

Productivity Hack: The Email Game

The (email) struggle is real. At this point, I get between 20-50 emails a day. Which ones are meaningful? Which ones need to be dealt with today, tomorrow, right now, not at all?! These are the questions that lead to slowness in my replying to email, or often missed messages altogether. Plus, I spend about 1 hour a day just going through and checking which is necessary, marking them as unread, flagging, or trying other ways to “set it to be dealt with later” and the reality is that later often doesn’t ever arrive.

One of the more powerful life/productivity hacks that I’ve been introduced to is the [Email Game](#) from [Boomerang](#) (Formerly Baydin) which turned me from an email backlog owner to a clear inbox in all of the best ways. I

Inbox Zero is not the goal here. The goal is actually moving the needle on productively and efficiently managing email.

It’s pretty simple:

1. Go to <https://emailgame.baydin.com/>
2. Put in your GMail address (works with Google Apps mail too)
3. Process in the time limits and let the productivity goodness become a part of your daily regimen

The tool will present you with a countdown timer for each email. You get points for archiving/deleting or processing emails as quickly as you can. The bonus comes in the reply countdown timer which gives a much needed nudge to just get to the reply and get it done. You see the emoji giving you some guidance and it even frowns when you skip a message, which you should see as a key indicator that just saving it for later is a bad way to handle it.

You can also use Boomerang to mark the message to be dealt with later or watch for no reply and other rules. Another post to come on how Boomerang has helped me as well.

Full credit to [Tim Ferris](#) for introducing me to this one. Here’s the fast GIF version of what the process looks like:



Make Productivity Fun, and Habitual

The key to using this is to first have fun with it. Seriously, this is a very fun way to get email processed and teach yourself to just get down to it without wasting time on stuff that normally injects productivity-killing slowdowns in your day to day.

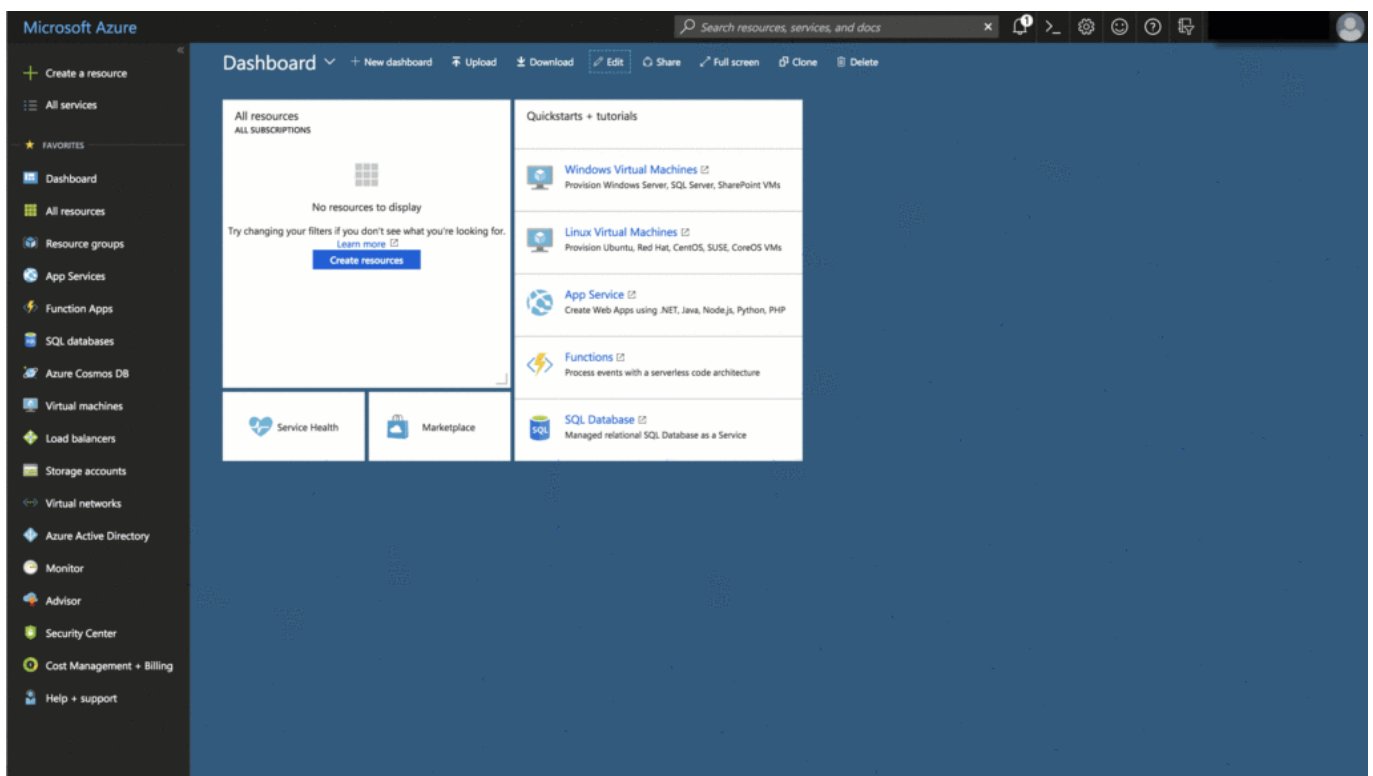
Set up a daily reminder to go to the email game and rock your inbox. I even force myself to a specific regimen at this point to ONLY use email game unless I'm specifically searching for email. This gets me into the habit of not spending hours of my day constantly checking for new emails.

