

Email Triage System

Control the chaos. Reclaim your day.

WORKSHOP

Reclaim Your Workweek Workshop

EVENT

Founded in FoCo 2026

PRESENTED BY

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4 Categories. One Decision Rule.

Every email lands in exactly one of four buckets. Your job is 10 seconds per email — decide which bucket, move it, move on.

URGENT — Act Now

Client/boss/prospect needs response within hours. Or: something breaks if you don't act.

- Active client with a blocker: 'Contract needs signature by EOD'
- Boss/CTO asking for info you're the only one with
- Prospect responding to your outreach (same day)
- Payment/scheduling dependency: 'Can you confirm the call tomorrow?'
- System/security alert: actual breach, not marketing

IMPORTANT — Schedule It

Needs a thoughtful response, but not urgent. Examples: strategy, feedback requests, planning.

- Prospect qualifying you: 'Tell us about your process'
- Team member asking for advice or feedback
- Internal project kickoff or status update
- Vendor quote request (you're interested)
- Weekly team sync or retrospective

BATCH — Process in Bulk

Routine, standardized. Examples: newsletters, FYI emails, updates.

- Newsletter, digest, or announcement
- Vendor update: 'New features in Slack', 'Zapier status page'
- FYI from colleague or team channel recap
- Repetitive request you've answered 5x before

DELETE — Trash It

Doesn't affect you. Doesn't require action. Noise.

- Marketing email from brand you don't care about
- Vendor 'urgent' that's really their deadline, not yours
- Duplicate thread you're CC'd on but not needed
- 'Reply-all' from someone not relevant to you
- Out of office or auto-reply

Decision Matrix

When in doubt, ask:

1. If I don't respond within 4 hours, does something break? → **URGENT**
2. If I don't respond this week, does someone get blocked? → **IMPORTANT**
3. Is this standardized/repeatable? Can it wait until Friday? → **BATCH**
4. Will I regret not answering this in 6 months? If no → **DELETE**

The trick: URGENT has a time cost (hours). IMPORTANT has a quality cost (you'll need to think). BATCH has a volume cost (bulk faster). DELETE has a cost of zero.

Edge Cases That Trip People Up

The Prospect 'Urgent' That Isn't Qualified

Prospect you don't know writes: 'URGENT — can we talk ASAP about your AI solutions?'

Move to BATCH.

Why? They're not a qualified lead. No relationship. No context. They're using urgency to get to the front of your queue. Batch it with other outreach, process on your schedule.

Action: Automated response (via email template) → folder → process Friday.

Boss CC's You on Something — Respond or Ignore?

Your boss CC's you on an email chain about a project you're not directly managing.

Move to DELETE unless:

- They explicitly asked you for input in the subject
- It's blocking your work
- They're signaling you should learn from this (check status, don't reply)

Default: Don't reply. If they need you, they'll follow up directly or @ mention you.

Vendor 'Urgent' = Their Emergency, Not Yours

Vendor writes: 'URGENT — we're deprecating this API in 48 hours!'

Move to IMPORTANT if you use it. **To BATCH** if you're just on their mailing list.

Why? They engineered the crisis. 48 hours is real, but it's not YOUR emergency until it blocks YOUR system. Schedule 30 minutes Friday to evaluate impact.

Team Freaking Out About Nothing

Slack/email: 'URGENT — the database is slow!' But: it's 5 AM, it's a scheduled backup, nobody's waiting for results.

Move to DELETE or BATCH depending on your role.

If you're on-call: URGENT. If you're the person who can fix it and others are blocked: URGENT. If you're just CC'd for visibility: BATCH (or don't look until morning).

'Reply-All' Guilt

Group email lands. 14 people are CC'd. Someone asks a question. You know the answer.

Move to DELETE (don't reply-all) unless:

- The person asked you directly
- You're the subject matter expert and others are waiting
- Someone else will miss critical context if you don't clarify

Default: Don't clutter their inbox. Let the original sender handle it. If asked directly, respond 1:1.

Old Email You're Finding Now

You discover an email from 3 weeks ago you missed.

If the deadline passed or they already solved it: **DELETE**. If they've since moved on: **DELETE**.

Don't send 'Sorry, late response!' — you'll just remind them you flaked. If they still need it, they'll follow up. If they don't, you've just created noise.

Triage When You're 200+ Behind

Scenario: 200 Emails. 1 Hour. What Do You Do?

Don't try to read them all. You can't decide quality on overload. Use the speed protocol:

1. **Filter for last 48 hours only.** Archive everything older. (No guilt. If it mattered, they re-sent.)
2. **Do a fast scan:** skim sender + subject line. 3 seconds per email.
3. **Sort as you scan:** URGENT → separate folder, DELETE → trash, everything else → BATCH
4. **Handle URGENT immediately** (they're time-sensitive). Ignore the rest until tonight/tomorrow.
5. **Before sleep:** 15 min on IMPORTANT (the thinky ones). Flag for deeper work tomorrow.

Speed version: Optimize for decisions, not perfection. A 60% correct triage in 1 hour beats a 95% correct one that takes 4 hours.

Mid-Project Crisis

You're deep in delivery. A 'blocker' email lands. You're not in email-checking mode.

