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Your Inbox is Killing Your Productivity, Focus and Time: Getting to an Empty Inbox Everyday

Keith W. Krieger

Johnson County Community College, kkrieger@jccc.edu

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Getting to Zero: Strategies for Emptying the Inbox

Keith Krieger, Technical Training Coordinator, Johnson County Community College
kkrieger@jccc.edu

Outlook's Inbox is

- Not a to-do list
- Not a filing system
- Not a calendar
- Not a bookmark list
- Not an address book

4 strategies to deal with every message in the inbox

- Delete
- Do (if the task in the email can be completed in 2 minutes or less)
- Defer (convert the email to an Outlook Task)
- Delegate (convert the email to an Outlook Task and Assign the Task)

An overflowing inbox causes problems

- Which message is important? The inbox cannot prioritize by importance.
- The inbox is cumbersome to filter by task type, importance, start date, or due date.
- Searching and sorting takes longer when the inbox is full.
- We can have problems remembering which message contains a specific task.
 - This requires us to re-open messages to find what we have lost.
- Did I forget an important message?
- An inbox full of tasks is a constant reminder of how far we are from being done.

Having an empty inbox can trigger two responses

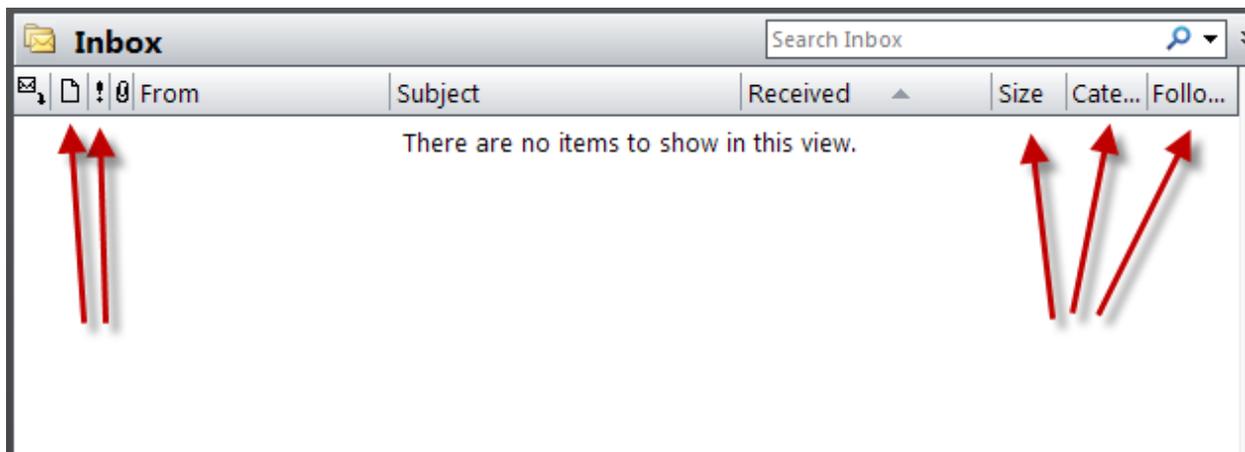
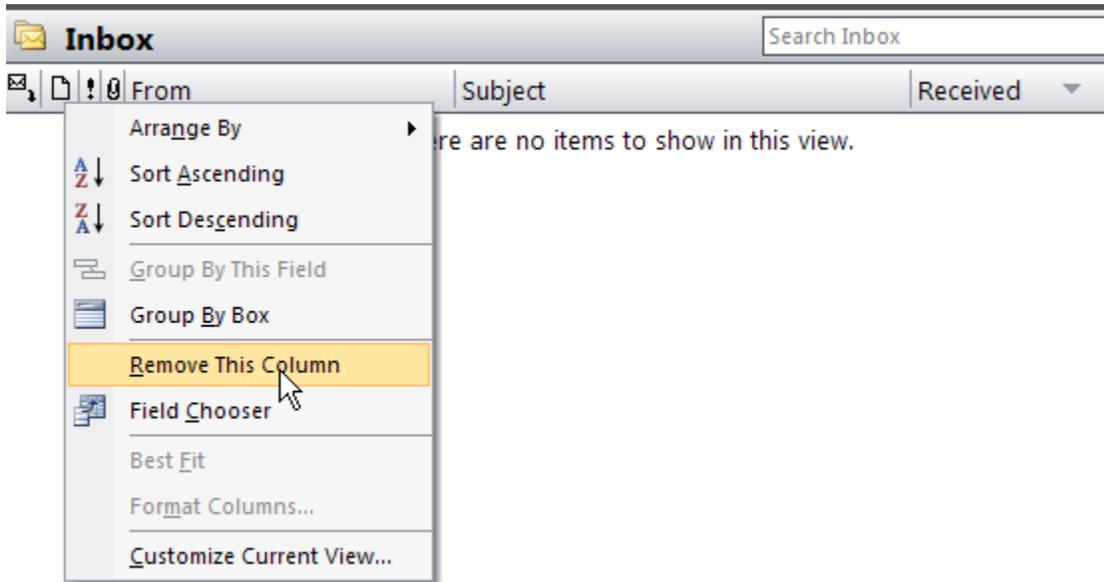
- I am not important, because I do not have any messages.
- Converting email to specific tasks means real work is necessary.