Hope that you enjoy this handy productivity tool and find the benefit like I have from it.



Customize your Azure Portal - Your Azure, Your Way

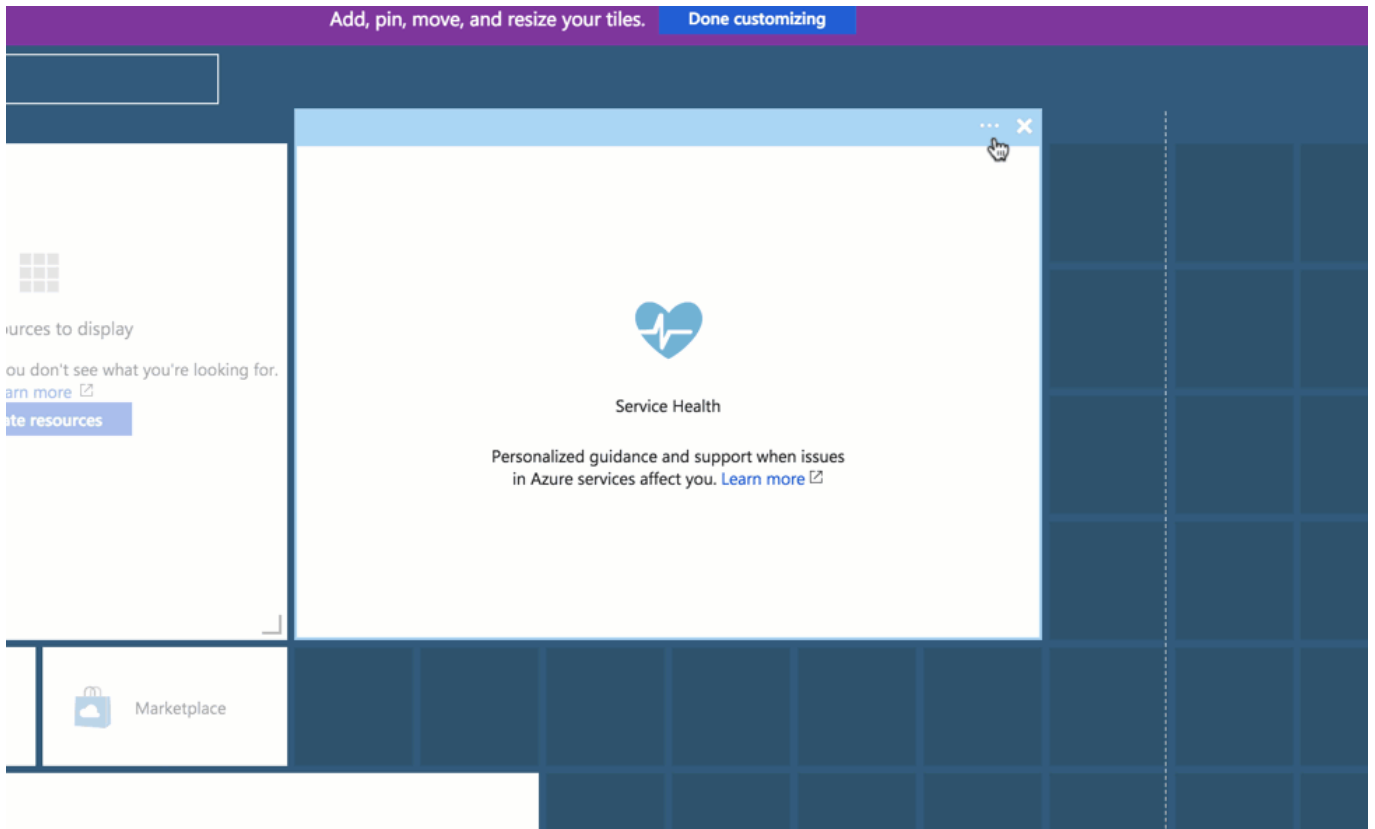
It isn't just Burger King that let's you "have it your way" today as we see the launch of the fully customizable Azure Cloud dashboard option. It's a very cool way to set up a portal that makes your goto items easy to see and quick to access. One of the most common complaints among systems admins as they explore more public cloud products is the lack of a centralized view. This is not the proverbial single pane of glass, but it is a very nifty way to get the Azure content you need in your default view.



