

Managing Incoming E-mail

What Every User Needs to Know

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1. Introduction

E-mail overload is a problem that affects nearly everyone with an e-mail account. Business Week recently estimated that corporate e-mail users receive an average of 20 to 30 incoming e-mails a day, and that e-mail volume may grow by as much as 80% in the next year.¹ Much of that increase will come from unsolicited promotional e-mail, or “spam,” which has doubled in volume in the last six months and could *triple* in the next year. The trend shows no signs of slowing down; increases in all incoming e-mail will likely continue year after year, creating an ever more urgent problem for e-mail users and corporations worldwide.

Incoming e-mail, if not managed properly, can become a significant drain on productivity. As users become distracted by messages piling up, they are more likely to lose track of important messages and fall further behind in their work. An inbox full of dozens or hundreds of messages renders the user increasingly ineffective in other areas of work, spending more and more time simply “putting out fires” caused by the bulging inbox. The more e-mail piles up, the less useful it is to users or their companies. In other words, the only way to enjoy e-mail’s benefits is to manage it properly.

This report describes a simple method that will allow any user to cope with increasing amounts of incoming e-mail.

¹ “Special Report: The E-mail Monster,” Business Week, March 1, 2002.

2. Why Users Matter

It may be controversial, but this report boldly asserts that users can and should be ultimately responsible for managing their own e-mail. To be sure, software is a necessary part of any e-mail management strategy, but in the end, users must take action. Already, some pundits have claimed that e-mail overload is a problem too big for users. Venture capitalist Bill Gurley suggests that training users is a losing proposition, saying that companies can “educate employees with regards to proper e-mail user behavior, [but] this is like telling someone that learning to swim will be helpful in the event of a tsunami.”² In May 2003, Saul Hansell wrote reported on “a wide range of proposals for taming spam... some involve technological innovation or legislation; many involve both.”³

This report is more confident in users, even in the face of increasing e-mail. The method described herein relies exclusively on users to take the appropriate actions. Corporate information technology (IT) departments should and must use software to defend against spam, bloated inboxes, viruses, and other challenges. But even with IT’s efforts, users *must* take a role.

Many companies seem to have pinned their hopes completely on software-based solutions. Companies like Brightmail, for example, sell server-based applications to help weed out spam before it arrives in users’ inboxes. Meanwhile, Microsoft Outlook and Lotus Notes offer features for servers and users alike to help categorize, filter, and file incoming messages. While incrementally useful, these tools will never fully address the problem of e-mail overload, for two reasons:

- Automated filters will never catch all of the spam, since spammers will continue to modify their text to evade the filters.
- Apart from spam, *legitimate* e-mails will continue to increase in volume, as e-mail

² “It’s Time to Put a Stop to Spam,” by Bill Gurley. Above the Crowd newsletter, April 3, 2002.

³ “How to Unclog the Information Artery,” by Saul Hansell. New York Times, May 25, 2003.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/25/business/yourmoney/25SPAM.html>

becomes a primary method of communicating within business and personal relationships. These e-mails will demand ever more attention from users. Even a perfect spam filter would still leave plenty of e-mails for the user to manage.

Of course, software does help and needs to be used. (Indeed, if e-mail software programs like Microsoft Outlook were better designed, software would be even more effective in solving e-mail overload.) But in the end, no strategy will work unless it includes users, relying on them to take responsibility for their own e-mail. Solving e-mail overload is essentially about understanding the user's information needs, and nothing can do that as well as the user.

3. The Method, Briefly

There is a simple solution to e-mail overload: don't become overloaded. This isn't meant to be trite. Many users complain about facing too many e-mails but never engage the obvious conclusion. If overload is the problem, then removing the load is the solution.

E-mail load is usually measured, inaccurately, in terms of message volume. Whenever people complain that they get 50 or 100 messages a day, they're talking about their volume — the number of daily incoming messages. But volume isn't an appropriate measurement of load, since it says nothing about how many other messages are still awaiting the user's attention.

The correct way to measure e-mail load is by the *message count*, or the number of e-mails currently sitting in the inbox. While message volume shows how much more e-mail users have to manage than yesterday, message count shows the *total* number of e-mails that are currently loading the user. A user who gets 100 messages a day may not be overloaded at all, if their message count is low; conversely, a user who gets ten e-mails a day may indeed be overloaded.

Therefore, message count is the best way to measure a user's performance in managing his or her incoming e-mail. To explain this point another way, let's turn to a somewhat unusual example.

In the 1980s video game Tapper, the player controls a bartender who must serve thirsty patrons as they advance the length of four bars. At any moment in the game, the player's status can be determined by the number of customers who, by not receiving service, are nearing the edge of a bar and threatening to end the bartender's "life":⁴

⁴ Screenshot from c64gg.com. Tapper was a truly classic video game.



Moment to moment, the bartender's survival has nothing to do with how many customers have entered the bar in the *past*. Instead, it only matters how many customers are *currently* distracting him with their demands for attention.

Likewise, e-mail management comes down to the number of current distractions — that is, messages — sitting in the inbox. The user's goal, just as in Tapper, is to dispense with those distractions quickly and efficiently so that the current load — that is, message count — never becomes too much to bear.

Remember the statement from the beginning of this section: *If overload is the problem, then removing the load is the solution.* This has little bearing on e-mail volume. For the most part, users can't control how much e-mail other people (or companies or spammers) send them, so there's no way to remove that load. However, the solution is abundantly possible in terms of message count. Once an e-mail lands in the inbox, the user has absolute control over how long it stays, and where it goes when it leaves.⁵ This brings us to one simple rule for solving the problem of e-mail management.

Here is how to manage incoming e-mail:

Keep the inbox empty.

⁵ Some corporate IT departments enforce a policy of deleting employees' inbox e-mails after a certain amount of time.

In other words, clear out incoming e-mails before they pile up too high in the inbox. Delete most of them, file some of them (in mail folders or elsewhere), but most importantly, get them *all* out of the inbox before they really begin to pile up. *Keep the inbox empty.*

It may be a simple solution, but it's not easy. Achieving simplicity — or emptiness, in this case — takes time, practice, and continual improvement. It's difficult but better than the alternative: drowning in e-mails, causing the user to become less and less effective. Only an empty inbox will allow users to take full advantage of the benefits of e-mail.

4. The Empty Inbox

Why an empty inbox? Some users survive for years without ever seeing a message count of zero. One user admitted to having over 2,000 e-mails in his inbox and seemed to feel fine.⁶ He's the exception, though; most users with a message count in the hundreds do *not* feel fine about their e-mail.

Consider the problems caused by inbox with dozens, or hundreds, of messages:

- It's easy to forget critical action items, since they're buried under so many other messages. At best, important e-mails will require reminders (thereby decreasing organizational efficiency); at worst, they will go undone (thereby negating any benefit of e-mail for that action item).
- It takes longer, on average, to reply to an incoming e-mail, since so many other messages are in the inbox awaiting replies already.
- It takes longer to find a specific message. Sorting may not help much, since (for example) a sort by sender may show tens of messages sent by the same person, all sitting in the inbox.
- A full inbox is stressful to look at, filled with weeks or months of old work to accomplish, messages to reply to (including an apology for being so late), and irrelevant messages to weed out.
- Especially large inboxes are more likely to crash, losing all contents.

