

DIGITAL ORGANIZING

Productivity experts and professional organizers weigh in about how to manage emails, digital files, and all those apps on your phone.

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HOW CAN I MARK OR FILE IMPORTANT EMAILS SO THEY DON'T GET LOST?

JAMIE STEELE I coach my clients to flag their emails with due dates. You can assign different-color flags that will mean “due tomorrow” or “due next week,” or you can move the email to your task list.

ALEX BRZOZOWSKI Set up rules or filters that basically say these types of emails go into these types of folders. Then your folder system should be what you reference later. It will bold the folders with unread messages and will show how many are unread.

ANDREW MELLEN I’m a firm believer in rules or filters. It’s a way to filter emails before they land in your inbox. That way you aren’t using your inbox as a tickler file to remind you to do stuff. You can be as specific as you want and capture a domain name, an email address, keywords, or subscriptions.

AUDREY THOMAS People need to recognize that an email is a decision waiting to be made. If they make decisions as they go along, emails don’t pile up. It’s estimated we can delete over 50 percent of emails after we read them.

HELENE SEGURA Ideally you will get rid of the emails you don’t need as you process your email inbox every single day. The key is to make decisions in the moment. Too many people think *I’ll decide later*, but later becomes 200 emails later.



HOW CAN I FIND MORE TIME TO RESPOND TO ALL MY EMAILS?

AUDREY THOMAS I convert important emails into a calendar appointment or a task. I move the email to where I need to work on it later. If it's a project that's going to take two hours, I drag it to my calendar and block off two hours.

ALEX BRZOZOWSKI Using a calendar with your email is huge. People use email as a reminder to do things, but a lot of what I do is changing people's thought processes about email. If I need to sit down and think about an email, then I need to schedule time to work on that. It's less about what's in my inbox and more about what's on my calendar.

HELENE SEGURA When you pull an email into a task, make a conscious decision about when that task needs to pop up in order for you to be able to complete it. Otherwise, when that task pops up later, it's usually in the middle of something else.

ANDREW MELLEN Unless your job is customer service, I don't encourage people to answer emails continuously throughout the day. Schedule specific blocks of time when you are in your inbox and deal with emails then. Every day that I'm in the office, I schedule three blocks of time for email on my calendar: morning, afternoon, and evening (at the end of the work day). I schedule thirty minutes at a time.

JAMIE STEELE I check my email twice a day: once at the start and then about one to two hours before quitting time. I process all my email by deleting what needs to be deleted, responding to emails, and assigning due dates to tasks.

HELENE SEGURA Some platforms offer inbox pause, where you can temporarily pause your inbox so nothing new comes in while you are going through your current emails and focusing on those.

OUR EXPERTS

ALEX BRZOZOWSKI, digital organizer, Be Organizing; San Diego

ANDREW MELLEN, professional organizer and coach; New York City

HELENE SEGURA, time management expert, LivingOrder San Antonio

JAMIE STEELE, productivity specialist and digital organizer, Tidy Your Time; Austin

AUDREY THOMAS, productivity expert, Organized Audrey; Minneapolis

Please see "Meet the Pros," page 90, for contact information.

SHOULD I USE FOLDERS ON MY COMPUTER TO STAY ORGANIZED? HOW SHOULD I NAME DIGITAL FILES SO I CAN FIND THEM LATER?

HELENE SEGURA Set up folders on your computer the same way you would set up a paper filing system. If you are a chronological thinker, start with the year, then the month and day so your folders will always be in chronological order. If you think about files in some different way, the most important thing will be the keyword that pops into your head when you are looking for something.

ANDREW MELLEN Your digital filing system should mirror your paper filing system. You don't want to call it "auto" in your filing cabinet and then call it "car" on your computer. I tend to like for the master folders of any category to be in all uppercase. It just makes it easier for me to read.

ALEX BRZOZOWSKI A lot of people have too many folders and they don't remember where they file things. We suggest using more general categories, such as "financial," and then getting more specific with subfolders. File naming is really important, too, because it can go alphabetically or numerically and the numbers will come before the letters. When you open up a folder it should be a story of what's been going on. If I open my car insurance folder, for example, I can see my most recent stuff because I have labeled it by year/month/day.

