The Outlook® Haystack: Finding the needle

I have the opportunity in my teaching travels to witness many people hunting for the proverbial needle in the haystack, a.k.a. their Outlook® inbox. Like many of you who are technically inclined, I have to resist the urge to grab their mouse and keyboard and “show ‘em how it’s done.” Most of us don’t find that helpful at all, just intrusive. Instead, I thought I’d cover it here on my blog. There are 3 easy ways to quickly find what you’re looking for.

Search: The obvious answer
Typing anything from a sender to some text in the body of the email into that little Search Inbox field puts you a click or two away from exactly what you’re looking for. If it doesn’t happen to be in the folder you were searching in, click the link “Try searching again in All Mail Items.” Here’s a great tip: if you are looking for a specific phrase, put it in double quotes, like “Office Tech Today.” In the example below, although the first two don’t appear to be a fit, the specific phrase was found in the body of each one. Notice how Outlook will highlight the key words or phrase in your search results. You will find these words and phrases highlighted in the body of the email as well if you examine it in the reading pane.

Search Folders: Repeating success
If you’ve attended my webinars, you know I always say that what separates the professionals from the amateurs in Office is how well you can repeat success without repeating the hard work. Search folders are great example of a tool to do just that. If you are always searching for email from a particular person or containing certain phrases, a search folder is an automatic way of always having those search results refreshed and at the ready. To create a search folder, click on the File drop-down menu (Office 2003/2007), select New and Search Folder. Specify your search parameters and you’re done. This folder will always be where you created it and always have updated search results.

Search by Sorting
Click on any column title in your Inbox or mail folder view and sort by that criteria. I often find myself sorting by person, date or attachment to locate what I need in a flash. A second click on the column title will sort it in the reverse order. For a little more help with the view and sort solution, try grouping and collapsing the groups with View, Arrange By and Show in Groups, and then Expand/Collapse Groups and Collapse All Groups. You can just expand the groups likely to contain the item for which you are searching.

For more great Outlook tips, join us on 11/9/2010 at 1PM Eastern for our webinar: Microsoft® Outlook: Beyond E-mail to E-fficiency. Click here to register. Also, for a limited time, you can get, absolutely free, a copy of our new newsletter, Office Technology Today chock full of great tech tips, tricks and tools to improve your relationship with technology. Subscribe to get it monthly. It’s like having your own personal help desk!