The fewer e-mails in the inbox, the less these problems ever occur. An empty inbox, in fact, solves nearly all of them. Users are more likely to reply, or finish an action item, when there are fewer e-mails distracting them; empty inboxes *never* cause an e-mail program to crash; and best of all, an empty inbox is a delight to look at, reminding users that they're fully caught up in this important area of work.

⁶ "You've Got Maelstrom," New York Times, July 5, 2001.

The Misused Inbox

Given the obvious benefits of an empty inbox, why do so many users allow their inboxes to fill up? A primary reason is that it's easier in the short-term to let the messages pile up. As messages stream in, it's easier to ignore them than to take the time right then to clean them out. Then, past a certain point, it becomes nearly irrelevant for users to attend to (and delete) any new e-mails, since there are several hundred older messages still awaiting attention. The inbox is a "slippery slope": the more messages the inbox contains, the easier it is to let it grow.

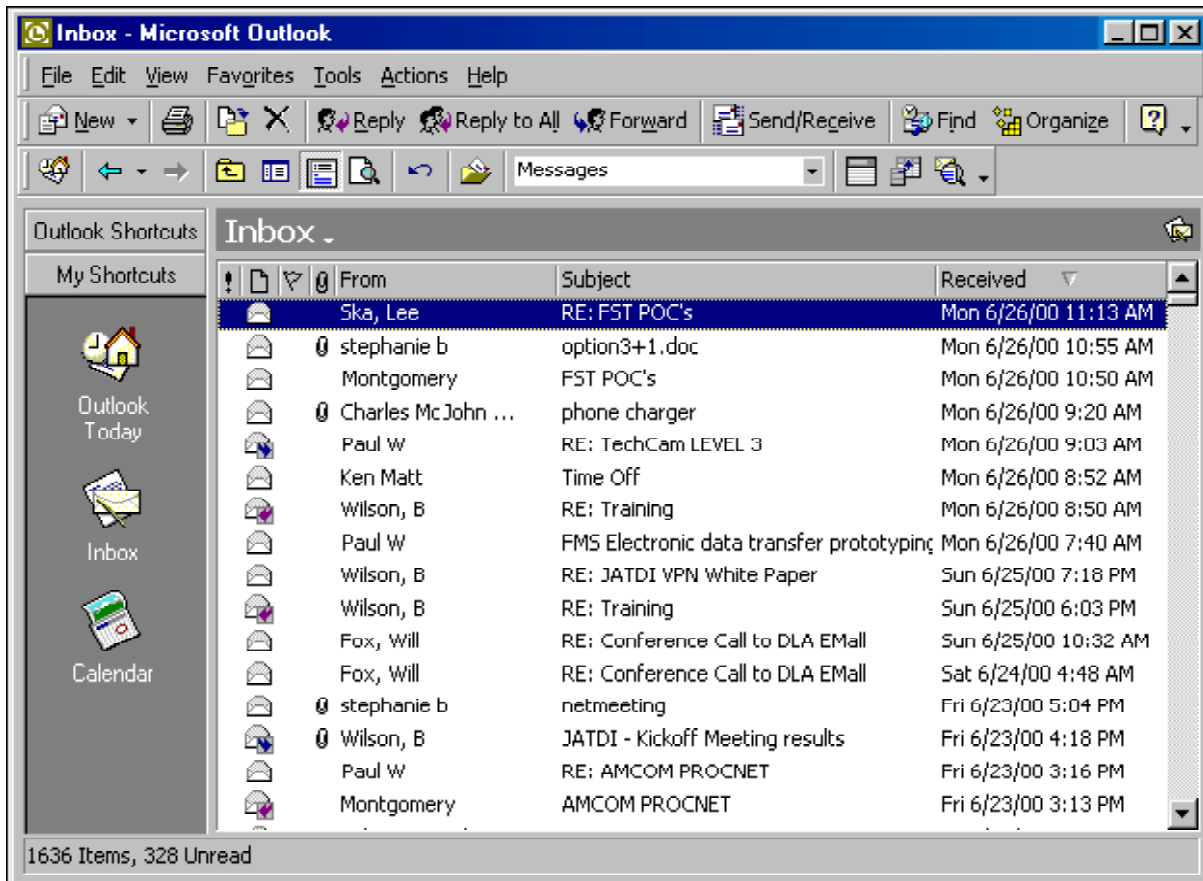
There's another reason for full inboxes, less obvious but equally pertinent. People often use the inbox for several purposes it was never intended for:

- *To-do list.* Users often keep action items and other "to-dos" in the inbox. This is perhaps the most common misuse.
- *Filing system.* Meeting notes, project status messages, attachments containing proposals and other important documents stay in the inbox, instead of going to a proper project folder.
- *Calendar.* Dates and times for meetings, conference calls, or other events pile up in the inbox.
- *Bookmarks list.* E-mails are kept that contain pointers to websites and other applications. Usernames and passwords may be in these messages as well.
- *Address book.* Messages containing phone numbers and postal addresses of contacts may stay in the inbox instead of being entered into an actual address book.

It's a mistake to rely on the inbox for these functions. An enterprising programmer may provide us someday with an inbox that *does* perform these tasks, but for now, the inboxes most people use (in Outlook, Eudora, and Lotus Notes) are simply not appropriate for those uses. A key to any information management is to use the right tool for each piece of information — a to-do list for to-dos, a calendar to store appointments, and so on — and users should use the applications *outside* the inbox to handle each function appropriately. One might correctly argue that Microsoft Outlook's calendar, todo list, and address book are inadequate tools. As bad as they are, they're still better than relying on the inbox.

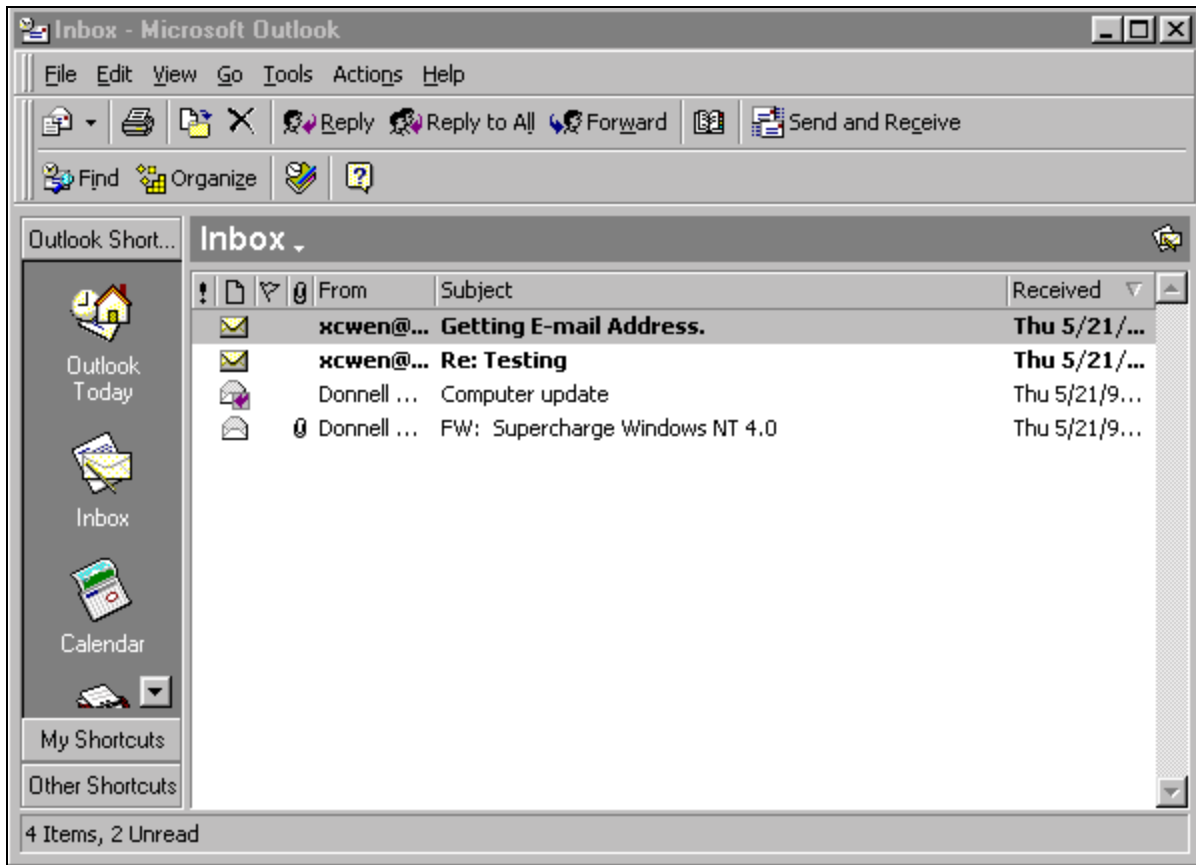
Until the software industry creates better e-mail tools, it's important to use the inbox for its only appropriate purpose: storing e-mails *temporarily* before they are read, possibly filed, and (always) deleted.

