

[R.I.P. Email Game - How to Keep the Email Productivity Up Without it](#)

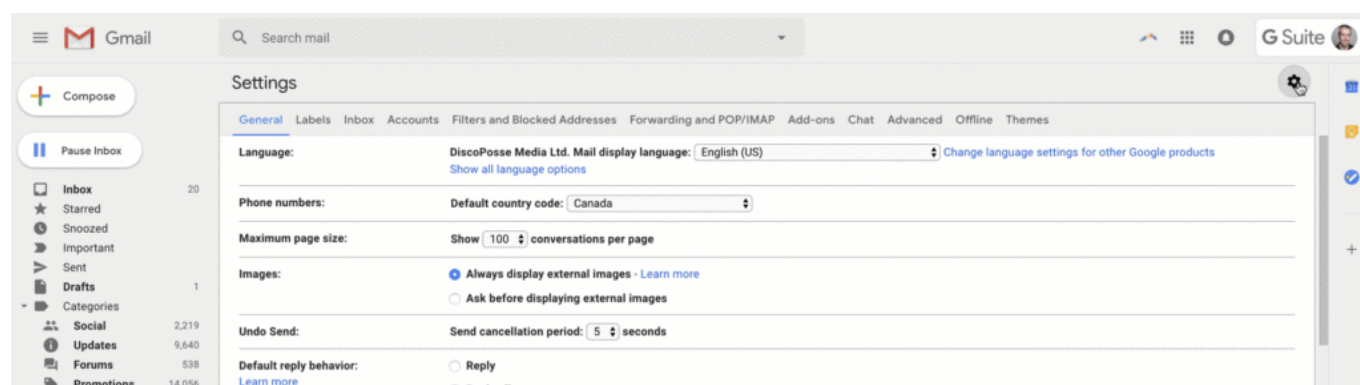
If you're followed some of my previous posts around personal productivity, you may have seen that I am a huge fan of [The Email Game from Baydin](#). It's also important to know that the goal of why I use the email game is not zero email. It's about moving more productively through email and the tasks and projects that come from it. This is why [inbox zero is not really the goal. Flow of work is.](#)

Today I found out that Baydin is closing the doors on the email game as of February 7th, 2019. Noooooo!!!

Using Gmail Auto-Advance to Move Through Email Better (and Faster!)

Open up your Gmail and click on the settings options. Then open up the Advanced option and you'll see a feature called **Auto-Advance** which is off by default. Once you enable that feature you will open up your top email and then the Gmail web client will automatically move to the next message where you can archive, skip, or reply.

Here's where to find that option:



Keep using the same process you did in the past with the email game. Start at the top and and keep yourself moving quickly and effectively through your inbox. Forcing the flow like this causes you to cut down on the wasted time normally spent mulling over how to respond or when to mark a message unread and file it away for later...which is just deferring the pain of processing it now which can be done in seconds.

Hopefully you find this tip helpful. Please let me know in the comments below if you like these kinds of posts! Many more where this came from as I learn more about personal productivity hacks that I love to share with everyone.

[New Day's Resolution - Daily versus Yearly](#)

Goal Setting

New Year's celebrations are around the corner. This is also the time where people try to set BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goals) and mark January 1st as the first day on a path towards them. Here's the catch: this is the worst possible way to do goal setting! Why do New Year's resolutions feel so good, yet they also fail at the highest rate?

Resolutions are goals. We call them resolutions, but they need to be treated as goals and then put other things into place around them. If your goals are too easily achievable, they aren't really goals. I firmly believe in setting big goals but the key to reaching them is in all the stuff you do around it.

