document.

And then I will go back into their folder, find the document I need, and then review it.

So I don't always keep those things in my inbox.

Um, in other words, I don't use my inbox as my to-do list and, or I try not to, this is a really hard thing, but I try not to do that.

Now the folders that I have, which are extensive, I, whenever I set up, uh, kind of new email and a new job, I always create this kind of folder system.

So these are set up mostly by individual people, but sometimes there's groups, you know, if I, I have an organization that I'm a member or things like that, they might get their own folder.

But I also have sub files under different teams and under different people.

So for example, each of my directors have a folder.

These are filed under the division or unit that they sit within, 'cause I oversee a couple different areas of the institution.

And then each of their staff are filed under those directors.

So I use kind of like a hierarchy based on who reports to whom in those folder systems.

And then I also have a section for like the chancellor's cabinet, the provost team.

These are some of the people that I correspond with the most.

And then of course there are different folders for different areas of the institution.

So for example, we have an IT department that has their own folder system, our finance and budget office, they have kind of a folder system 'cause I work with those folks on a pretty regular basis.

So I use this folder system to basically try to get things out of my inbox and some of the benefits that I have found of this folder system.

And I go into more depth about these benefits in that blog post I mentioned.

So again, I'll link that in the show notes.

For me, things are easier to find when I have a folder system.

It is harder for me to know what to search for if like everything is just sitting in my inbox.

And I know that that works for some people, but it doesn't work for me.

So this is an easier way for me to organize things.

It also helps me to kind of cement the organizational structure of the institution in my mind because I know who reports to whom and where they sit within the institution, especially when I'm working with a lot of like cross-functional teams.

And there are people that I interact with that I don't always see in meetings on a regular basis.

It's helpful for me to kind of know that too.

I do get close to having inbox zero, which I think is a really good benefit of this system is it just clears things out and it removes digital clutter from kind of the main thing I'm looking at with my email every day.

And then the last thing, which I kind of mentioned is I have this like personalized archive.

So if I need to go back and say, what did that person say to me, you know, in this email conversation or I need to jog my memory about a meeting or something like that, I can easily find what I need to find and go back and look at that archive as I need to.

Okay, so the thing that I would imagine many of you are wondering about is how I am finding the time to emailing in the midst of having lots and lots of meetings.

And so the next thing I wanna talk about is this concept of like triaging and how I triage my email.

So I would say I usually spend at least 20 to 30 minutes on email when I first get into the office.

And that is the primarily like triaging time, filing things away, trying to see what needs attention that day or like immediately in that moment.

Most days I do not have meetings in my first hour of the day.

So that's when I am able to do this.

And I try to get through as much of it as I possibly can.

Then throughout the day in between meetings, I will also do light triage.

And depending on where my meetings are, if they're on zoom, this can be at my computer, if they're somewhere out of my office, then I often will do this on my phone.

And typically what I will do is just kind of mark emails as red if they don't need immediate action and then mark them as unread if I need to actually attend to them at some point later in the day.

So it just kind of like helps me to understand where my attention needs to go.

And then I don't always have time, um, uh, depending on kind of what my meeting schedule is, especially if things are really busy and things are really back to back, I will often use like 10 to 15 minutes in my lunch hour to try to just again quickly triage the email and see is there anything that needs immediate attention.

Now part of this is recognizing that some emails that come into my inbox I don't need to respond to.

Like it could just be a heads up that I'm getting about a piece of information.

It could be an institution-wide email that I just need to know what was in it but I don't actually need to take action on anything.

And I will also say I'm very fortunate that I do have an executive assistant that if there's something in my inbox that she can do, like if it's filling out a doodle poll for like an upcoming meeting or something like that, I just forward it to her and she takes care of it.

So part of that triage is also trying to understand are there things coming into my inbox that I can basically just like CC her on, give a quick response, and then she's going to handle like the scheduling of a meeting or something along those lines.

Now I will say I don't always have time at the end of the day, and it's a time thing, but it's also an energy thing.

I don't always have the energy at the end of the day to do more email, depending on my meeting schedule.

But I will often do a quick check to see if anything needs immediate attention.

And usually what that means is I'm flagging something for the morning or I'm adding it to my to-do list.

The morning window and those little bits throughout the day are really my main periods of time that I have.

And I do my very best to not do email after work, unless I am like super behind.