What's wrong with this inbox?



In the bottom-left corner, Outlook reveals the user's embarrassing count: 1,636 messages in the inbox, including over 300 *unread* messages.

Now consider this inbox:



What's different here? The count. There are only four messages in the inbox, and only two are unread. This user is not overloaded with e-mail and with a minimum of effort could bring the inbox to a count of zero.

Note that we've evaluated the e-mail management of both users, and in neither case do we know how many e-mails the user gets each day. The *count*, not the volume, is the important measurement.

What's most important, though, is knowing *how* to get to an empty inbox.

How to empty an inbox

Perform these three steps to empty any e-mail inbox.

Step 1: Delete all the spam. (Users should set up mail filters to automatically delete

some of the more frequent spam messages, but they'll always have to delete some spam by hand.) The next section, *How to Delete Spam*, explains this step in detail.

Step 2: Read any personal mail from friends or family, then do whatever you want with it — print or save it somewhere else on the computer — after which you *must* delete those messages from the inbox. (Corporate users may have to skip this step if they're not allowed to receive personal e-mail at work.)

With the first two steps completed, the remaining messages in the inbox are somewhere between too irrelevant to read (spam) and too relevant to *delay* reading (personal mail).

In preparation for Step 3, make sure that the inbox messages are sorted by date, with the *oldest* message on the top of the list.

Step 3: Open each message, from top to bottom of the inbox, *engage* it — that is, take some action — then delete it from the inbox. When this step is done, the inbox will be empty.

Step 3 in detail: *How to engage an e-mail*

The specific action for engaging an e-mail depends on the type of e-mail. At this point, remember, spams and personal mails are already gone from the inbox. The three remaining types of e-mails are newsletters, FYIs, and to-dos.

- *Newsletters:* Read (or scan) newsletters quickly, depending on how much time is available, then delete. If you have very little time and lots of other e-mails to engage, then quickly scan the headlines and delete the newsletter. If you have more time, feel free to read more of the newsletter. But whatever you do, don't save or file the newsletter, since when the next issue arrives there will be *two* issues waiting for attention. (By the way, this assumes that you already prune your newsletter "diet" to minimize any unnecessary subscribed e-mails.)

- *FYIs:* These are non-actionable pieces of information: for example, an answer to a question, or a notification of an event. An FYI might also be a BCC of your own outgoing message to someone else. Whatever it is, read the FYI, file it if necessary, then delete it. Note that filing may involve scheduling an activity, like a meeting or

appointment, on the calendar. In any case, the FYI must be deleted afterward.

- *To-dos*: Use the “two-minute rule” for to-dos: if it takes two minutes or less to complete, do it immediately (even if it means physically getting up from your chair), and then delete the e-mail. If the to-do would require more than two minutes of your time, add it to your to-do list (which must exist outside the inbox), then delete it.

Note that *you must delete each e-mail after you engage it*. You might file or save an e-mail elsewhere before deleting, but no e-mail may remain in the inbox. Remember: the inbox is only for accepting incoming e-mail, not for storing it.

E-mails, no matter what kind or how important, are only allowed to stay temporarily in the inbox.

Emptying the inbox for the first time

Many readers of this report will no doubt have some difficulty following these suggestions, given the current state of their inboxes. Cleaning out a few spam mails is easy enough, but what if there are already hundreds of FYIs and action items in the inbox, having sat there for months?

The only solution is a total cleanout of the inbox, allowing the user start afresh with a message count of zero. This first-time emptying can be an intimidating task, especially for users with years of old messages moldering away. But it’s the only solution that gets users “on track” for the method described above. A more gradual approach may seem more attractive (“I’ll just clean it out a little bit each day, and soon it will be empty”), but it’s unlikely to work for users who have grown accustomed to a high message count.

As harsh as the “cold turkey” approach may sound, the first-time emptying of an inbox is well within the reach of any user. After all, the method doesn’t ask users to *do* all the work in the inbox; rather, it simply asks that they get the information where it belongs: to-dos on the to-do list, meetings on the calendar, and so on. An inbox with hundreds of messages can be cleaned out in this way in an hour or two of focused work; thereafter, the inbox can be cleaned daily with a few minutes’ work.

How often to empty

As e-mails arrive in a steady stream throughout the day, it's impossible to keep the inbox empty at all times. It's up to the user to decide how often to clear out the inbox. There are two main choices:

- *As e-mails arrive.* As soon as a batch of new e-mails arrives, engage and delete the new messages, thereby bringing the inbox back to a count of zero. It therefore never takes more than a few minutes to empty the inbox; however, this approach may distract users from tasks that may need sustained, concentrated effort.
- *Once or twice a day.* Users may choose not to empty the inbox, or even check e-mail at all, except at certain times of the day. This guards against spending too much time “glued to the screen” and helps ensure that users will spend their limited time in e-mail efficiently. If users opt for emptying the inbox once a day, close-of-business or bedtime are good times to do it. Starting off one's day with an empty inbox can be a unique stress reliever.

Users really should not let an inbox go more than one business day without emptying. Allowing new e-mails to pile onto old e-mails overnight yields an especially demoralizing sight in the morning: an inbox filled with new work *and* yesterday's unfinished work.

Users who are away from their e-mail for several days (on a business trip, for example) may find it especially difficult to keep the inbox empty — even if they can access e-mail from the road. Meetings or conferences during the day leave very little free time to manage e-mail. There is no easy answer for this, except perhaps that the user must try especially hard to manage the inbox, even when time is short.

But remember: Cleaning the inbox doesn't have to mean *doing* all the work in its messages — just filing them properly. The inbox is only for temporary storage of e-mails waiting to be put in the right place.

At any rate, users should commit to emptying the inbox at *some* frequency. Since messages never stop coming in, the user must never stop in the pursuit of an empty inbox. The only alternatives are to hold the inbox steady at a certain count — in which case the user might as well hold it steady at zero — or to let the inbox grow and grow, until it eventually crashes the e-mail program, losing the entire inbox in the process. At least then the inbox will be empty.

