



# INFORMATION OVERLOAD AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT

Allison C. Shields, Legal Ease Consulting, Inc.

## Information Overload and How to Deal with It

In the modern world, information arrives mostly through electronic means, at all hours of the day and night, no matter where we are or what we are doing, leading to information overload.

### Focus and Filter

The key to battling information overload successfully is to first identify what is the most important information that you need to receive, and then develop filters that will help you to focus on that information and weed out the less important information.

### Give Up Multi-tasking

Our society has become one in which multi-tasking is seen as a good practice; people brag about being “good multi-taskers” and wear their attempts to accomplish many different things at once as a badge of honor. Many of those people think that they’re being productive or getting a lot done because they’re multi-tasking.

But multi-tasking contributes to information overload – how can you help but feel overwhelmed when information is coming at you from multiple sources at the same time? How can you possibly focus on what is important if you are trying to process an email while talking on the phone?

Multi-tasking wastes time, rather than saving it. Studies show that for over 97% of the population, there’s no such thing as multi-tasking. What you’re really doing is constantly switching back and forth between two or more tasks.

In his book *The Myth of Multi-tasking*, Dave Crenshaw calls this “switch-tasking.” Switch-tasking is less efficient and costs time; it takes extra time to shift mental gears every time you switch between the two tasks, resulting in less efficiency. As the complexity and the unfamiliarity of the tasks increases, so does the inefficiency.

The truth is that you can’t accomplish two things which require you to expend mental energy at once. You can only do one at a time.

If you’ve ever had the experience of not remembering what you were doing after you’ve been interrupted, you know that it takes more time to get things done when you try to multitask. In his book *Brain Rules*, John Medina contends that people who are interrupted – and therefore must switch their attention back and forth – take 50% longer to accomplish a task. Essentially, multi-tasking is nothing more than constantly interrupting the flow of work on one task to replace it with another, supporting the theory that what most people call multi-tasking is really switch-tasking.

What does this have to do with information overload? The more time you waste, the more overwhelmed you will feel and the more difficult it will be to focus on the most important tasks.

## Tips for Managing Email

Email may be one of the most difficult forms of communication to master. Hopefully, these tips will help.

### Manage Email Expectations

A frank conversation about when and under what circumstances communication by email is appropriate and when clients, colleagues or others should expect to receive responses to email messages can work wonders. If you don't want to respond to email messages at night, on weekends, or while you are on vacation, make sure you explain that up front – and then stick to your own rules and don't respond during off-hours!

You can set up an out of office email message that will automatically respond to those who email you during off-hours, letting them know that their message was received and when they can expect a response.

### Schedule time for email

Don't allow email to become a distraction and kill your productivity. Turn off email notification sounds and pop-ups. Don't create more work for yourself and risk losing important client messages by going through the same email messages multiple times. Don't read emails first thing in the morning. For most lawyers, urgent messages don't arrive via email overnight or first thing in the morning.

Schedule a specific time to blast through email after you've already tackled your most important task of the day, and then at other strategic times throughout the day. Be sure to leave sufficient time to review and respond immediately to email messages whenever possible.

If you are waiting for something particularly urgent, or you tend to send urgent emails before you arrive at the office, limit yourself to a quick scan of your inbox to ensure no urgent messages have arrived and then move on to another task and leave the rest for your designated email time.

### Manage your inbox

Don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed by your email inbox, but give yourself a break. Don't add extra stress by thinking you need to get to "inbox zero;" it may sound good, for most, it's unrealistic. It's more important to ensure that you manage your inbox so that the most important messages are read and acted upon in a timely manner.

## Delete

Junk messages, coupons, advertisements, list-serve messages and messages about upcoming events or programs should be deleted immediately if you are not ready to act on them now; new ones are sure to arrive in your inbox tomorrow.

To eliminate these time-wasters in the future, remove yourself from one email list per day until you're only on lists that you actively participate in or routinely derive valuable information from. If you find that you miss being on a list you've deleted, you can always re-subscribe.

## Delegate

If the email requires action by someone else, forward it to that person right away with a note. Then eliminate the original email from your inbox by deleting it, moving it to an alternate folder, or converting it to a task for follow up.

