

*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 it.*

Herbert Simon, Recipient of Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics¹
and the A.M. Turing Award, the “Nobel Prize of Computer Science”

¹ Simon received the Nobel Prize in 1978 for his contribution to organizational decision making: it is impossible to have perfect and complete information at any given time to make a decision.

The Manhattan A-train was packed for the Christmas season, and as we stepped in for the two-minute ride to the next station and shopping at Macy’s, my friend Justin looked down at his Blackberry as he always did when waiting. He’d had it for less than a week and was already glancing at his inbox every 10-15 minutes.

“Another e-mail from my boss.” Justin didn’t have any reception for his Blackberry, so it took him a full three minutes to respond. In that span of time, his boss had left him two voicemail messages.

It was 8pm on a Saturday.

THE EXPANDING WORKWEEK AND THE INEVITABLE BOTTLENECK

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool. Richard P. Feynman, Nobel Prize-winning physicist

Americans now work approximately eight weeks longer² per year than in 1969—in the space of a single generation—for roughly the same income after adjusting for inflation. The new standard workweek is 70 hours³ and the growth rate is increasing.

The fuel? Instant access to information and instant access to each other.

The problem is clear when we look at the best case scenario: If you get what you want—for example, a promotion or 10% more customers per month—and get 10% more e-mail or phone calls per month as a result, are your behaviors and routines scalable? Can you answer 1,000 e-mails as easily as 100? If not, at what point will you become a bottleneck that creates a permanent backlog of unread and unanswered items?

For me, it was June 14th, 2004.

From August 10th, 2000 to June 14th, 2004, I checked Outlook 100-200 times per day, first as an employee, and later as the founder and CEO of a Silicon Valley-based firm with more than 300 full-time and contracted workers. In June of 2004, I was working from 7am to 9pm, including weekends, and receiving more than 1,500 e-mails per week.

It was unsustainable and 100% unscalable.

Deciding that incremental changes wouldn't solve the problem, on June 14th, 2004, I decided to conduct an experiment at the opposite extreme—I left the US to run the business from wireless locations in more than 20 countries. There was just one rule: I couldn't check e-mail more than once

² "Work, Stress, and Health," National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health Conference, 1999

³ "Extreme Jobs: The Dangerous Allure of the 70-Hour Workweek," Harvard Business Review, December 2006.

per week for 15 months. To be honest, I expected the experiment to fail. Instead, profits increased 30% in the first four weeks alone.

How did it happen? In retrospect it was simple. I had decided to cultivate the rarest of skills in a world of infinite interruption: selective ignorance.

Selective Ignorance and the Low-Information Diet

Though selective ignorance has several facets, we'll focus on the low-information e-mail diet (here forward called the "low-information diet"), as e-mail is the single greatest time waster in modern life. Before we get into specific guidelines, the two fundamental principles of selective ignorance are worth mentioning:

- 1.** If you don't define your goals clearly, everything seems important and requires action. If you define your goals clearly, especially your single most critical goal, almost all things are of little or no importance and few things require action.
- 2.** Trying to make everyone happy—besides being impossible—is the surest way to make yourself miserable.

There are then three specific steps for following the low-information diet that we'll explore in descending order of importance: decreasing frequency, decreasing volume, and increasing speed.

STEP 1: DECREASE FREQUENCY

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man. George Bernard Shaw, Maxims for Revolutionists

Stoner vs. e-mailer—who wins?

In 2005, a psychiatrist at King's College in London administered IQ tests to three groups: the first did nothing but perform the IQ test, the second was distracted by e-mail and ringing phones and the third was stoned on marijuana. Not surprisingly, the first group did better than the other two by an average of 10 points. The e-mailers, on the other hand, did worse than the stoners by an average of 6 points. ([BBC News article](#))

There is a psychological switching of gears that can require up to 45 minutes to resume a major task that has been interrupted. More than a quarter of each 9-5 period (28%, or 134.4 minutes) is consumed by such interruptions⁴, and 40% of people interrupted go on to a new task without finishing the one that was interrupted. This is how we end up with 20 windows open on our computers and nothing completed at 5pm.