Now, if I am very stressed by the state of my email box, and I feel like, you know, 10 minutes is going to get me out of that state of being stressed.

I might open it up when I get home from work and just try to, you know, do that quick triage.

Um, and then I also want to note my other email inboxes like tied to business and clients and things like that.

Those are things that I typically tackle on the weekends, unless there's something really urgent coming in.

So I will often funnel a lot of those emails.

I do quick triage, you know, maybe at the end of the day of like my personal email inboxes, but I'm often not doing major email response during the week.

Okay.

So the next topic is communication outside of email.

Now I feel like for some of us, this might actually feel more overwhelming to have all of these other channels that people are engaging in outside of email.

But to me, this actually helps me to keep my email box a little bit more manageable.

So one thing that we use at work is Microsoft teams.

And this is basically, if you, if you don't use it, it's kind of got a number of communication channels, including like a chat feature.

And I'm on chat with probably at least a dozen different people throughout the day, if not more.

And this includes, you know, people like my assistant, people who directly report to me, other members of the leadership team at the institution that I'm frequently in contact with.

And this helps me to get either quick answers to my own questions so that I'm not sending more email, or I'm able to answer quick questions that I'm getting from other people.

And so then they're not cluttering my email box.

All of my staff know that I'm, I'm pretty on top of email, but especially when things are very stressful or my I'm traveling or my schedule is, you know, a little bit, um, extra full, they will come to teams instead, because that's just the easier way to share documents with me or to get like quick and immediate feedback or to have me answer a question very quickly.

This is also a great way for me to stay in contact with my assistant because if I'm in meetings all day, I can't always like walk out of my office and talk with her, but I can give her like quick things on teams and it's not clogging up her process because I haven't answered a question.

So, um, the other thing I'll say too, is I do have text based relationships with a bunch of people at my institution and sometimes we are texting as well.

So if there's another thing that's kind of urgent and I'm not at my computer, like if I'm in a meeting that is not where I have my laptop in front of me, sometimes I will get a text message and that's kind of easier for me to answer and people know that they can contact me that way if needed.

So all of these communications outside of email also help me to you know make sure that I'm not having just this complete overload in my inbox with these other kinds of communications that are being funneled elsewhere.

Now, the last thing I thought I would mention is I do not do this currently, but I have certainly done it in the past, which is basically to create email rules and outlook, and this allows you to auto file emails into a particular folder for later review.

Now this works particularly well.

I have found for things like listservs, um, and other things that have like a high amount of volume, but they often don't require like immediate response.

So if you're trying to kind of stay on top of a listserv and it's cluttering your inbox, then it can be helpful to do a rule where those things get auto filed.

Now, the thing is you have to remember to go look in that file.

So at some point you need to make sure that you're actually going in and reviewing it if you care about it.

And the other thing I would say is just unsubscribe if you don't care about it.

Now, I don't really have any listservs on my work email.

I have a couple listservs on my personal email that I connect with.

And, um, I feel completely fine with that because I, I don't check that regularly and I don't feel like it has a lot of urgency.

So I've tried to keep some of that stuff that has a high volume just out of my work inbox because, um, it's a lot.

And I don't need that like streaming into my inbox throughout the day.

I do need to be able to kind of focus and prioritize the things that are coming in that do need kind of an urgent response.

And I would say that throughout any given day, there are probably between half a dozen to a dozen emails that come in that like need a response within an hour or two, just because of the nature of the decision that I need to make or the, the, um, feedback that I need to offer on something.

And so I would like to focus my energy there and make sure that I'm doing the best I can, you know, with those things versus, you know, trying to kind of swim through all of this other minutiae that's coming in that may not have as much importance.

So over time, I feel like I've gotten clearer with myself about what I actually want to come into my inbox and what are some of these other channels and triage methods that I can use to try to cut through, you know, some of the the extra stuff that's in there that's not as pertinent.

So I hope this was helpful to hear some of my strategies for managing the endless emails that come into our inboxes.

I'm also happy to answer additional questions about this.

If there's something I didn't cover that you're kind of curious about, you can always email me at hello@drkatylinder.

com to ask any questions that you might have about this, or if there are other topics you want to hear me talk about on the podcast, I love to hear that as well.

And of course, if you have your own strategies for managing email, I would love to hear those as well.

So hopefully this gives you a couple of ideas of what you can implement into your own structures.

And thanks so much for listening to this episode.

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