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Now, back to the report.

5. How to Delete Spam

I receive about 150 spam e-mails a day. At night, between the time I leave the office and when I arrive in the morning, I'll get around 100 new messages, almost all of them spam. This is at least double the amount of spam that I was getting a year ago. By next year, 2004, I may be getting 300 spams daily. But I'm not worried.

Spam is not a problem.

I spend less than two minutes per day dealing with my incoming spam, which is well above the average user's load. I do this without any special spam software, external Web-mail services, or any other plug-in. I merely use a simple method, which draws on no other technology than a few filters in my low-tech e-mail client (Claris EMailer, published in 1996). Spam shouldn't be a problem for you, either.

Spam history

Spam e-mail is all too familiar to most e-mail users today:

```
Subject:    It's TRUE!.....we GUARANTEE you a check!!!
Received:  4/4/02 3:33 PM
From:      PowerLines3834355823703646@yahoo.com

Hi

You are receiving this email because you have either requested
business opportunity information from me in the past, or we have
shared business opportunity information.  If you do not want to
receive any other emails from me, please forgive me & click on
the following link to be removed.
mailto:remove_from_list_now@verizonmail.com?Subject=Remove

Answer four simple questions and I'll guarantee you a check!

A successful friend of mine called to inform me his team,
they had just launched an exclusive recruiting software
```

Spam e-mail got its nickname from early Internet users, who had in mind a famous

Monty Python comedy sketch in which the word “spam” is repeated many times.⁷ The sketch takes place at a breakfast diner:

Waitress: You can't have egg, bacon, spam and sausage without the spam.

Wife: But I don't *like* spam!

Husband: Shhh, dear, don't cause a fuss. I'll have your spam. I love it. I'm having spam, spam, spam, spam, spam, spam, spam, baked beans, spam, spam, spam, and spam.

“Spam” refers to all unsolicited e-mail, whether it appears repeatedly or not.⁸ It can also become a verb (as in, “Why do these people keep spamming me?”) and, unfortunately, an occupation (as in, “Spammers should be given long prison terms”).

Where does spam come from?

Spammers use a variety of methods to acquire e-mail addresses: buying them from other spammers or companies, or even blindly guessing at what might be valid addresses. Particularly vulnerable are users whose addresses are posted on a public Web page, since spammers use software to scout the Web and add any addresses found there to their database. (Addresses are cheap. A CD-ROM with millions of addresses sells for under \$200, giving anyone with cash and a Net connection the ability to spam the world.) A good resource with more data on this problem is “Why Am I Getting All This Spam?”, a March 2003 report from the Center for Democracy & Technology.⁹

Spammers also buy e-mail addresses directly from popular commercial websites, though it's unclear which sites are engaging in this practice. Reporting for the Wall Street Journal, Stacy Forster recently conducted an experiment to find out how addresses are “harvested” by spammers. She created brand new accounts on free-mail services like Yahoo Mail or Hotmail, then sat back to watch the results. Here she describes her experience with just one of those accounts:

I provided all of the information requested (name, address, demographics, etc.) during the registration process, and I used this e-mail address just one time — to purchase a gift certificate from Borders.com. Less than a week later, the spam started rolling in — jamming the inbox...¹⁰

⁷ “Spam,” by Monty Python, on the album “The Final Ripoff.”

⁸ It also refers to a meat product packaged by Hormel Foods Corporation, which owns the Spam copyright.

⁹ <http://www.cdt.org/speech/spam/030319spamreport.shtml>

¹⁰ “Tracking spam to the source,” by Stacy Forster. The Wall Street Journal, February 7, 2002.

Representatives of Borders and Yahoo both flatly denied to Forster that their companies provided her address to spammers; after all, that would be an explicit breach of their user agreements. Clearly, even top websites are selling out to spammers more than they would like to admit.

Spam is inevitable. Commonly-used addresses simply cannot escape spam, but instead will get more of it in coming years. Spam is a fact of life for e-mail users, like smog in Los Angeles or rats in the New York subway. It may be irritating, but it's nothing to take personally. It's just a problem to deal with as efficiently as possible. Best of all, unlike smog or rats, spam *does* have a straightforward solution: deletion.

Never reply to spam

It's worth stating that spam should be deleted right away, *without* replying:

Another common [spammer's] trick is to include in a spam solicitation instructions for "unsubscribing" from a list. When users do unsubscribe, the spammer knows this is a live address — now your address is sold for a premium to direct marketers.¹¹

Never reply to spam, even if it includes an "unsubscribe" address. The only action appropriate for spam is deletion. There are two ways to delete spam, both of which are necessary:

1. Automatically, with a mail filter.
2. Manually.

We'll cover mail filters first.

Deleting Spam with Mail Filters

Mail filters are invaluable for deleting *repeating spam*, or identical spam e-mails that arrive multiple times, week after week.

Most e-mail programs, like Eudora and Outlook, allow the user to set up mail filters. A mail filter checks every incoming e-mail to see if it matches certain criteria defined by the user. If there's a match, the filter takes some action on the message — usually deletion. For example, a mail filter could delete any e-mail whose Subject line

¹¹ "It's Time to Put a Stop to Spam," by Bill Gurley. Above the Crowd newsletter, April 3, 2002.

contains the phrase “make money fast”.

Users aren't the only people setting up mail filters these days: some Internet service providers and corporate IT departments are also using mail filters to weed out spam before it even gets to users' mail programs. Despite their best efforts, however, increasing amounts of spam *still* make it to users — which means that users must learn how to set up their own mail filters.

Using mail filters

Mail filters are most effective when matching on Subject lines. For example, if the Subject line contains “make money fast,” it's almost certainly a derivation of the same “make money fast” spam that users have received for years. The only drawback of mail filters is that they might delete a non-spam message that happens to match the filter criteria.¹² This is unlikely to happen, as long as filters are set up conservatively enough. Matching on “make money fast” is conservative, for example, since it's highly unlikely that any legitimate e-mail would contain those words. On the other hand, setting up a filter to match just the word “money” in the Subject would be far too liberal.

The downside of being conservative (deleting a few more spams by hand) is much better than the downside of being too liberal (filtering a legitimate e-mail into the trash), so be conservative.

Be conservative when setting up mail filters.

The best filtering strategy, in fact, is a two-tiered approach:

- Tier 1: E-mails that are *definitely* spam are immediately deleted by the filter.
- Tier 2: E-mails that are *probably* spam go to “purgatory,” a mail folder that holds suspected spam for the user to verify and delete later.

When to use mail filters

Spammers constantly change the wording of their spams (in Subject lines and in the message body) in order to outsmart mail filters. This means that mail filters will never

¹² Users of Microsoft Outlook face another drawback: creating even the simplest Outlook mail filter is a difficult and frustrating process.

catch every spam. In fact, filters are only effective at all if the user is vigilant in keeping the match criteria updated with the latest wordings of the spam coming into the inbox.

Here are three suggestions for using mail filters:

1. Set up mail filters to delete any spam received on multiple occasions. (Don't create a mail filter for a spam received only once, since it may never appear again. Only create mail filters for those spams that are likely to appear again.)
2. Continually create new mail filters to combat the new spams that constantly appear. (The "make money fast" spam, for example, might reappear next week as "make fast cash").
3. Do not rely exclusively on mail filters to delete spam. As described above, there will always be some spam left over to be deleted manually.