Multi-tasking is dead. It never worked and it never will. Intelligent people love to sing its praises because it gives them permission to avoid the much more challenging alternative: focusing on one thing.

“Single-tasking,” creating an environment that permits the start-to-finish completion of high-impact tasks, will be the defining feature of top performers in a world of ADD-enabling technologies. But how do single-taskers prevent the trivial many from interrupting the critical few?

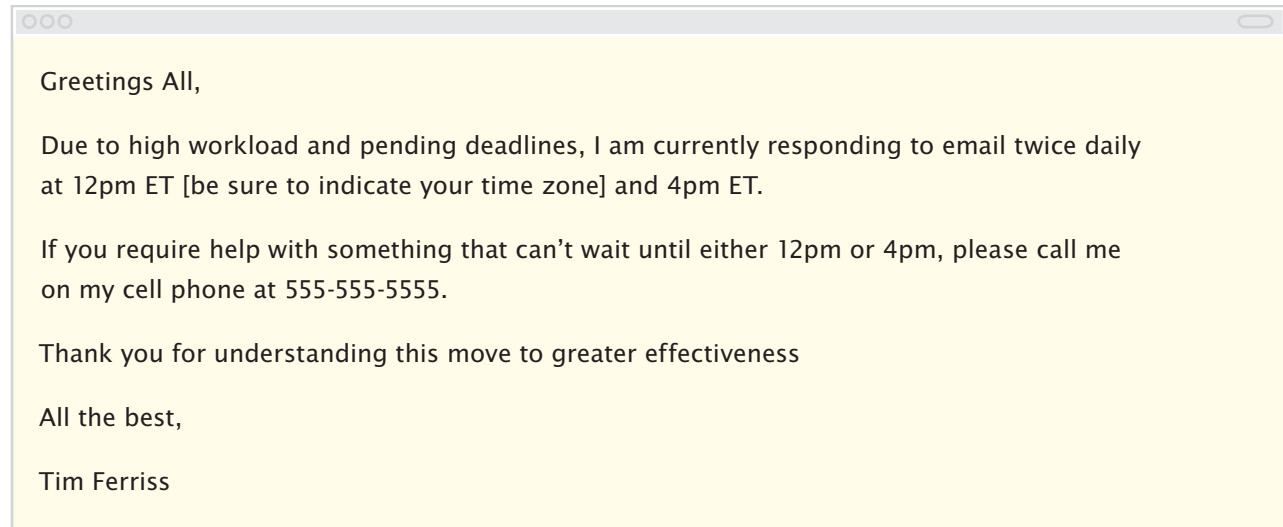
⁴ “The Cost of Not Paying Attention: How Interruptions Impact Knowledge Worker Productivity,” Jonathan B. Spira and Joshua B. Feintuch, Basex, 2005

One word: batching.

Batching is scheduling the completion of time-consuming but necessary tasks at set times, as infrequently as possible, between which we let them accumulate. This can be done with everything from voicemail to invoicing, but here's how you batch e-mail:

- 1.** Turn off the audible alert if you have one on Outlook or a similar program and turn off automatic send/receive, which delivers e-mails to your inbox as soon as someone sends them.
- 2.** Set up an auto-responder that permits you to check e-mail twice per day, once at 12 noon or just prior to lunch, and again at 4pm. 12pm and 4pm are times that ensure you will have the most responses from previously sent email. Never check email first thing in the morning⁵. Instead, complete your most important task before lunch to avoid using hunger or reading e-mail as an excuse to put off the important (usually also the most uncomfortable). Here is a template you can use:

⁵This habit alone can change your life. It seems small but has an enormous effect.



Move to once per day (I prefer 2pm) as quickly as possible. Emergencies are seldom that. People are poor judges of importance and inflate minutiae to fill time and feel important. The autoresponder is a tool that, far from decreasing collective effectiveness, forces people to reevaluate their reason for interrupting you and helps them decrease meaningless and time-consuming communication.

But what if you miss something important?

Remember, first of all, that you are offering your cell phone for urgent issues. It is possible to reach you.

Regardless, I was initially terrified of missing important requests and inviting disaster, just as you might be upon reading this recommendation.