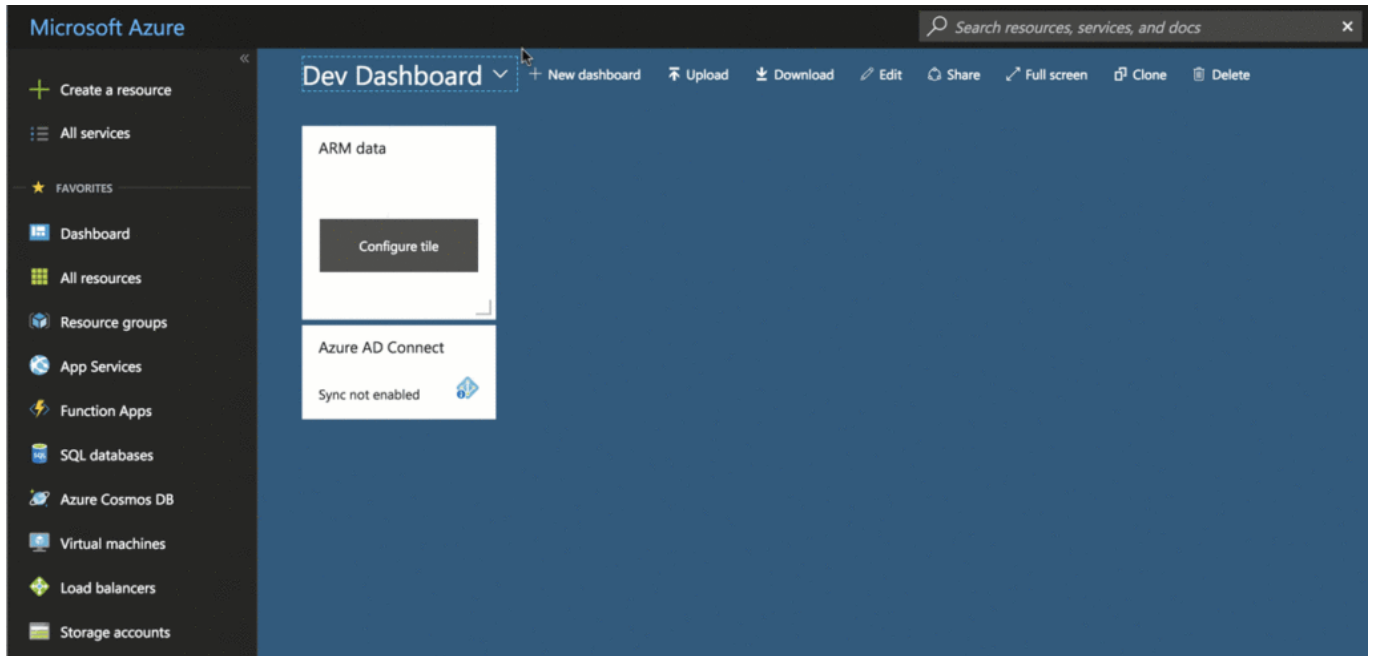
Once you log into your Azure dashboard, you'll see the Edit button at the top which lets you add a number of different widgets to the default view.