JAMIE STEELE Give files a very specific name. The goal is to know what the file is before you open it. You can add numbers to the front to keep a folder up at the top. Try not to use abbreviations. A year later you might not know what you meant and if other people need to find the file they might not know your abbreviations or acronyms.

AUDREY THOMAS Make sure you keep your file names relatively short and to the point. What's the first thing that pops into your head? That's probably what you are always going to think of first, so go with that.



MY PHOTOS ARE TAKING UP ALL THE STORAGE ON MY PHONE. WHAT CAN I DO?

JAMIE STEELE I recommend storing photos in a cloud service. Most of these services will pull the photos from your phone or leave them there for easy access. Set reminders on a calendar to remind you to transfer your photos or double-check that downloads and syncs are happening automatically.

HELENE SEGURA Upload photos to a cloud system whenever you have a break. Instead of losing an hour on social media, you can do something productive.

ALEX BRZOZOWSKI Let's say you go on vacation. You can spend each night recapping photos and deleting the bad ones—any accidental screen shots, multiple versions of the same photo, etc.—and pick the best of your photos right then.

AUDREY THOMAS When you are sitting at the doctor's office waiting, you might have four minutes—and you can get through a lot of your photos in four minutes. Think about the times when you have a few minutes here or there; you can really stay on top of your photos that way.

ANDREW MELLEN I have a protocol for myself which is every month or so I plug my phone into the computer, I drag the images off the phone that I want to keep, and then I delete them off my phone. Every phone can also back up to a cloud.

ALEX BRZOZOWSKI Take the time to get your photos organized because you'll actually use them more. Get your photos into one library and then automate your phone to back up into that program.

HOW SHOULD I ORGANIZE ALL THE APPS ON MY PHONE?

HELENE SEGURA The first act of organizing is to decide what apps you actually use and need to have on your phone. You can either put them in folders or separate screens. If there are apps you use on a daily basis, put those on your home screen—unless they are your procrastination crutches. In that case, put them on the back screen. In the process of swiping to get to that app, you may catch yourself procrastinating.

AUDREY THOMAS Most people will put their most-used apps on their home screen. On each individual screen, you may put them alphabetically or based on how often you use them.

ALEX BRZOZOWSKI I've seen apps organized in many different ways. It's such a personal thing. Some people are visual, so they organize them by color. Some people like alphabetical. You could put your most frequently used apps on your first screen, the next one could be personal stuff, and the third screen could be business-related apps.

ANDREW MELLEN I create folders of like with like. I have folders for social media, finances, taxis, music and podcasts, shopping, food, travel, and entertainment. Apps like Safari and Google Maps aren't in folders because I'm in and out of them all the time and don't want multiple layers to get to them.

JAMIE STEELE You can have folders for work, games, self-care, social media, music, and TV. Or you could organize by screen: one for productivity, one for games, and another for music.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I DELETE APPS THAT I DON'T USE?

JAMIE STEELE Deleting apps may be something you want to add to a monthly or quarterly checklist. In settings, you can sort by largest app. If you aren't using an app that is taking up a lot of space, you may want to go ahead and delete it.

HELENE SEGURA If you are constantly downloading apps, do your app clean out once a month. When to delete an app is a personal choice, but if you have to tap on an app and ask yourself "What's this?" you probably don't need that app.

ANDREW MELLEN Deleting apps is a great waiting room activity. When you are stuck somewhere with nothing productive you can be doing, that's a perfect time to go through apps.



APPS TO HELP YOU GET ORGANIZED

UNROLL.ME This app helps you unsubscribe to emails you don't need and can roll up unimportant emails (like daily sales pitches from your favorite retailers) into one email each day.

BOOMERANG This app can take an email out of your inbox until you are ready to deal with it. Or use it to set a reminder to follow up on an email if you haven't gotten a response within a certain number of days.

ICE When you're cleaning out apps you don't use, Audrey Thomas recommends installing the ICE "In Case of Emergency" app that stores your emergency contact and allergy information.