For the last three years, I have checked business e-mail no more than once a week, often not for up to four weeks at a time. I've never had a problem that cost more than \$250 to reverse or fix, and this is with distribution in 15 countries and workers in half a dozen time zones.

Conversely, batching e-mail has saved me thousands of hours of redundant work. How much is that time worth, and what is my profit? This is not a rhetorical question. It's critical to calculate it.

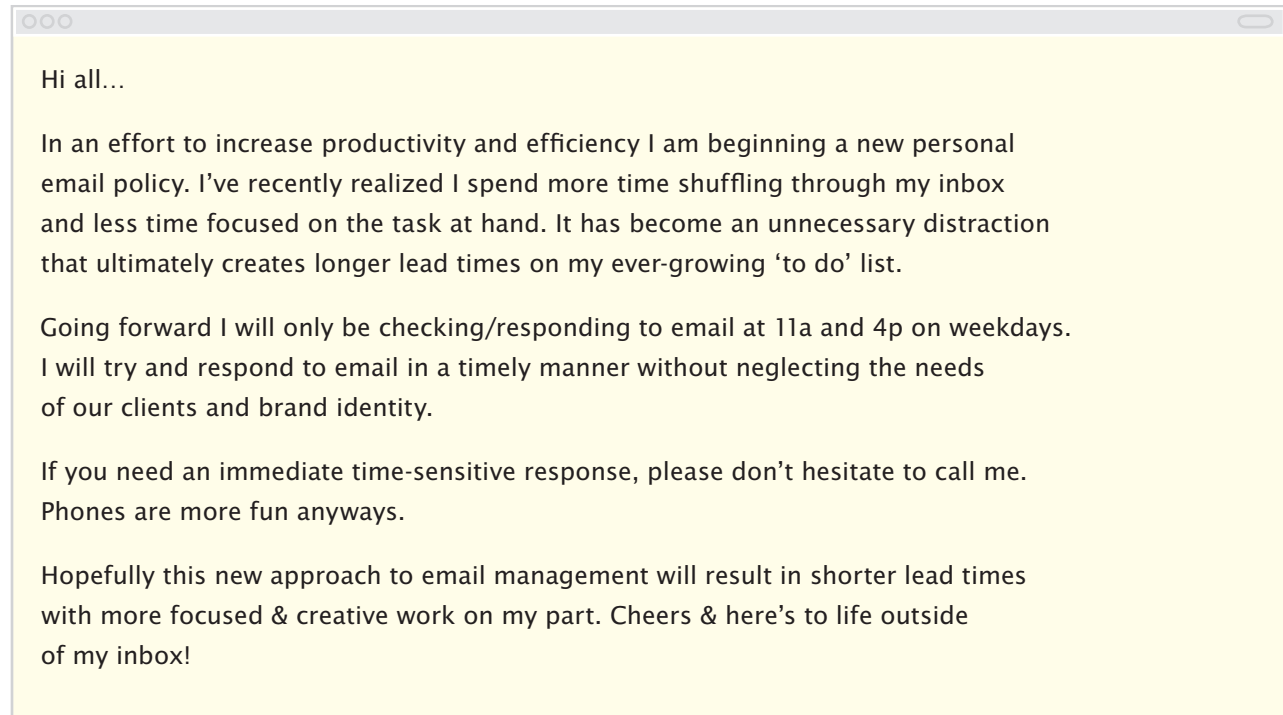
To begin, cut the last three zeros off of your annual income and halve the remainder for your hourly income. Thus, if I make \$50,000 per year, I take 50 and divide it by two to arrive at \$25 per hour. Let's assume I save 20 hours per week by batching, which is a low estimate, the time savings alone is worth \$500. If I have to spend \$250 to fix issues that crop up, I'm still \$250 ahead, not to mention the enormous financial and emotional benefits of focusing on the important (such as landing a large client or eliminating weekend work). The value of batching is much more than the per-hour savings.

Last but not least, don't break your own rules to catch artificial emergencies. If you check e-mail and see that someone has ignored your autoresponder and asked for an immediate response, I encourage you to ignore the e-mail if consequences can be repaired or reversed, even at your own personal expense. Respond at your set times. If you break your own rules, especially in the beginning, no one else will follow them.