Sizing and Customizing

Choosing the location of your widgets is drag and drop level of easy as you can see in the image above. One thing that is not drag and drop at the moment is the widget sizing. Simply click the three dots in the bar that show up as you hover over your widget in edit mode to get access to the size layout chooser:



As you set up your custom view, you will also see that you can create more than one dashboard. This is a handy option if you have multiple environments that you want to see in context. Choose the drop arrow at the top title section of your dashboard to create and change dashboards.



There are lots of good things coming in the Azure environment which show the enterprise focus that Microsoft is putting into things. As a consumer of all three of the major public clouds (AWS, Azure, GCP), I am becoming more used to finding the focus areas and advantages in certain portions. Having this first update to the customized dashboards looks like a very admin/Ops type of advantage. Looking forward to seeing more updates in the UI/UX as this and other features evolve.

[Social Fasting: A Mind-Focusing Productivity Cleanse](#)

Having a very community-focused job and life means that I (and many others we know) spend a lot of time staying “connected” to our peers through social media. I’m a big fan of the power of social media as well as an opponent to it in certain ways. My personal social habits include the use of LinkedIn for professional posting (mostly auto-posts that come from my blog and other platforms) and Twitter for my more interactive social engagement. I stopped Facebook usage well over a decade ago for a variety of reasons and my personal social circles continued on quite fine without it.

Social Overload - Understanding the Impact

A great [post was shared by Ethan Banks](#) on the challenges of productivity and getting distracted by online engagement and various rabbit holes of things like meme searching and such. A big thanks to Ethan for sharing his personal story goes along with my own experience of using the [StayFocusd](#) plugin for Chrome which is set to have Twitter and some other sites locked down to 15 minutes per day.


What that did for me was to ensure that I use these sites for very specific tasks and keep the focus tighter when I’m using them so that I don’t find myself spending too much time off-topic and cutting into productivity.

Social Fasting - Cleansing as a Life Hack for Productivity

Intermittent fasting is one of the most effective weight loss and diet management plans out there. That’s just a fact, and one that I subscribe to as a successful way to keep my body fat and energy levels as close to ideal as I can. Then it hit me....why don’t I do the same thing for

Dictionary

fast²

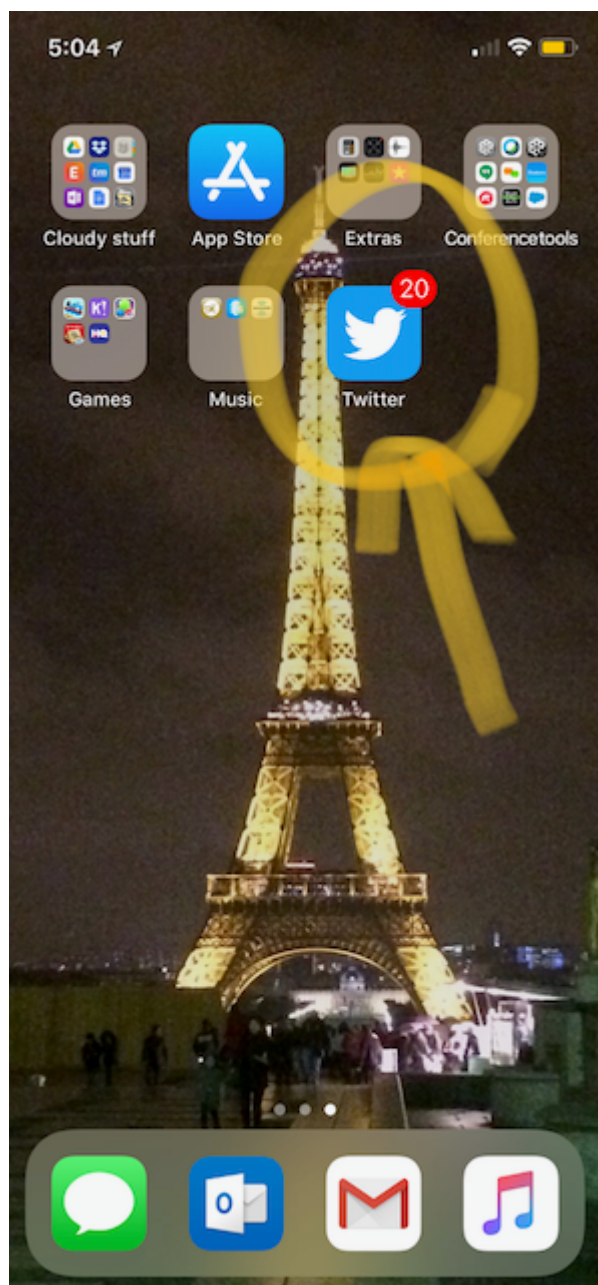
/fast/ 

verb
gerund or present participle: **fasting**

abstain from all or some kinds of food or drink, especially as a religious observance.
synonyms: eat nothing, abstain from food, refrain from eating, go without food, go hungry, starve oneself; [More](#)

We are gripped by the need for dopamine (no, seriously this is a synaptic response when we engage through social media) and one of the biggest challenges you’ll face is the “I have a notification, so I have to check it” habit.

