

Getting Your Inbox to Zero

—by Kelly Forrister

For years David Allen has said the master key for managing email is the hardest habit for many to change—working from a regularly empty inbox. It takes less psychic effort to operate from a zero base than to leave anything sitting in the inbox. That doesn't mean that the inbox in email is kept at zero—just that it gets there on some regular basis (at least once a week in the Weekly Review). The problem is that most people do not have a system for managing their emails beyond the inbox area, so if they can't move on or finish dealing with the email right then, they will leave it in "in" as the safest place.

Getting Your Inbox to Zero

Getting your inbox to zero means you have made a decision about what each email means and what you want to do about it. Using the questions from the GTD[®] Workflow Map you would simply ask:

What is it?

Is it actionable?

NO – Trash, Incubate, or File it

YES – What's the next action?

Do now, delegate to someone else, or defer to do myself later?

- If **doing** now, handle it in the moment, as long as it takes less than 2 minutes.
- If **delegating**, track the waiting for reminder (if you need to track this getting completed) in your @Waiting For folder in email or Waiting For list in your list manager.
- If **deferring**, track the action reminder in @Action folder in email, Calendar, or a Next Actions list in your list manager.

If multiple actions, what's your desired outcome?

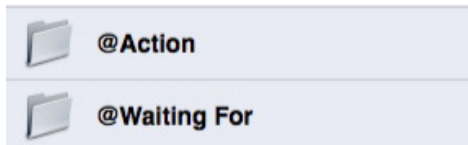
Track that outcome on your Projects list in your list manager.

On a daily basis, we recommend processing your email inbox down to zero as often as you can. On a weekly basis, in your GTD Weekly Review[®], all of your inboxes are driven down to zero in the Get Clear steps.

You have two easy options for managing actionable email:

Option One: Use the email as the reminder

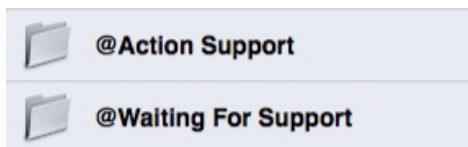
Create @Action and @Waiting For folders, and use them like an action list. You would not also put those reminders on your Calendar or Next Action lists in your list manager—the email itself would be the only reminder. That means you need to scan these folders with as much discipline as you would your Next Actions lists and Calendar, for reminders of your commitments. The @ symbol is a trick to push these folders to the top of your email structure for easy access. If the @ symbol does not work in your email program, try another symbol.



People often like this option for the quick win it gives in getting your inbox processed to zero. The downside with this option in email is that you have no place to capture the next action or due date that's associated with that actionable email. So you'll inevitably be doing some "re-deciding" about emails you already decided about, if the next action is not apparent by the subject line.

Option Two: Use your list manager or your calendar as the action reminder

Create @Action Support and @Waiting For Support folders in Mail to hold supporting information for actions that are tracked on your Calendar or Next Actions lists. In this case, the folders only serve as storage buckets to hold the information you need to take the action. You would be reminded of the action when you review your Calendar or Next Actions lists. It's one fewer place to look for actions or waiting fors, whereas the first option adds an additional location to look for a complete view of your reminders.



People often like this option because all of your reminders will be tracked in as few places as possible. But it does mean you have to take the time to go to your list manager and define the next action.

Experiment with both options, if you're not sure which one is best for you.

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