But what if your boss freaks out?

Surprisingly, I've never seen this happen if the autoresponder is framed in the interest of increasing results and not as the result of poor time management. I asked attendees of the South by Southwest Interactive tech conference to test email batching with autoresponders, and one skeptic who was sure his boss would threaten to fire him later sent me this e-mail:

I sent out an email to everyone in my division letting them know I'd only be checking email at 11am & 4pm. I've included my email down below:



So far the response has been very receptive and supportive. Here's the quick "reply to all" email response I got from our senior operations manager (he oversees 5 radio stations and most of the people in the building):

"AWESOME time management approach!!! I would love to see more people adopt that policy."

I'm sticking to it and it's making my days more productive already. As the days are progressing, more people are "on the bus" with respecting my new email policy and I haven't had any snags (even with SXSW going on - and I work in Austin radio, so we're all swamped this week). However, every

single person feels like it just wouldn't work for them if they did it. "Oh, but I'm on too many mailing lists" or "All I do is work in my email box; I have to." I'm sure you've heard it all before.

STEP 2: DECREASE VOLUME

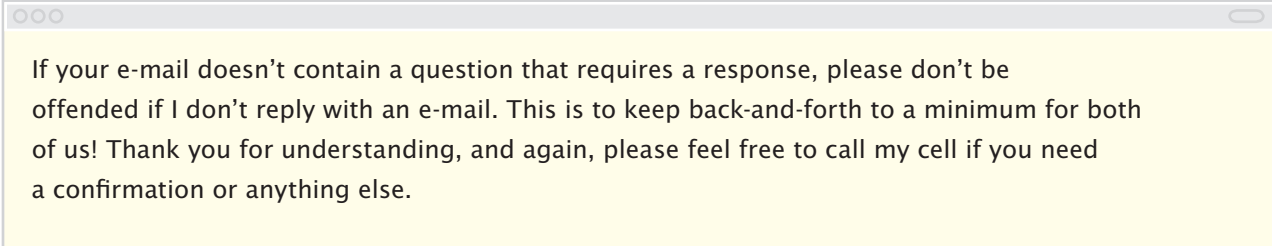
There are many things of which a wise man might wish to be ignorant.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, poet and essayist, leader of the Transcendentalist movement

Once we limit the number of times we check e-mail, the next step is to cut down on the number of e-mail we respond to. Here are a few strategic choices, from minor to major, that will help get your inbox—and outbox—to empty:

1. Set expectations so you don't have to respond to non-question e-mail.

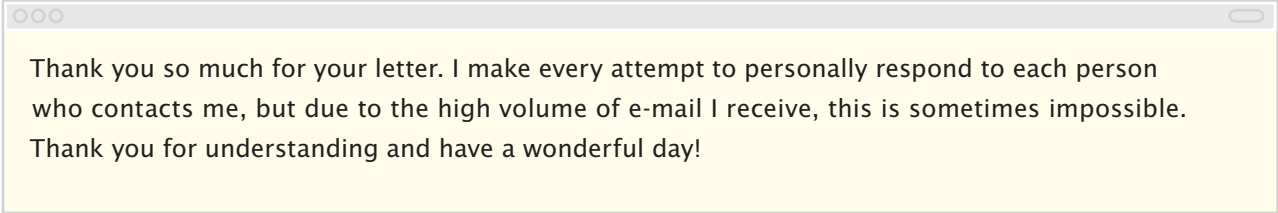
Add a line or P.S. to the batching autoresponder that reads:

A screenshot of an email autoresponder message displayed in a window. The window has a title bar with three small circles on the left and a close button on the right. The message text is centered and reads: "If your e-mail doesn't contain a question that requires a response, please don't be offended if I don't reply with an e-mail. This is to keep back-and-forth to a minimum for both of us! Thank you for understanding, and again, please feel free to call my cell if you need a confirmation or anything else."

If your e-mail doesn't contain a question that requires a response, please don't be offended if I don't reply with an e-mail. This is to keep back-and-forth to a minimum for both of us! Thank you for understanding, and again, please feel free to call my cell if you need a confirmation or anything else.