## Respond immediately

Don't waste the time you've set aside to deal with email by just reviewing messages and thinking you'll go back and respond to them later. It just creates extra work, and may result in important client messages getting lost. If you're going to review your emails, respond when you first read the message if possible.

## Saving Email messages - where, why and how

E-mail was meant to be created and stored on a computer. There is no reason to print email messages and save hard copies. If you need to save the message, save it electronically.

Save e-mail messages as you would other correspondence – in the corresponding electronic folder, rather than in your inbox, where it may be difficult to locate later. You can create folders for reference, for individual projects, etc., or you can use add-ins such as OneNote or Evernote to save messages that contain information you want to keep track of in other ways.

If necessary, convert email messages or entire folders to PDF. Adobe Acrobat Standard or Professional will create a PDF Portfolio containing a group of email messages or even entire Outlook folders, complete with all attachments. Once these items are compiled and moved to the client's folder, they can be removed from your email program.

You may also wish to establish folders within your email program to keep track of e-mail correspondence outside of your regular Inbox using folders. You can also create rules so that email messages are automatically routed to the correct folders. (See Outlook Tips below for more on how to use Outlook Rules)

For example, you may wish to create separate folders within your email inbox for list-serve emails, newsletters, email pertaining to bar association committee business, etc. This will help reduce clutter in your main Inbox.

## Beware Reply All

Have you ever received a group email which was then followed by a seemingly endless parade of responses because recipients insisted on using Reply All instead of simply Reply? And it's even more irritating when those responses don't concern you. Don't be that person.

Before you hit Reply All, think hard about whether everyone on the original list needs to receive your reply. If you want to send a group email, you might consider eliminating the option for recipients to choose Reply All as an option.

## When Email Isn't the Right Tool for the Job

Know when email is not the appropriate medium for your communication. E-mail is fast and easy, but it isn't always appropriate. Sometimes picking up the phone or walking down the hall to see a colleague is a much more efficient way to accomplish a task or to get the answer you need than ending up in an endless back-and-forth exchange of email messages.

Email is best used to communicate facts. It can be particularly ineffective for sensitive topics, when emotions are involved, or when inflection or tone is important. In those instances, a phone call or in-person discussion is probably more appropriate.

Think twice before using email as a method for scheduling meetings, especially those with several attendees, as it generates an unproductive string of messages. Instead, use a tool created specifically for that purpose, such as [Doodle](#).

## Separate tasks from emails

If an email represents a task that you need to complete, move it out of your inbox and into your tasks folder, or add it to a to-do list or action folder. In Outlook, you can drag and drop an email message directly to your Tasks folder, and then eliminate the original message. You can also use third-party tools that help you manage emails as tasks, such as [Toodledo](#) or [Remember The Milk](#).

## Move appointments to your calendar

If an email represents a deadline or appointment reminder, don't keep it in your inbox – put it where appointments and deadlines belong – on your calendar. And then delete the email. (In Outlook, just drag and drop the message to your calendar and all the information in the email will stay with the appointment.)

## Email Power Tips

### Separating Business and Personal Email

Don't clutter your regular email inbox with newsletters and subscriptions. Create a separate account for them on a service such as Gmail so they're not in the way of your most important messages in your Inbox. Make a separate shopping account for email for online shopping so that sales promotions and shipping confirmations

stay out of your business inbox. Tell family and friends not to use your business email account for personal messages, jokes, or other non-business purposes.

### Auto Sorting

One of the newer methods of managing email is by deferring it. Several email apps and email services offer the option to defer email for a set period of time. You could, for instance, defer an email until tomorrow or Monday and then the email will disappear until the designated time.

### Send Effective Email Messages to Get Effective Responses

One of the best ways to manage your email Inbox is to compose better emails; good email messages beget better responses. Write in full sentences, in a professional tone, using correct spelling, grammar and punctuation to give the best impression possible.

**KISS - Keep it Short and Simple:** If you send a lengthy email, expect a lengthy response. But if you're brief, those who respond to you are more likely to be brief in response.

**Request a specific response or action:** Give email recipients good instructions and tell them what you need or expect in return. Ask pointed questions. If there is no response required, say so.

**Stick to the Subject (Line):** The subject line of your email plays an important role in ensuring your message is opened, read and responded to. Make sure the subject line doesn't waste words and that it accurately reflects the content of your email.

