

Get organised with Outlook

Empty your inbox

Don't use your inbox to store all your emails. Once you've opened an email, remember the golden rule: do it, dump it, or delegate it. Try to get into the habit of clearing your inbox at least once a day.

File 'em or dump 'em

The next step is to file your emails so that they are easy to find.

Select 'View', then 'Folder List' and right click on 'Personal Folders'. Then select 'New Folder'. Move emails to your new folders by dragging them with a mouse. At a very minimum create one folder to dump all your processed mail. You can create sophisticated nested folders for different topics.

Find emails fast

Click on 'Find' to bring up the search panel and search the folder you are looking at.

To find messages related to a given email, for example all the emails in a back-and-forth discussion, open a message and select 'Actions', then 'Find All', then 'Related Messages'.

Clicking on the column heads (such as From, Subject, Received) sorts all the mail in the folder and this can make it easier to find emails.

Get rid of Spam

Cloudmark's Spamnet program kills 80-90% of unwanted spam email. It works well because it is a collaborative effort between all its users. Best of all, it doesn't cost a penny. See www.cloudmark.com.

Reduce the amount of unwanted email by using the 'Out of Office' feature to tell people when you are away, and unsubscribe from email newsletters and distribution groups.

Get organised

Select 'Tools' then 'Organise' to bring up this helpful panel. You can use colours to highlight emails from important people or auto-file email into folders based on simple rules. For instance, you can file emails sent to a particular mailing list into a folder to read later. Use this trick to draw your attention to emails that need urgent attention (or those that don't).

Use the subject line

Giving every email a meaningful subject can help other people with their email filing. You can use acronyms such as EOM (End Of Message) to indicate that the subject line is the message. Other examples: NFA (No Further Action), RFP (Request For Proposals), or MSR (Monthly Status Report).

Manage your contacts

You can use Outlook contacts as an email address book so you can enter someone's name instead of entering their full email address. To do this, right click on the 'Contacts' icon in the shortcuts bar, select 'Properties' and then 'Outlook Address Book'.

Using 'Contacts' as email addresses means that it is much easier to remember people's email addresses and avoid mistyping them.

Create new contacts

Right click on an email address in an email message to add that person to your outlook contacts list or drag the email from the inbox into the 'Contacts' icon in the 'Outlook Shortcuts' panel. This makes building your contacts database much easier.

Don't forget important dates

When you put dates in the diary, remember to put the finishing time as well, so that you are clear about your time commitments. It also helps to book in time to get from one place to another or to prepare for meetings. You can also select 'Recurrence' in the diary item window and set up repeating events such as birthdays.

Be reminded

Outlook has lots of ways of entering dates. You can type a date in the usual way, click on the pop-up to get a calendar view or you can enter a date in words, such as 'the last Friday of the month', or 'one week from today', or 'second of Nov.'

Do your tasks

In the tasks view, you can use categories, priority (high, low or medium) and due dates to get yourself organised. If a task isn't ticked off before its deadline, it shows up in red which helps draw attention to it. The important thing is to review the list daily and make sure it reflects your real priorities.

View task master

Views are the most powerful feature of Outlook. Select 'Views' then 'Current View' to see tasks arranged in a timeline, see tasks due in the next seven days or filter out completed items. You can even create your own custom views by selecting 'Views', 'Current Views', 'Define Views'.

Use the notes section

Contacts, diary items and to-dos all have notes fields. You can use these to store directions, agendas or more detailed information.

You can take it with you

Taking a printout of your diary and task list can be very useful. By default, Outlook prints one day per page, but select 'File', 'Page Set-up', and 'Weekly Style' and you can print out a weeks worth.

There you go

Outlook is quite complex, but it rewards those who spend the time to learn it.