2. Set expectations so you have the option to not respond at all.

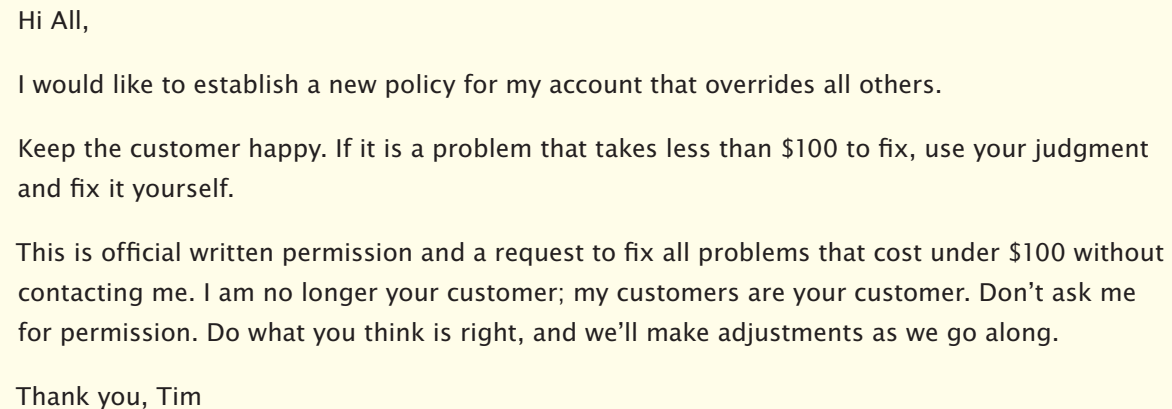
Popular bloggers and business celebrities have long used this approach, which is most suitable for entrepreneurs. It removes an enormous pressure but gives you the option to respond at a later point:

A screenshot of an email window with a yellow background. The text inside reads: "Thank you so much for your letter. I make every attempt to personally respond to each person who contacts me, but due to the high volume of e-mail I receive, this is sometimes impossible. Thank you for understanding and have a wonderful day!"

Thank you so much for your letter. I make every attempt to personally respond to each person who contacts me, but due to the high volume of e-mail I receive, this is sometimes impossible. Thank you for understanding and have a wonderful day!

3. If you manage others, provide financial thresholds for independent decision-making.

To avoid constant e-mails for permission and advice for small decisions, establish a policy for all of your direct reports that allows them to use their own judgment to solve problems up to a certain dollar amount. This is the e-mail I sent to all of my outsourced service providers that reduced their inquiries from about 200 per day to less than 20 per week:

A screenshot of an email window with a yellow background. The text inside reads: "Hi All,

I would like to establish a new policy for my account that overrides all others.

Keep the customer happy. If it is a problem that takes less than \$100 to fix, use your judgment and fix it yourself.

This is official written permission and a request to fix all problems that cost under \$100 without contacting me. I am no longer your customer; my customers are your customer. Don't ask me for permission. Do what you think is right, and we'll make adjustments as we go along.

Thank you, Tim"

Hi All,

I would like to establish a new policy for my account that overrides all others.

Keep the customer happy. If it is a problem that takes less than \$100 to fix, use your judgment and fix it yourself.

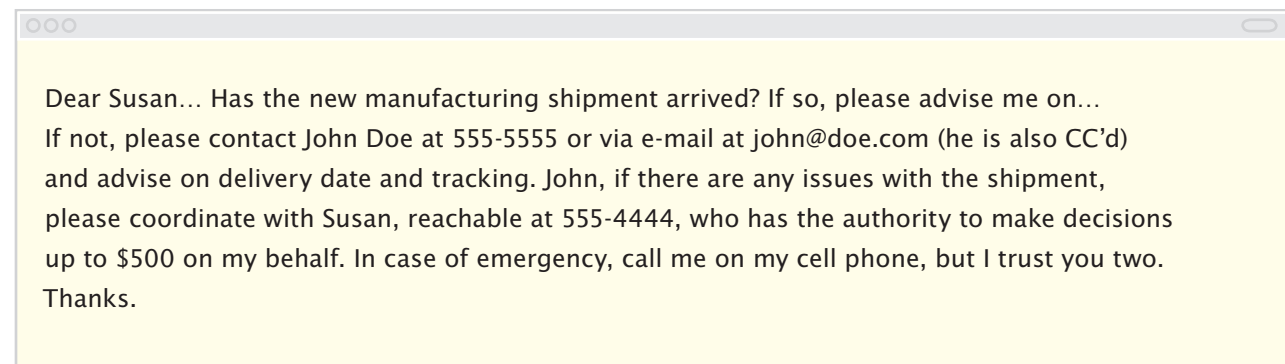
This is official written permission and a request to fix all problems that cost under \$100 without contacting me. I am no longer your customer; my customers are your customer. Don't ask me for permission. Do what you think is right, and we'll make adjustments as we go along.