This is the screenshot from a couple of days ago when I began my latest social fast:



My Social Fasting Routine

It's pretty simple. I just cold turkey style for chunks of days. I began with not checking Twitter for a few hours, but then found that I got back on and kept re-checking and refreshing the timeline for a while.

Every week or so, I drop off of Twitter usage for 1-3 days. My postings are done using other tools (blog auto-posts, PostBeyond, Buffer) so that I keep other outbound social media content moving, but I just don't interact with Twitter for those social fasting periods. Once I got used to doing this on-demand, it made me think more about how to better use the platforms in a more productive way.

My recommendation is to give it a try by not going on social until part way through the day. Put aside the urge to wake up and grab your phone to check your social media. It will help your life (and potentially your relationships) by giving you the focus to really stop and think about what's on the

todo list for the day/week and letting you stay more focused and productive with the continued habit.

The Down Side of No Social - Missed Messages (legit ones)

My Direct Messages on Twitter are a genuine contact method for many people. You may find the same thing as you take your social fasting. There are other options such as setting up notifications via IFTTT to let you know if you have a DM. Personally, I just make sure that people know how to reach me via email and for some, direct text message.

If you do heavily use DMs as a contact method, you may even setup a Twitter client (e.g. TweetDeck) and only allow your DM column. Set your times in the day or week when you allow yourself time to open it. Use calendar notifications to force the habit of opening and closing. We do love our dopamine hits of taking in notifications and refreshing the timeline, so we need those little hardened reminders as a helper sometimes. Nothing wrong with that. You're fighting human instinct and psychology on this stuff, and creating (or breaking) habits takes work and routines.

Escaping the Grip of FOMO

But...but...but...FOMO, and how do I keep up with news?! Great question. First is the FOMO challenge (Fear of Missing Out). If you take time away from social media, it feels like you've left the conversation, but the reality is that you need to and the world keeps on spinning just the same way it did before. Getting caught up is never an issue once you learn to take breaks. If you had a situation where you had 3 events to attend the same day, would the 2 events you can't go to suddenly leave you far behind in your learning? Probably not. If you are the type of person to sign up for so many things, you're probably a pretty aggressive learner already and the catch up is easier in many cases because you are more focused on what you want to get out of it.

The second bit is the "what if something happens in the world that I miss out on?" which (spoiler alert) is as much fake news as any of the content we read ☐. If any serious event takes place, you will find out about it through any of a dozen other means. It's not that you are shutting your eyes and ears and denying the world is spinning around you. It's that you are just stepping back from the real-time immediacy for a bit. We used to live this way quite well prior to the advent of social media.

Taking a social fast will have you rethinking how to better use your access to these networks hopefully. Feel free to reach out to me on tips and tricks with social fasting and how it has begun helping me both personally and professionally with productivity and mood.

On Joy, and Meaningful Work

There are many folks in the IT community and in my life who have inspired joy, and allowed me to seek out the two things that continue to enrich me which are:

1. Meaningful work - creating and finding opportunities to affect the people and organizations in a positive way through the work that I do on a daily basis, regardless of the nature of that work

2. Meaningful relationships - genuine connections, even in small ways, with people and organizations that create learning and growth opportunities in a bi-directional way

Alastair Cooke, whom I'm lucky to be able to call a friend, wrote a great post at his blog (<http://demitasse.co.nz/2018/07/what-brings-you-joy-do-more-of-that/>) which sums up much of what we need to search inwards for among our own pursuits.

This inspired a podcast which draws on Alastair's post as well as from the two principles I list above, also found throughout the works of Ray Dalio. Please share your thoughts on this with our audience and also take the time to reflect on what I share in the podcast. All feedback is welcome!

Podcast is here if you want to listen, and I hope that you enjoy the content and share with me what your 1-2-3 questions are. Comment below with your responses and share with this community to help bring joy to others and share the knowledge.