Annual Goals Lack Conviction

There are some key failings in using annual goal setting. We see this play out at work all of the time with things like long-term software or business projects, yearly budget planning, and others. The odd thing is that we continue to repeat the behaviour with the same poor results. Here are a few reasons for that:

1. Long-term work is immediately allowed to be delayed - you have set a moderate to large goal and you already cap the duration at a year which makes it way too easy to defer and delay things which leads to dropping the priority and losing momentum. You know that you've done this already with the excuse of "I have a year to do it, so pushing it off by a week won't hurt".
2. Goals need Measurable Steps and Outcomes - setting a goal like "lose 40 pounds" or "get more exercise" does not attach strategies (how you will do it) or tactics (what will be done to execute the strategy) and does not assign regular measurable steps. These are good goals, but must also have strategy, objectives, and tactics to measure and reach the goal.
3. Measurement must be regular to ensure improvement - Number 1 and 2 combined show you that even if you have the right goal and the right strategy and objectives, you must regularly measure so that you can adjust and pivot as needed to keep working towards the goal (or adjust the goal as needed). Lack of regular measurement ensures a high chance of failure.

The irony of annual resolutions is that many of them are recycled from the previous year (save more money, lose weight, spend more time with family) but despite not achieving them in previous years, we keep reassigning the same goal without putting the right framework around measuring and successfully achieving them.

Successful Goal Achievement is About Trade-Offs

Here's the real trick. It's not about how badly you want the thing you set as your goal. It's about what you are willing to trade off in order to get it. This can't be overstated enough. Nothing will be achieved without some trade-off. What do trade-offs look like:

- **GOAL:** Lose 20 pounds. **TRADE-OFF:** Remove 70,000 calories from your routine which comes by a combination of reducing intake and increasing output. 70,000 sounds like a lot but when stretching across a 4 month period that means reducing 583 calories a day for 120 days. That translates to one less mochachino a day or cutting dessert or sweet snacks out on most days. There are lots of ways to find those calories (bad ones preferably) and by adding a little mild exercise in the routine.
- **GOAL:** Exercise more. **TRADE-OFF:** Add small incremental exercise goals and increase across long periods. Don't race to the gym on January 2nd and work out for 60 minutes when you

aren't used to doing it. Start with just 5 pushups, 10 setups, and 10 free-standing squats on day 1 and set a goal to do that every day for 5 days. Then increase the numbers slowly and work up towards bigger goals. Walk more, park further from the mall, do small, continuous, incremental things that add to your exercise output.

- **GOAL:** Save more money. **TRADE-OFF:** Drop regular, small spending out of your habits or forcibly set aside money from your pay cycle in automated ways to ensure that you are moving money to where it is "safe" from easy access to spending. It's not the big money purchases that kill your savings as much as it's the little and continuous spending that can eat away at things. Setting up a 100\$ per pay transfer into a savings account with interest attached means that you are starting a longer-term strategy to saving. As you get used to that, do things like taking bonuses and raises and adding them to the automated transfers so you increase the savings without adjusting to new income levels.

Incremental Work and Measurement is Hugely Important

This is another thing that cannot be overstated enough. Just because you used to be able to run a 10km race in high school, it does not mean you should strap on the running shoes and head out for a 10km run when you have not done consistent exercise for many years. This is the fastest path to injury and disappointment.

Let me share a personal story on how I've made this part of my day-to-day. I set up a goal of doing 100 pushups a day, every day. This was done as part of a community online that was meant to do 100 pushups in any number of ways (10x10, 50x2, 2x50, etc.) just making sure that we did 100 per day for 30 days. There were about 30 people involved at the goal setting stage. By day 5, the numbers started to drop. By day 30, about 20 percent were not even reporting their daily results. So, why did this happen?

By setting up an audacious goal which did not have incremental achievements, we saw people getting sore, injured, and did not set aside time to reach the real goal which should have been "working towards 100 pushups in a day" rather than just going from zero to one hundred. My new goal that I set and measure is to do 50 repetitions of exercise a day at a minimum which can be a combination of pushups, ab crunches, pull ups, and squats. What that set for me is an achievable, measurable, incremental increase in output which I now exceed and have moved the number up.

It's like the old saying goes: "Q: how do you eat an elephant? A: One bite at a time"

Wait, Why is it about Money and Weight All the Time?