Thank you, Tim

4. If you ask a question, include “if-then” instructions to prevent back-and-forth.

“If-then” e-mail structure becomes more important as you check e-mail less often. Since I often check business e-mail once a week, it is critical that no one needs a “what if...?” answered or other information within seven days of a given e-mail response.

If I suspect that a manufacturing order hasn’t arrived at the shipping facility, for example, I’ll send an email to my shipping facility manager along these lines:



This prevents most follow-up questions, maintaining two separate dialogues, and takes me out of the problem-solving equation. Get into the habit of considering what “if...then” can be used in any e-mail where you ask a question.

STEP 3: INCREASE SPEED

A schedule defends from chaos and whim.

Annie Dillard, winner of 1975 Pulitzer Prize in non-fiction

There will be times when, it's true, you will have to read e-mail. God forbid.

The good news is that you can increase your reading speed at least 200% with less than five minutes of conditioning once you understand what reading is and isn't. Reading isn't a linear process but a series of jumps (saccades) and independent snapshots (fixations). To feel both, put the tip of your index finger on one closed eye and slowly trace a straight horizontal line on a wall with the other.

Reading speed increases to the extent that you reduce the number and duration of fixations per line. That is the verifiable science of speed reading in one sentence.

The process is simple. First, draw a vertical line down the center of five text pages, then draw two additional vertical lines 2" to either side of each center line. Practice fixating only at the points where these vertical lines intersect the horizontal lines of text, then progress to unmarked pages of text. By training peripheral vision and consolidating eye movement, you will be reading at least three-times faster than before.

1 }→

2 }→

3 }→

IN SUMMARY: THE CRITICAL FEW VS. THE TRIVIAL MANY

A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone.

Henry David Thoreau, naturalist

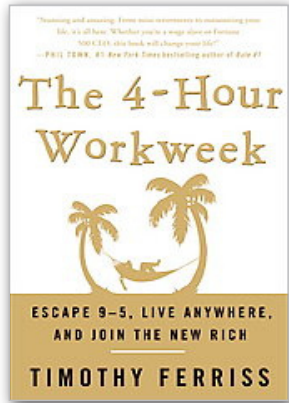
Just as modern man consumes both too many calories and calories of no nutritional value, the modern knowledge worker eats data both in excess and from the wrong sources.

Learn to recognize and fight the information impulse. This is infinitely easier when you have an alternative set of rules and routines to follow: the low-information diet.

Ignorance may be bliss, but it is also a necessity in a world of infinite distraction. Ignore or redirect all information and interruptions that are irrelevant, unimportant or unactionable. Most are all three.

Focus on being productive rather than being busy—your life depends on it.

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For more details or to buy a copy of Tim Ferriss' *The 4-Hour Workweek* [click here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Serial entrepreneur and ultravagabond TIMOTHY FERRISS has been featured in *The New York Times*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *MAXIM*, and other media. He is a guest lecturer at Princeton University in High-tech Entrepreneurship and *The 4-Hour Workweek* (Crown) is his debut book on ideal lifestyle design. He speaks five languages, runs a multinational firm from wireless locations worldwide, and has been a world-record holder in tango, a national champion in Chinese kickboxing, and an actor on a hit television series in Hong Kong. He is twenty-nine years old.

For extensive case studies, sample autoresponders, and free chapters, visit www.fourhourworkweek.com and the Experiments in Lifestyle Design blog at www.fourhourworkweek.com/blog

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