Most importantly, start off by creating a few main filters that will catch 80% of your current spam load. Here are the four that will do most of the work:

- Ignore (i.e. don't filter or act on) any mail that is from someone in your address book.
- Filter to "purgatory" (a mail folder for suspected spam mails) any e-mail containing the letters "<html>". i.e. filter out any HTML mail from unknown senders.
- Filter to purgatory any e-mail with six consecutive space characters, or three consecutive ! characters, in the Subject line.
- Automatically delete any e-mail containing any of the various bad words that you expect to see in sexually explicit spam.

As you add more filters, your spam filters' accuracy will climb over 90%. Below are a few others that may be helpful.

"Adv:"

Delete any e-mail whose Subject line begins with "Adv", followed by a colon or space. Some spammers do users the favor of beginning their Subject lines this way, to allow users to filter out the spam (presumably leaving less experienced users to

read the spam for their own enjoyment).

For example, this e-mail would be deleted by such a filter:

Subject: Adv: Huge Opportunity !!!

Just make sure the filter doesn't match on "Adv" without a colon or space character following; if it did, it would delete e-mails with Subject lines like "advocacy" or "advertising campaign results".

By the way, most mail filters are not case-sensitive, so most e-mail programs won't require setting up filters for both "adv:" and "ADV:".

Common Subject lines

Delete any e-mail whose Subject line contains any of these common spam phrases:

FREE CASH GRANT
FREE Long Distance!!
Find Background Info About ANYONE
Email Advertising Works
QUIT SMOKING IN
Be Your Own Boss!
INCREASE ENERGY LEVELS BY
For Serious Marketers ONLY!
100% LEGAL WAY TO
Herbal Viagra

These filters should match not on a Subject line that is the *exact* phrase, but instead a Subject line that *contains* the phrase. This is because some spam Subject lines end with an ID number, or begin with "Re:" to throw off mail filters.

Other filters to purgatory

Several words are common in spam Subjects but might also appear in the a legitimate e-mail. Filters on these words would file the e-mail in purgatory, if the word appears on the Subject line:

Free
Mortgage
Inkjet
University Diploma
Life Insurance

Deleting Spam Manually

Since mail filters don't delete every spam e-mail, users will have to find and delete some spam mails by hand. To do this quickly, users must be able to *visually identify spam mail by the Subject and From line*. This way, users can quickly delete spam without opening each mail and viewing the full contents.

The best way to learn this skill is through practice, so we'll use an example.

Subject	From
Free Quote for Any Loans (159840)	ykmccrea@delphi.com
need loans? (300807)	qsblackman@usa.net
Get the Facts on Net Businesses!	info@factsdisc.com
Lady V: The Pleasure Pill for Women!	Youth@arwex.at
Time to Travel and Build Wealth!	TravelAndWealth18093@newmail.ru
Time to Travel and Build Wealth!	TravelAndWealth18093@newmail.ru
Refinancing your house can SAVE you big dollars!	tr1fd94a@yahoo.com
FREE !!! ...EXPLODE YOUR BUSINESS !!! 4238	EMAIL_Ato2
Build a Better Nest Egg 7125jcl6	Joellen6244g25@kichimail.com
Scooters @ Wholesale Prices! (16247)	i-market-0693457@excite.com
TURN \$20 INTO \$15,000 OR MORE QUICK!!	vac12@mail.com

Shown above is an inbox full of spam messages. The left column shows the Subject line, and the right column shows the From address. Each message contains one or more clues that it is a spam message. We go through the messages below, starting with these two:

Free Quote for Any Loans (159840)
need loans? (300807)

Both Subject lines end with a number in parentheses, an easy tip-off that it's spam. Every unfortunate recipient of these e-mails sees a different number, allowing the spammer to track any replies (since the number would be contained on the reply's Subject).

Get the Facts on Net Businesses!
Lady V: The Pleasure Pill for Women!

Next two: The tip-off here is that most or all the words are capitalized, and they end with an exclamation mark. The promise to "get the facts" is another clue.

Time to Travel and Build Wealth!
Time to Travel and Build Wealth!

This spam appears two consecutive times in the inbox. Visually scanning the inbox for repeating Subject lines often points out spam mails. (If *many* repeating Subject lines appear, temporarily sorting the inbox by Subject will make it easier to select and delete them all in one action.) Delete these.

Note the From address on the next spam:

tr1fd94a@yahoo.com

This From address is a dead giveaway, even without looking at the Subject line. It's a random collection of characters and numbers generated automatically by the spammer's software. The yahoo.com domain shows that the spammer is using a free Yahoo Mail account to send the spam. Other free-mail domains frequented by spammers include msn.com, hotmail.com, mail.com, and excite.com.

FREE !!! ...EXPLODE YOUR BUSINESS !!! 4238

Text in all caps, promising "free", ending in multiple exclamation marks: yes, it's spam. But there's something else here which uniquely identifies this as spam. Notice the number on the Subject line, separated from the text by several spaces. This number is a unique identifier for any reply mail, similar to the first example above. The spaces are there to hide the unique identifier from the user, since some e-mail programs only display Subject lines up to a certain width.

These "spammer's spaces" are actually an advantage to a careful user. Here are two ways to exploit the spammers right back:

1. In the mail program, change the view of the inbox so that the Subject line's field is as wide as possible. This will reveal the numbers hiding at the end of "spammer's spaces" at the end of Subject lines.
2. Use a mail filter to detect these "spammer's spaces" and delete the spams automatically. Just be sure to match on a conservative (high) number of consecutive space characters, as in the following:

Try this mail filter: If a Subject line contains six consecutive space characters, delete the e-mail.

As if the From address of Joellen6244g25@kichimail.com of the next message wasn't enough of a tip-off, the Subject line gives it away:

Build Build a Better Nest Egg 7125jcl6

Note the random string of characters in both the Subject and From lines. While no mail program currently matches on random characters, this should give an idea to programmers of anti-spam software. Regardless of the Subject line or sender's Internet domain, any random string of characters in either place should alert a filter.

Scooters @ Wholesale Prices! (16247)

This spam is easy to spot because it matches several of the criteria noted above. Capitalized words, exclamation point, ID number, and a long, complicated From address at a free e-mail system (i-market-0693457@excite.com).

TURN \$20 INTO \$15,000 OR MORE QUICK!!

This e-mail is similar to the previous spam, but even easier to spot, since the Subject line is in all caps (another good spam tip-off, though very occasionally a legitimate e-mail has an all-caps Subject line).

To review, here are the major tip-offs of spam, without having to open the message:

- Subject ends with number in parentheses.
- Subject's text is capitalized and ends in one or more exclamation marks
- From address is a string of random numbers and letters, from a free-mail system like yahoo.com
- Subject ends in several spaces, followed by a number
- Subject matches any of the above and promises anything for free

Quasi-spam: Hoaxes, Petitions, and Virus Alerts

All e-mail users should be aware of other kinds of e-mail that are just as annoying as spam, even if not promotional per se. Call these e-mails quasi-spam: hoaxes, petitions, and virus alerts. The rule here is the same as with spam: Delete them. More than that, never forward them to another user.

Once again: never forward petitions, virus alerts, or any message that could be a hoax.

Apply the Golden Rule here: would you want to be forwarded any of these e-mails?