If an email conversation veers off-course, or the subject changes mid-stream, edit the subject line to reflect the new content of your email. This also makes email messages easier to find later.

Stick to one subject per email message whenever possible. If you must include more than one item or subject in your message, indicate that in the subject line, separate them (or number them) within the message, and request a specific response to each item.

**Use an Email Signature:** Ever had to search a sender's contact information – or worse, wasted time trying to figure out their full name – because their email message didn't include an email signature or their email address did not include their full name? Creating an email signature is a quick and easy way to make sure your email message recipients know who you are and how to contact you. You may wish to use a different email signature for different recipients.

## Outlook Tips

### Use the Reading Pane

Reading emails by clicking on one message after another to open and read them is very slow. Using the Reading Pane makes it much easier and quicker. With the Reading Pane enabled, you can see and read the content of email messages without having to open each message. The Reading Pane seems most effective on the right, rather than on the bottom of the screen.

To find the Reading Pane, go to the View tab, click on Reading Pane in the Layout group and choose Right to display the Reading Pane on the right side of your screen.

Because you can view messages without opening each one, you can also set Outlook to mark messages as read either when you view or after you view them for a specific amount of time by clicking on File-Options-Advanced, and clicking the Reading Pane button under Outlook Panes.

### Flag effectively

Outlook lets you 'flag' email messages so that you can easily find messages that require special attention. By default, flagging an email turns the flag to the right of the message red and also creates a 'to do' of that message for today's date, which will appear in Outlook's To Do bar. But if you receive many emails or have many To Dos already, using the default email flag may not be enough to ensure that message gets the attention it needs.

You can change the due date for a flagged message by right-clicking the flag button on the message, which will display a list of possible due dates, or you can choose Custom to set a specific date. You can also double-click the item to reopen it and choose a different due date. But a due date alone may not be enough. In that case, you may decide you want to add a reminder to the flagged message, just like reminders you get for calendar appointments.

To add a reminder, right click the flag and choose Add Reminder. A popup will display options, including start and due dates, as well as the date and time you want to be reminded.

Once you've attended to your flagged message, click the flag again to replace the flag with a check mark to show the item has been completed.

### Use Rules

Outlook uses Rules to automate common tasks. You can create Rules in Outlook to do things like move messages from particular senders or with specific subjects to specific folders within Outlook, or to automatically flag certain emails for follow up. Creating rules is easy. In Outlook 2016, click on File-Rules and Alerts and then New Rule to create a new Rule and follow the prompts in the rules wizard.

You can also create a Rule directly from a message. This is helpful when you're reading a message and you realize that you would like to create a rule that applies to all messages with a particular subject line, or to all messages from a particular sender.

For example, you may want to create a folder for all messages that come from your bar association list-serve or from a particular individual, and to have all of those messages automatically sort into those folders when they arrive in your inbox. To do so, simply right-click the message you want to base the rule upon, and click Create Rule in the Ribbon under the Home tab.

### Color Coding Email in Outlook

Color coding incoming messages is one way to easily see when a message from an important client has arrived in your inbox. In Mail in Outlook 2013, click the View tab and then click View Settings, then Conditional Formatting. Here, you can change the color that Unread emails appear in your Inbox (the default is blue), or change the font and color of emails in your Inbox. You can also click Add to create your own rules for different kinds of emails.

For example, if you want emails from specific clients to appear in a different color in your inbox so you can find them easily, create the rule, choose the font and color for the message and then click Conditions to set the conditions for the rule (by choosing the client's name or email address in the "from" field), similar to the way you would set up Rules and Alerts in Outlook.

### Creating and Using Outlook Quick Steps

Some email management tasks are performed repetitively in Outlook, but are not appropriate for Rules, because they cannot be automated; they require you to make a decision about what to do with the email. In those instances, Quick Steps may be the answer.

Quick Steps are one-click actions to help you manage your Inbox. Quick Steps can help you move items to folders, reply and delete, or perform other actions with your email messages in just one click. Some Quick Steps are pre-loaded into Outlook, but you can create your own Quick Steps as well.