The reason I zeroed in on these top goals is that they are also the least-achieved goals that people continue to set as New Year's Resolutions. Other great examples of poorly mapped out goals include things like:

- Get a raise at work
- Get a promotion at work
- Do more charity and community work
- Drive less and bike more

While these are all great sounding goals, they lack measurability and strategic planning when they are just left as the only part of the goal. What these need to look like is this:

- **Get a raise at work** - as measured by being more vocal with the management team on projects and participating more in team leading with my group and ensuring that the HR team

has a path to growth in the position that maps to my personal goals.

- **Get a promotion at work** - as measured by a clear path mapped out with my management team and HR to take on more leadership within the organization on projects (which must be defined and measurable as well).
- **Do more charity and community work** - as measured by setting a weekly goal of 1-4 hours of work with or for a charitable organization or community program
- **Drive less and bike more** - as measured by riding to work on Tuesdays and Thursdays instead of driving during the spring and summer and booking a spin class commitment during fall and winter with a minimum of 6 classes per month.

There is a reason that we say “as measured by” in these goal setting scenarios. The moment that you state a goal but do not have anything you can attach to it “as measured by” then you are setting the wrong goal.

Goal setting is super tricky and we have lots of psychology around why it works and doesn't work. Here is my goal for you as you head into New Year's Eve and prepare your annual resolution setting: Set two specific and measurable goals that have incremental, measurable steps towards the end-state and write them down. Physically write them down. Then, write them down every single day in the morning. This is the start of your path towards better goal setting and more effective goal achievement. I'll share much more on why these things matter as well.

[Why Inbox Zero may Not be What you Think but it is Better than you Realized](#)

Inbox Zero is probably not what you think it is. There is a fairly common misconception that just doing a Select All | Delete would count as Inbox Zero. There is a generally good feeling that comes from the clean look of an empty inbox, but that is really just part of the real psychology behind it all.

Let's take a look at some of the reasons why Inbox Zero is a huge productivity winner and also how to get there.

Inbox Zero is about flow, not message counts

I wrote about the [Email Game previously](#) and have been practicing this method on a daily basis. Every day at 10 AM the game begins and sometimes I follow up with an afternoon edition in cases where there is a big buildup of content.

Dropping the message count down to zero is a cathartic feeling. That's not the real reason Inbox Zero is important, though. The real reason is about the **flow of work** which is affected by the way that tools like the email game make us work. By rapidly forcing cleanup and answering emails in seconds instead of labouring over them for minutes to get the same result, we increase the **flow** which means increased productivity.

Flexing the Email Muscle

Stacks of emails are no different than piles of paper which need to be dealt with. The count is

important and has a profound psychological (and even a physiological) effect on you as I wrote in a recent blog on [Why Badges and Notifications are Killing your Productivity](#). Moving the badge counter to zero **by increasing the flow of work effectively** means that you are increasing the output and training your email muscles.

Any communication is meant to simply move the flow of work and keep track of data/details to ensure we are communicating effectively. Email often becomes a long-form version of instant messaging apps. A former manager I worked with once said “if you have more than 3 replies to an email, pick up the phone”.

Moving emails through and assigning real todo items into lists or other tools like Kanban or task management products will lead to a cleaner flow from inbox to output. Time to start your training!

Your First Inbox Zero Training

When you run the process of the Email Game it teaches you do a few things which are practices and methods to increase productivity:

1. **Discard or archive unneeded email** - spam, ads, and general mails that you usually spend time on are quickly moved through to archive or trash You will become adept at scanning and archiving to really decide what's necessary to keep
2. **Boomerang content that needs to be revisited by giving it an honest priority** - 2 hours, 4 hours, 8 hours, tomorrow and more. These are deferrals which you become much better at honestly assigning priority to
3. **Reply / Reply All** - Separate buttons (thank you for reducing Reply to All storms by accident!) which give you a timer to answer the email. When the clock is running, you learn to be concise and quick.
4. **Open and interact** - timer stops while you click into the email which opens in another tab. Sometimes you need a little time to dig into the content

Start with the first batch of emails and then think about things like “how can I reply quickly but get an effective response?” and also think about changing from using your inbox and unread emails as a todo list. If you have email that needs to be revisited, the boomerang feature is super cool. You can even reply and set it to remind you after a period of time if no reply comes back.

