Three Years of Logging My Inbox Count

Mark Wilson
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Input from the world

Email inbox

Need to research / read / do / think about…

Deal with right away

Why?

My pathological *Getting Things Done* email processing workflow
My pathological *Getting Things Done* email processing workflow.
Why?

Email inbox

Input from the world

Emails to self

Deal with right away

Need to research / read / do / think about...

My pathological *Getting Things Done* email processing workflow
Why?

Inbox count ≈ “unaddressed things in my life” ≈ stress
# What I Did

I wrote a Python script to access my Gmail account using IMAP, and run it every day at 1am to count the threads in the inbox. Since February 2012, I've been doing this and recording the count in a log file.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015-04-11 01:00:00</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-04-12 01:00:00</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-04-13 01:00:00</td>
<td>54</td>
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...
What I Did

1–54 of 54

Gmail

Python script

IMAP

Time                Threads
2015-04-11 10:00:00 email #1, #2, #3...
2015-04-11 11:00:00 email #1, #3, #4, #5...
2015-04-11 12:00:00 email #1, #3, #4, #5...
...

Log file

Starting recently: Every hour, detailed info about messages
Looking back on three years for the first time...

Number of messages in inbox at end of day, March 2012 - May 2015

- peak before a purge of at least 20 messages
Purges happen regularly.

Number of messages in inbox at end of day, March 2012 - May 2015

(♦ = peak before a purge of at least 20 messages)
Assumption: “my inbox passively tells the story of what else is going on in my life.”
...but why is my baseline “stress” so high?

Baseline level of things still stressing me out

...until this purge
A dramatic purge
The dynamics of my inbox growth starting from zero

Age of messages in inbox at end of day, 2015

- Days old:
  - 33+ days old
  - 5-8 days old
  - 17-32 days old
  - 2-4 days old
  - 9-16 days old
  - 0-1 days old

- No data

Messages in inbox

- Feb 01
- Feb 15
- March 01
- Mar 15
- Apr 01
- Apr 15
- May 01

Inbox zero

(missing data: a bug in my code)
I stay on top of recent emails while consciously avoiding older, important ones.
I stay on top of recent emails while consciously avoiding older, important ones.

The dynamics of my inbox growth starting from zero.

Here, nearly my entire inbox is old email I am avoiding.
My responsiveness to emails

Length of time a message spends in inbox, by date of arrival, 2015
My responsiveness to emails

Many emails not dealt with for 4+ days
My responsiveness to emails

I am depressingly responsive in dealing with trivial emails at the same time that I am procrastinating on anything that requires effort.
Time spent checking email

Time spent at computer, by 15-minute block of day, February-May 2015 (n=91)

Number of days when I was at my computer during this 15-minute block and checked Gmail at least once
Number of days when I was at my computer during this 15-minute block and did NOT check Gmail

Computer usage data from Time Sink
Time spent checking email

Checking email has become a compulsive routine.
Overturning my assumptions

**Assumption:**
Inbox count as a passive record of my stress

**Reality:**
My email habits *enable* my inbox count to cause stress
## Overturning my assumptions

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