- *Hoaxes*. So many hoaxes have been passed around via e-mail that several websites have been set up to identify and track them. A classic e-mail hoax warns users not to accept drinks from strangers at a bar, lest they be drugged and their internal organs harvested. Check www.snopes.com before you forward something that might be a hoax — and *always* include the URL of the Web page you found it on. (If there's no URL, don't forward it.)
- *Petitions*. Most e-mail petitions are also hoaxes (one falsely claims that the U.S. Congress is about to shut down the National Endowment for the Arts); others are merely irritating. No matter how strident the call to action, e-mail petitions aren't worth passing along to other users.
- *Virus Alerts*. The popularity of virus alerts is understandable, given the frequency with which new viruses run free on the Net, creating havoc for Microsoft Outlook users everywhere. In practice, however, virus alerts are almost *never* accurate. Users should pay attention to virus alerts only when they come directly from a reliable source, such as their company's IT department. Let the experts pass the news; for everyone else, never forward virus alerts.

The New York Times' David Pogue recently wrote what could be a summary for this section:

*If [an e-mail] sounds alarming, urgent, or too good to be true, delete it at once.*¹³

Spam in the Business World

Several recent articles have estimated the impact of spam on the corporate world. Extra technology is one cost, since spam overloads mail routers and servers. Productivity is also impacted, though perhaps not as much as Business Week guessed, saying that one firm has

created a calculator that projects the cost of spam. It shows that a company with 500 employees, each of whom receives five junk e-mails per day and spends about 10 seconds deleting each one, can expect to lose close to \$40,000 per year in wasted salaries and 105 days in lost productivity.¹⁴

¹³ "Deflecting the Marketing Offensive," by David Pogue, NYTimes.com, April 11, 2002.

¹⁴ "Special Report: The E-mail Monster," Business Week, March 1, 2002.

Does it really take ten seconds to delete a single e-mail? The average time should be closer to one second, especially if the user has set up mail filters and can visually identify spam from the Subject and From lines, as described previously.

Still, spam is undoubtedly a drain on productivity and resources, and it's worth investing in measures to combat it. CNet's recent article on "spam fighters" describes the efforts within corporations to find and delete spam before it gets to users' inboxes.¹⁵ It's a daunting task, since the amount of incoming spam is rising exponentially and its text changing constantly to evade filters. And companies' efforts to filter aggressively have led to the deletion of legitimate e-mail. For the moment, the only way for companies to accept all legitimate e-mail is to filter so liberally that some spam inevitably gets to users as well. The only possible solutions are better anti-spam technology, which could take years to develop, and strict governmental controls, which may never happen. Until then, users will have the final responsibility for deleting most of their spam.

¹⁵ "Companies taking desperate steps against spam," by Stefanie Olsen, CNet News.com, March 21, 2002.

6. Mail Filters in Outlook

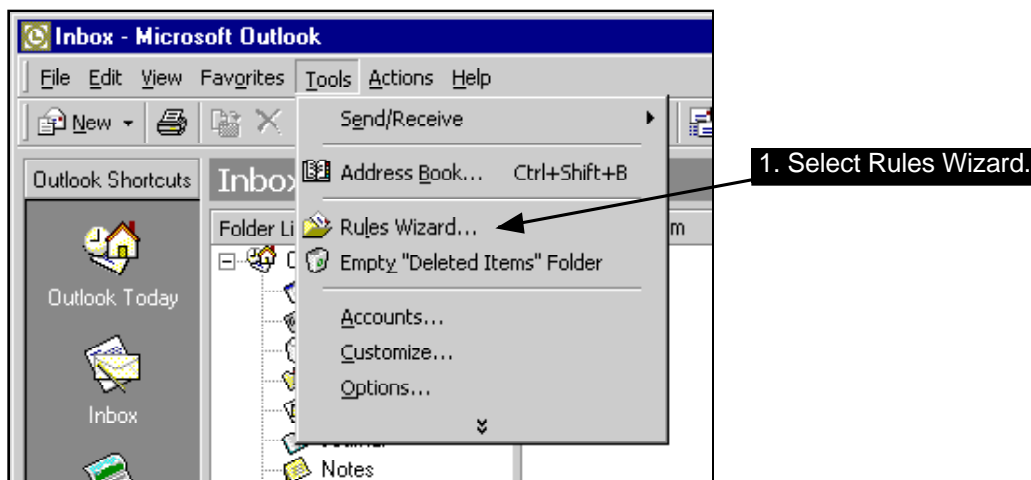
This section has two goals:

- To show how to set up mail filters in Microsoft Outlook, especially given the importance of mail filters and the popularity of Outlook.
- To show how poorly designed Outlook is. Like many other popular software programs, Outlook is crammed with features and details that users don't really need. Users should demand better tools from their IT departments and the software industry.

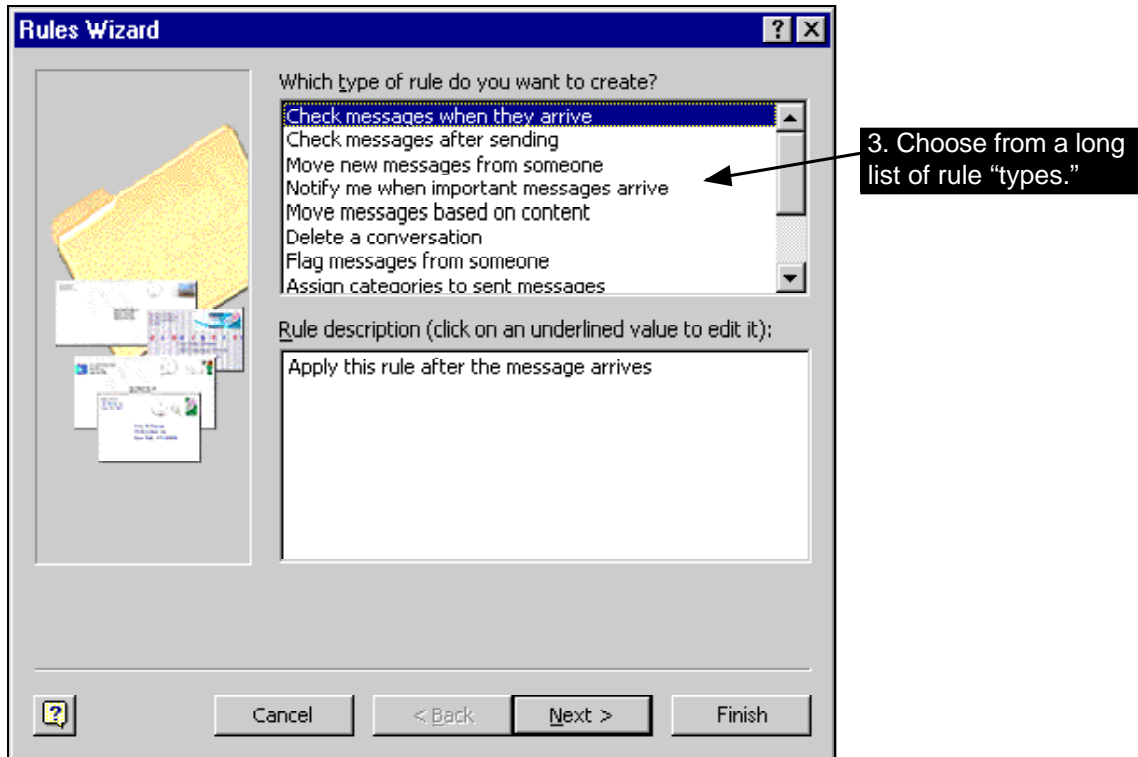
Nine steps to create a mail filter

Below are the nine steps necessary to create a mail filter in Outlook. Screenshots are included for several, but not all, of the steps.

