Email organization: Pro tips to clean up your inbox

You've finally decided to get your email organized. But where do you begin? Here are some easy email organization tips to improve your outlook.

Conversation view

In Outlook desktop versions from 2010 forward, you can show your email messages in order by conversation. This includes your sent messages, too. Then, you can apply the Clean-up tool to reduce these conversations to the minimum items required to maintain the entire conversation.

1. To begin, be sure the inbox is sorted by date. You can do this by simply clicking on the Received column heading, or from the View tab, in the Arrangement group, click on the Date selection in the Sort Order gallery.

2. Check the box in the Messages group that says Show as Conversations.

3. On the Home tab, in the Delete group, click on the Clean-up button and choose one of the options that appear in the dropdown menu. To clean up the whole Inbox including subfolders, click that selection, or just choose to clean up a single conversation.

Rules

If you recognize a pattern in the email, you can simply folder or delete without even opening it. Set up a filtering rule to do this for you. Let's say you get automatic notification messages every day from a system that you check each day anyway. Let's further decide that you have no way of ceasing this message flow.

1. Right-click on the email message and choose Rules, then Create Rule.

2. Select either the from address, if it is unique to this type of message, or some consistently repeating text from the subject line.

3. In the Action section, choose the Deleted Items folder to send them to.

This process can also help you set up a series of "sweep" folders that can hold email you'd like a chance to peruse but will ultimately end up deleting. This can be social media messages, out-of-office messages or Meeting Accept/Decline/Tentative items. This one would need to be done as an advanced rule using the "Uses the form name form" option in the first step. Choose Application forms and then one or more of the meeting response types.

Categories

The great thing about categories is that you can apply multiple categories to a single item. For example, you

can categorize an email message by project, and then also categorize it as urgent. Categories are also a great way to organize email messages without subfolders. To view your messages by category, click on the Categories column in the view. Or, on the View tab, in the Arrangement group, click Categories from the Sort by gallery. Messages with multiple categories will appear multiple times. However, there is really only one message. If you delete it in one place, it will be deleted from all. Right-click and click the category you wish to remove. It will still appear in the others.

Clean out Deleted Items

It may sound obvious, but many people use the Deleted Items as a permanent folder. You should be deleting your deleted items regularly. If there are some you keep just in case or want to review again before confirming that you want to delete it, create another folder and use a Quick Step to put something there with a single click. That way, everything that goes into Deleted Items is something you mean to delete. Alternatively, you can begin using Shift+Delete to permanently delete things you absolutely don't need. But still, sweep Deleted Items once in a while, too. Who wants to file in a trash can?