Quick Steps are located under the Home tab toward the middle of the Ribbon. Click on Create New to develop your own. Once your Quick Step is created, it will be much easier to act on your email messages. For example, if I want to copy an email message from my Inbox to my Action folder (a subfolder I created within Outlook), rather than clicking on Move, then Copy to Folder and then choosing my Action folder, I can simply click on my Action Quick Step.

### Using Quick Parts to Insert Blocks of Text

Do you find yourself repeating the same information over and over in email messages to different people? Don't keep reinventing the wheel – use Outlook's Quick Parts (not to be confused with Quick Steps)!

Lawyers who need to insert large blocks of text into an email message – for example, directions to their office, a list of documents clients should bring to their first appointment, or answers to frequently asked questions – can do so easily using Quick Parts in Outlook.

First, type the text once into a new email message, then select the text and click the Quick Parts icon on the Insert ribbon tab and save it to the Quick Part Gallery so it is available for use again in the future. When you want to insert that block of text again, click on Quick Parts and choose the appropriate Quick Part to insert.

### Use the Send From Command

In the File menu of most Windows-based programs, you will find Send From or Share command, which enables you to send the item you are working on to another person through your default email program without exiting the program you're working in and then going into your email program.

For example, if you're working on a Word document and want to send it to a colleague for their comments, rather than closing the Word document, opening Outlook 2016, clicking on Attach File and searching for the Word document, all you need to do is click File from within the Word document, then click Share, and choose Email. Then click the option you want (send as attachment, send a link, send as PDF). This should open an email window and automatically insert the Word document as an attachment. All you need to do is customize the email message and hit send.

# Allison C. Shields



## Contact Information:

[Allison@LegalEaseConsulting.com](mailto:Allison@LegalEaseConsulting.com)

Phone: 631-642-0221

[www.LawyerMeltdown.com](http://www.LawyerMeltdown.com)

[www.LegalEaseConsulting.com](http://www.LegalEaseConsulting.com) (blog)

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CONSULTING INC

**Allison C. Shields, Esq.**, President of Legal Ease Consulting, Inc., provides productivity, practice management, marketing, business development, copywriting and social media coaching and consulting services for lawyers and law firms.

After leaving her position as Administrative Partner at Lewis Johs Avallone Aviles, LLP in 2005, Allison started Legal Ease Consulting, Inc. to help lawyers build better law practices. A former practicing lawyer and law firm manager, Allison understands the law firm environment and the daily pressures faced by lawyers trying to manage and build their business while practicing law and successfully serving their clients.

Allison helps her clients create efficient, effective systems and operations to maximize productivity. Her clients learn how to identify and attract their ideal clients, improve their client intake and selection, increase client loyalty, develop client-friendly fee structures, and increase profits. Recognizing that lawyers must capture attention and demonstrate their expertise online, Allison provides online marketing and social media services and training for lawyers to help them maximize these important opportunities.

Allison is the author of the Legal Ease Blog at [www.LegalEaseConsulting.com](http://www.LegalEaseConsulting.com), and writes the *Simple Steps* column for *Law Practice Magazine*. She has written regularly for the ABA Legal Technology Resource Center (LTRC) blog, [Law Technology Today](#), for the Canadian blog, [Slaw](#), and for [Lawyerist](#). Allison's most recent book, written with Daniel J. Siegel, is [How to Do More in Less Time: The Complete Guide to Increasing Your Productivity and Improving Your Bottom Line](#). She is also the co-author, with Dennis Kennedy, of the books, [LinkedIn in One Hour for Lawyers](#) (now in its second edition) and [Facebook in One Hour for Lawyers](#), all published by the American Bar Association's Law Practice Division.

Allison serves on the Council of the American Bar Association's Law Practice Division and is the Chair of the Division's Book Publishing Board. She also serves on the Board of the LTRC and has been a member of the editorial boards of both *Law Practice Magazine* and *Law Practice Today*. She is the former Executive Director of the Suffolk Academy of Law, the educational arm of the Suffolk County Bar Association, served as Associate Dean of the Academy, and is a past member of the Board of Directors of the Suffolk County Bar Association.

Allison lectures on marketing, social media, business development, productivity and practice management for law firms, bar associations, law schools and other legal associations, and has been a presenter at the ABA TECHSHOW, the leading legal technology conference and expo. Her website, [Lawyer Meltdown](#), provides resources and information for lawyers about managing and building their practices.