Step 1 is to select the awkwardly named “Rules Wizard” menu option from the Tools menu:



Step 2 (not shown): Click “New” to add a new rule.



Step 3 (above): From the long list of rule types, choose this one:

Apply this rule after the message arrives

Step 4: In a similar window, choose from a long list of conditions to match on the contents of the Subject line. Choose this condition:

with specific words in the subject

Notice, by the way, that Outlook offers some match conditions that most users will never use (“specific words in the message header”). Such superfluous items should appear, if anywhere, in an Advanced screen — and not here, where they make it harder for users to find the conditions that they *would* use.

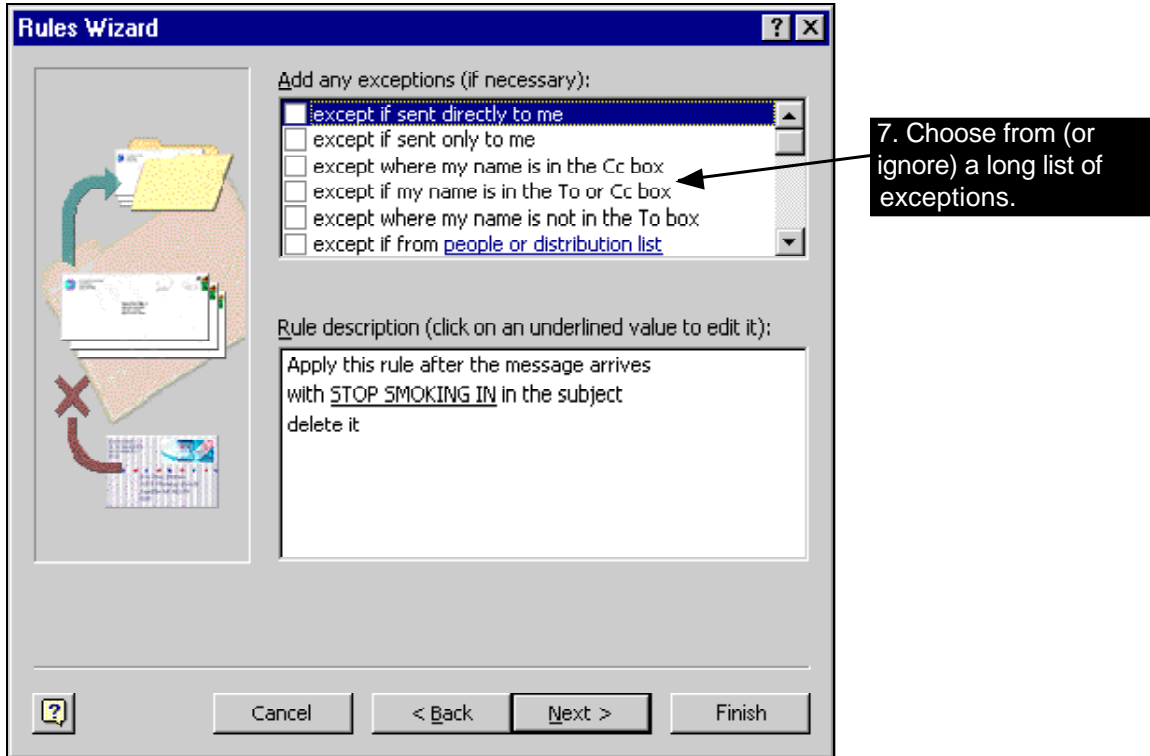
Step 5: Specify words to match on, then click Add, then click OK. For example,

Stop smoking in

would match on spams with Subjects like “Stop smoking in just 5 days!!!”

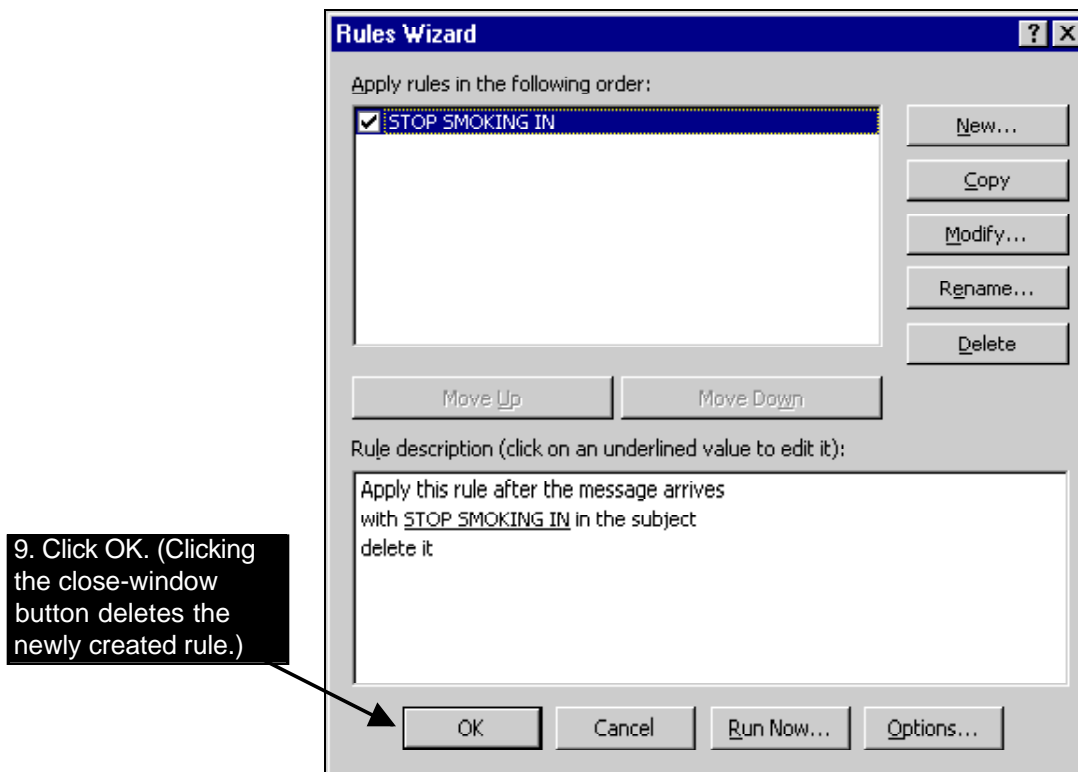
Step 6: Choose from a long list of actions. Here again Outlook supplies the user with many unnecessary choices. Clearly, most users will want to choose from just two choices: either file the mail in a folder, or delete it. Outlook gives users several choices: to forward to distribution lists as text or attachment; to delete *or* permanently


delete (as if anyone knows or cares about the difference); and several others.



Step 7 (above): Ignore the long list of exceptions, which most people will never need. Click Next.

Step 8: Name the rule.



Step 9: Click OK, and *only* OK. Here Outlook contains an egregious error in its user interface: Clicking the close-window button  in the upper-right corner of the window *deletes* the newly created rule, forcing the user to start over from Step 1. But clicking Close appears to be perfectly reasonable, since the rule is listed in the upper-left with a checkmark as “applied.” Outlook gives no cue that the rule is not yet fully created until OK is checked.

Once OK is clicked in Step 9, the mail filter is live and will delete any incoming spam that matches the filter.