If an overloaded inbox is the problem

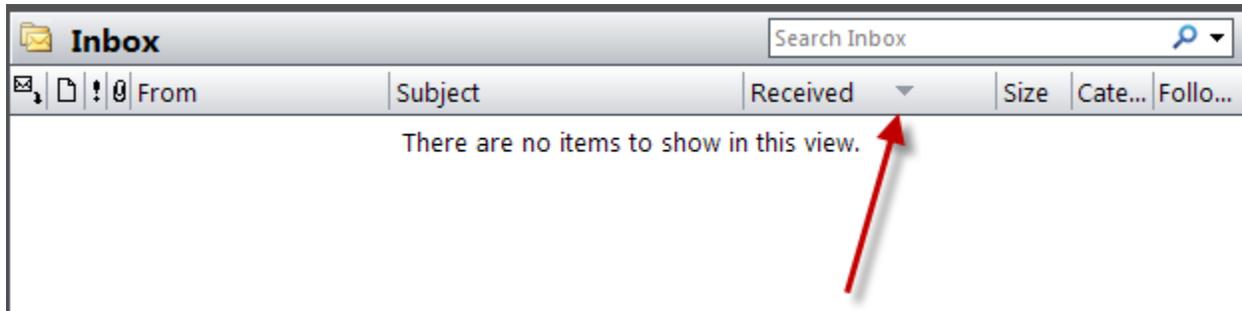
- Remove the overload.
- Get to zero messages in the inbox. Not 5 messages, not 10, not 15, but zero.

First step: eliminate unnecessary columns from the inbox

- Remove columns, specifically importance icons, message size, categories, colors, and flags.
 - We want to focus on an individual message, one at a time.
 - Removing unnecessary information allows us to focus.
 - Right click those items, and then choose Remove This Column.

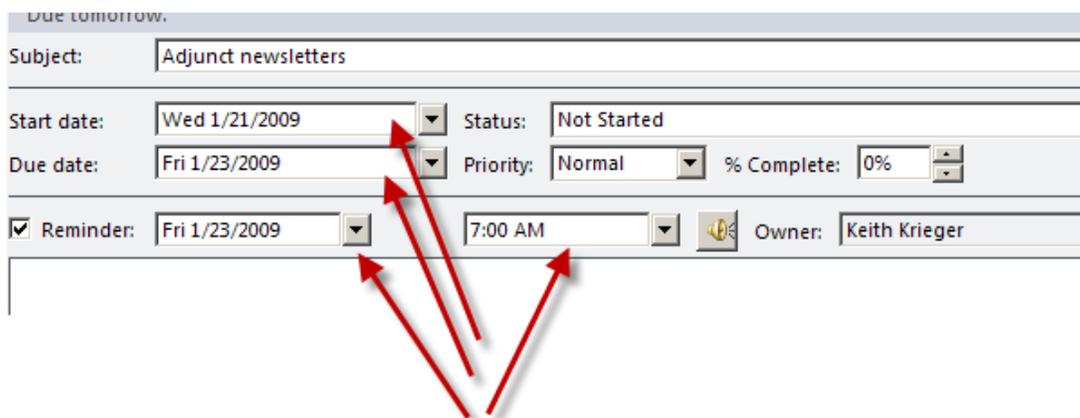


- Focus on each message by turning off all previews
 - Choose View>Reading Pane>Off, and View>AutoPreview.
 - Previews allow us to procrastinate and put off dealing with the message content.
- Sort the inbox by received date, ascending.
 - Click the Received button to change the sorting, or
 - Right-click the Received button, and choose Sort Ascending.
 - Focusing on the oldest message first helps avoid working only on newly arrived items.



Process messages

- 1) Read personal messages first, and then delete them.
- 2) Delete spam.
- 3) Delete or move the FYIs and CCs messages to a folder. Reading those messages is optional.
- 4) Execute the 2-minute Do messages, then delete or file the message.
 - a) By replying to the sender that the task is complete, we can delete the message.
- 5) Move big tasks to Outlook's Task list.
 - a) Open the message, scan for information, and then close the message.
 - b) Drag the message to the Task button or Calendar button.
 - c) Set a start date, a due date, and a reminder date and time.



- d) After creating the task, **delete** the message from the inbox.

- 6) Delegate the task to someone else
 - a) The process is the same as creating a task, except we assign the task to someone else.
 - b) Click the Assign Task button
 - i) Add the person receiving the task assignment
 - ii) Show recipient how to update progress.

Newsletter strategy

- Read quickly, keep for reference, and then delete.
- Alternatively, copy and paste relevant content to a document outside of Outlook.
- Do not save the newsletter to read later. We typically never get around to reading them.

3 ways to move towards an empty inbox

- Difficult approach
 - Working from the oldest message, apply Delete, Do, Defer, or Delegate.
 - Apply this to all messages in the inbox.
- Moderately difficult approach
 - Set a recurring, daily task to process a set number of the oldest messages daily.
 - This approach takes longer, but is more manageable.
- Easy approach
 - Select everything in the inbox, and delete them.

Change the focus

- Reveal Outlook Today to focus on tasks and appointments.
 - Choose View>Toolbars>Advanced.
 - Outlook Today is the first button on the left.
 - You can set Outlook Today to start when Outlook starts.
- For the task list, change the view to show start dates and due dates of the current date **only**.
- The shorter the task list, the more likely we are to finish.

Further Reading

Hurst, M. (2007). *Bit Literacy*. New York: Good Experience Press.