Inbox Zero Achieved, Now What?

Practice, practice, practice! Make this a daily habit. As I mentioned in my notifications and productivity blog, the habit of managing email as a batch process means that you free up that nagging feeling where you have to check all the time to see what's new. Don't deal with email when it comes in. Deal with email on your schedule which creates the habit for both you and for the folks you communicate via email with. We all need to be trained on getting better productivity ☐

Time your batch processing to a few times a day on specific intervals. Here is how to make that work:

PRODUCTIVITY HACK #1 - Don't open email until 10 AM. Seriously, this works once you get used to it. Start with 8, then 9, then eventually you will find that most of the early emails are people pitching content over the fence so that they clear up their todo list.

My email cycle is to generally not open email until 9 or 10 AM. This includes work and personal email. From there, CLOSE YOUR EMAIL CLIENT!! Yes, you read that correctly. Close down your email until after lunch. Then batch process email and prioritize what is current for the day, then CLOSE YOUR EMAIL AGAIN. Set your next batch at 3 PM or so, and then once more at the end of the day.

If you follow the more aggressive Cal Newport / Tim Ferriss methods, they use things like days-in-a-row without email and auto-responders, but I tend towards the more early stages of email batch handling which has proven to be super helpful.

Let me know what you think and your own methods by dropping in a comment. Sharing your successes and challenges helps all of our readers and I learn every day from how my peers take on and adopt productivity habits.

[Why Badges and Notifications are Killing your Productivity](#)

You have a mission here to prove me wrong ☐

This blog is about methods to keep attention and increase productivity. The whole read should be less than 6 minutes. Good luck, and I hope you find this helpful!

There are a lot of challenges we face on a daily basis. Abundance of information is an incredible value that we have thanks to social media, continuous availability of our resources online, worldwide access to a wealth of knowledge and to people everywhere. The down side to this access is that it's a trade-off. Herbert A. Simon, an economist and political scientist, sums it up well in this statement:

“in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume”

Cal Newport (<http://calnewport.com/>) wrote a great book called Deep Work, and shares many ways that you can attack the issue of scarcity of attention when doing what requires specific and focused attention on a subject.

What I want to share with you here is a life hack that I borrowed from the ideas of Newport, Tim Ferris (<http://tim.blog>) and others, which has led to some proven success over the last few years and increased success in recent weeks and months as I have aggressively adjusted my routines to embrace these methods.

Badges?! We don't need no stinking badges!

Beep! That sound of a notification sends you an audible or vibrating buzz (and fires off a shot of dopamine to your brain) in order to get you to stop what you're doing and look at your email/phone/computer. We are living in a culture of immediacy with email, text messages, Skype, Slack, and dozens of other tools that are fighting for our immediate attention.

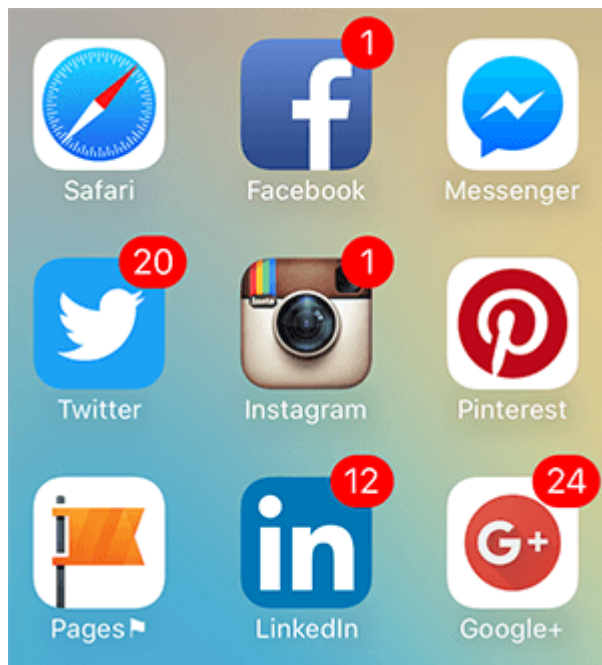
Here is the maxim that I use: nothing needs your immediate attention, or if it does, it should be a focus not a fight.