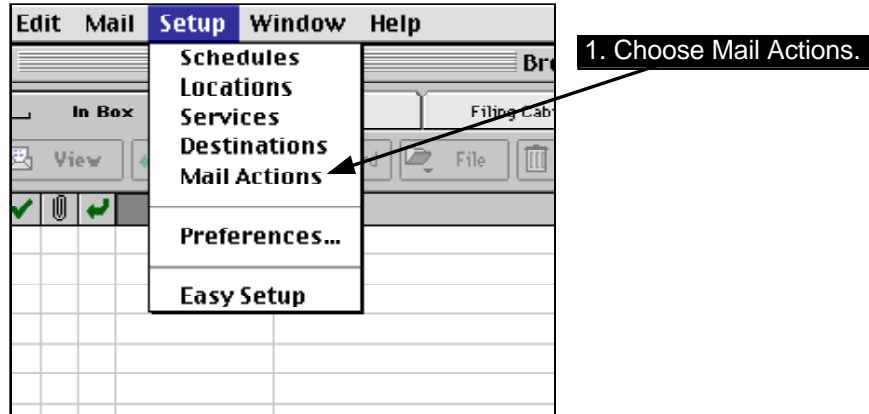
A simpler interface: Claris EMailer

Obviously, it shouldn’t require *nine steps* to create a simple spam-deleting mail filter. No wonder many users don’t use that feature in Outlook.

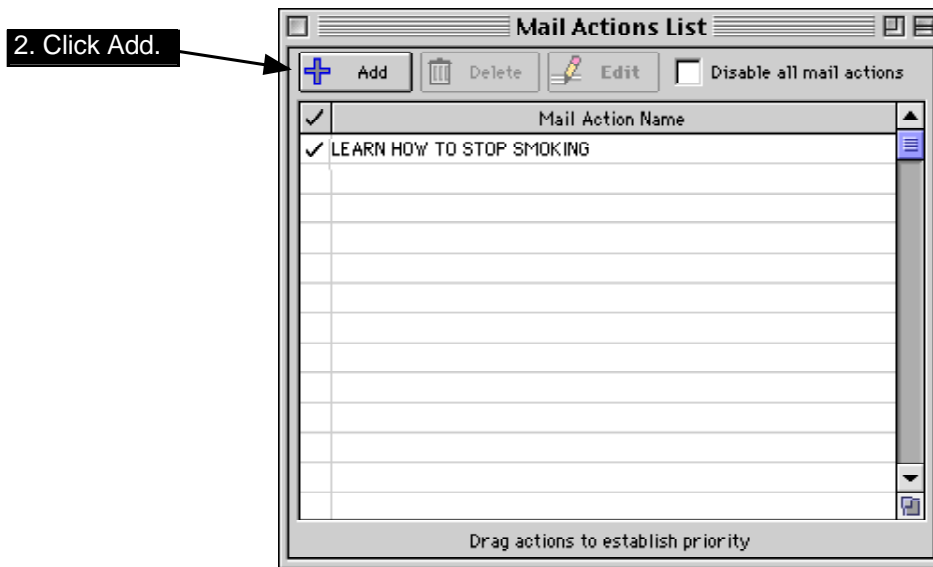
To contrast Outlook, we consider the same process in another mail program: Claris EMailer, version 1.1. This is not an attempt to convince anyone to use EMailer. (It runs only on Macs and is so old that it lost its support from Apple years ago.) Instead, the intent here is to show how simple it *can* be to set up a filter, if only the

user interface is designed properly.

Below are all three screenshots for the *three* — not *nine* — steps in creating a mail filter in Claris EMailer.



Step 1 (above): Choose Mail Actions from the Setup menu. (Notice the clearer label: Mail Actions, instead of Rules Wizard. Mail Filters would be even better.)



Step 2 (above): Click Add.



3. Name the rule, then choose the criteria and action.

Step 3 (above): Define the filter by typing the name in the first field, and the matching text in the second field. Then set the action to file the message in Deleted Mail, then click Save. (Notice that the user only has two options: Cancel and Save. Compare with Outlook's *ten* active buttons at this step: OK, Cancel, Run Now, Options, New, Copy, Modify, Rename, Delete, and Close.)

This is how a mail filter can be created in three screens, not nine as in Outlook. In fact, without counting the first two steps in both mailers (since they would be part of any mail filter process), Emailer does in *one* screen what it takes Outlook to do in *seven*. Emailer also has far fewer menu options and list items throughout the process.

Justification for a simpler process

This review of Outlook may draw criticism from software developers and interface designers, at Microsoft and elsewhere. Two responses in particular are likely to come up. First: “So what if Outlook has lots of options? It’s better to give users *more* options, then leave it to them to choose which features they do and don’t want.”

Response: It’s better to give users *fewer* options — only the essential ones. This forces developers to focus the product on its most important features, thereby making it easier for users to find what they need the most.

Here’s the second likely response: “Having nine screens in the process is actually *better* than just three, since each of the nine screens does only one thing, allowing

the user to focus on one choice at a time. This is the process underlying the ‘wizard’ that so many Microsoft applications use. Claris EMailer’s process relies too much on the third screen, which requires too many actions from the user.”

Response: Given the choice, users will prefer a three-step process to a nine-step process, as long as it isn’t unduly complicated. EMailer’s third screen is simple and therefore preferable to Outlook’s seven screens.

7. The Future of E-mail

The method in this report will become increasingly relevant to e-mail users in the future. As spam, business e-mails, and personal e-mails all increase, users will *have* to become more conscious about their inbox. It simply won't be possible for users to make effective use of e-mail if their message count is in the thousands.

Spam will likely become a major problem as it increases faster than any other kind of e-mail, overloading e-mail servers and disrupting productivity. It will require the right mixture of legislation and spam-fighting technology, something that *will* likely come about, but not in the short-term. For the foreseeable future, users will have to buckle down and delete their own spam.

Another major issue to tackle is the state of e-mail clients today. Microsoft Outlook, Qualcomm Eudora, and Lotus Notes are the three leading software-based clients. AOL mail, Yahoo Mail, and Hotmail are three of the most popular Net-based clients. All six of them could stand improvement (some, such as Outlook, more than others) — in their user interfaces, their cooperation with established e-mail standards, their encouragement of open file formats (such as ASCII), and their defense against virus attacks.

In short, users deserve better tools than they are getting today. Until the industry improves its e-mail clients, users will have to learn how to use today's tools, as flawed as they are, to *keep the inbox empty*.

If this report succeeds, it might just help users see more empty inboxes, and fewer confusing messages like this:

Microsoft Outlook



The Journal can automatically track Office documents, and also e-mail associated with a contact. However, the Activities tab on the contact item is the best way to track e-mail and does not require the Journal.

Do you want to turn the Journal on?

Please do not show me this dialog again

Yes

No

Enjoy the Report?

If you enjoyed reading “Managing Incoming E-mail,” there are three easy ways to get more involved:

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When: April 30, 2004 (for the second annual event)
Where: New York Historical Society
Manhattan, New York City
Details and registration: <http://www.goodexperience.com/gel>
Recap of 2003 conference: <http://www.goodexperience.com/gel/03/recap.html>
- **Contact Mark Hurst.** Good Experience, Inc. provides training and consulting in e-mail management, information flow, and bit literacy. Operational savings — for an entire corporation, or just for one team — can pay for the project in a matter of days. (Hurst’s other company, Creative Good, Inc., helps corporate clients improve the customer experience on their websites.)
E-mail: mark@goodexperience.com