Some simple rules I've been able to apply which help bring this focus are:

1. Email is not an immediate communication tool - Don't send an email and expect a quick reply
2. If everything is a "rush" then nothing is - prioritization is relative, so use the phrases rush, ASAP, and High Priority carefully
3. Would this task/message/process fail if you were sick for 1-2 days? - Imagine if you suddenly had to call in sick for 1 or 2 days and whether this task would be waited on or re-assigned as a result. Odds are it can wait
4. Does the number of notifications and unread items increase the anxiety and decrease your ability to focus on prioritizing your work?

Number 4 is the important point as you get ready to start your focus experiment.

Turning off Badges Enables Productivity



The badge notifications showing unread account are decreasing your ability to prioritize. That's a fact. If you have 3 things to do, you can prioritize them with relative ease. If you have 5 you start to run out of ways to prioritize due to amount of time you can think about getting them done in. Move beyond 5 into double and triple digit counts and you are off the rails on ability to prioritize and you are now swimming in attention deficit.

This is where your experiment begins. What would happen if you turned off the badge counters in

your apps (email, Slack, etc.) and just moved to checking on a regular cadence and ignoring the “number”? Spoiler alert: it will make you more productive.

Here are the steps I took that you should too:

Step 1: Shut of the badge counters in all of my apps other than Skype and iMessage which I elected as prioritized apps

Step 2: Develop patterns to check regularly, but less often (e.g. 10 AM, 1 PM, 3 PM, 5 PM)

Step 3: Create a pattern where you become available for checking and response

Step 4: Enjoy!

What I’ve proven with my social and work circles over the change in my habits and patterns is that if you reply immediately to emails, you will be expected to always reply immediately to email. If you need to be reached quickly, there is an expectation that every channel is a path to immediate response. It also means that every time to stop to pick up a message/notification it takes your attention away from another task.

Choose your “In case of rapid response” method using {tool of choice}

For my work, Skype and iMessage are the two methods that I have highlighted as more immediate accessibility. Skype is the primary chat method for work and iMessage is the one thing I do check as my family uses it. You must also train yourself to not answer every message or check every message immediately. If you’re in a group chat, let it roll by for a while and shake off the dopamine-triggered response need that we all have. We are literally fighting off biology and deep-rooted psychological responses here, for our own good.

Over the course of a pattern training you will find the you can differentiate better between prioritizing and just attention-stealing tasks and notifications. The schedule does not create the habit as much as your desire to use the schedule as a way to create the habit. What I mean is that you have to strive for the goal of stretching out the attention-eating activities and use the attention-focused times towards more tasks which need deeper thought and focus.

Your Productivity (and You) are Looking Up

If you’ve stuck it through to this part of the blog, you have given yourself the first positive result. just by spending the 3-5 minutes reading this has proven that you are keen to know how to keep attentive to a task. Did you know that the average time spent on most blog articles hovers around 1 minute? It isn’t that you read them in 1 minute, but that most people start to scan, scroll, and then skip the content as attention fades.

REMEMBER: Your goal here is to focus attention, not to ignore things. This is about being able to more effectively attach focus and prioritization to a task or set of tasks and to increase the flow of work. You may even find that the task is a 2-3 minute task but even in that 2-3 minute period you might find yourself thinking about something else or reaching for your phone to check a notification which cuts into that productive time.

This will undoubtedly help when you need to dedicate deep attention to things like reading a long-form book or article, writing, programming, requirements gathering for a technical project, or other tasks that need warm up and undivided attention.

Another bonus effect is that you find yourself looking up instead of down into your phone when there may be something or someone who needs your attention.

More than just the interruptions

Simon Sinek, author of Start with Why and other great books, explains the deeper issue with this subject. This is beyond the 6 minutes I promised you would need to read this article. It's a worthwhile video to watch and you may find some inspiration in it. If you find these tips helpful, please drop in a comment below or send me a message on Twitter. I promise that i do read them and take all the comments as great feedback, I just can't promise I read it the moment you post it ☐