Look at sender + subject. Ask: Can this wait 2 hours? Yes? DELETE from your mind, go back to work. Keep a note-to-self to check email at 5pm.

No? Pull out, triage it, handle it, return to work.

Email Bankruptcy Option

You're so behind that responding to 300 emails would take 10 hours. The cost is too high.

Option: Email bankruptcy. Archive everything older than 48 hours. Start fresh.

If someone actually needed you: they'll re-send or call. You just bought back 10 hours. Use it.

Note: Do this sparingly. But it's better than drowning.

EXECUTION

Batch Processing Templates

Once categorized, use these templates to process emails in bulk. The goal: 20 emails in 10 minutes.

Template 1: Quick Acknowledgment

For prospects, vendors. Use when you need to acknowledge but don't have time for a full response:

QUICK ACK TEMPLATE

Thanks for reaching out — I got your email. I'm heads-down on client work through [DATE]. I'll circle back on [SPECIFIC THING] by [DAY]. — Reu

Template 2: Rapid 'No Thanks'

For vendors, newsletters, requests. Use for vendors, unqualified leads, and things you're not interested in:

BULK NO TEMPLATE

Thanks for thinking of us. Not a fit right now. Best of luck — [NAME]

Template 3: Redirect to Asynchronous

For meeting requests, looser deadlines. Use when someone wants sync time but email is faster:

REDIRECT TEMPLATE

Let me give you the short version here: [Your actual answer in 2-3 sentences] Does this help? Or do we need to sync? — Reu

The trick: Answer questions in email first. If they need clarification or sync, they'll ask.

Stay Disciplined After Triage

Once triaged, most people re-triage the same email 3x. Here's how to stop that:

Gmail Setup

Create 4 labels:

- **Urgent** — Red. Check 3x daily (9am, 1pm, 5pm)
- **Important** — Yellow. Schedule 30-min block daily
- **Batch** — Blue. Check Friday morning only
- **Delete** — (don't label, just trash)

Discipline Rules

1. **BATCH folder = do not open until Friday.** Not even a peek. Your brain will find reasons to look — ignore them.
2. **Once labeled, don't re-triage.** Trust your 10-second decision. If you were wrong, you'll catch it when you process.
3. **Process IMPORTANT emails in bulk:** open the whole folder, read all, write responses back-to-back. Context switching = death.
4. **Set email app to close after you triage.** Don't lurk. Triage + close = clean psychological break.

The Anti-Pattern

Checking email constantly while working on something else. Your brain never settles.

Fix: Schedule email time. 9:00 AM Triage (15 min). 1:00 PM Urgent checks (5 min). 4:00 PM IMPORTANT batch (30 min). 5:00 PM final sweep. Outside these windows: email app is closed.

Your Weekly Email Schedule

Monday–Thursday

1. **9:00 AM Triage (15 min):** Inbox → 4 categories
2. **9:15–10:00 AM URGENT responses (45 min)**
3. **1:00 PM URGENT check (5 min):** Handle any new time-sensitive stuff
4. **4:00–4:30 PM IMPORTANT batch (30 min):** Thoughtful replies to strategy, feedback
5. **5:00 PM final check (5 min):** Anything critical before you leave?

Friday

1. **9:00 AM BATCH processing (30 min):** Everything in BATCH folder. Bulk handle or delete.
2. **9:30 AM Cleanup (15 min):** Triage any new urgent stuff, then archive inbox
3. **4:00 PM soft close (10 min):** File stuff, check one more time, done for week

When the Schedule Breaks (And It Will)

Client emergency lands at 2 PM. Your IMPORTANT block gets crushed. Your BATCH folder sits until Monday.

Plan B:

- Drop everything except URGENT and the emergency
- IMPORTANT emails can wait until tomorrow — they're not time-bound
- BATCH emails: batch them harder — process 40 in 20 min instead of 20 in 10
- At day's end: triage new stuff only. Don't revisit old triage.

The schedule isn't rigid. It's a default. When chaos hits, use it as a guide for what to drop first (BATCH). Not a straitjacket.

AI Prompts for Fast Email Drafting

You've triaged and categorized. Now use these prompts to draft responses in 30 seconds.

Responding to Prospect Inquiry

PROSPECT INQUIRY PROMPT

Write a short email responding to [PROSPECT NAME]'s inquiry about [TOPIC]. Tone: Warm but professional. Position us as implementers, not consultants. Length: 2-3 sentences max. Include a next step: call or brief video. Their email: [PASTE]

Client Says They're Blocked

CLIENT BLOCKER PROMPT

Write an email to [CLIENT NAME] unblocking them on [SPECIFIC THING]. Be direct. State what you're doing and when it'll be done. If you need info from them, ask clearly. Their email: [PASTE]

When Someone Asks for Your Input

FEEDBACK PROMPT

Write feedback on [SPECIFIC THING] for [PERSON]. Be kind, specific, actionable. One suggestion per sentence. Length: 5 sentences max. Context: [PASTE THEIR DRAFT/QUESTION]

Saying No Gracefully

REJECTION PROMPT

Write a 'no thanks' email to [NAME] about [PROPOSAL/VENDOR THING]. Don't say 'not a fit' – say why. Be honest but kind. Leave the door open for future. Their ask: [PASTE]

Prospect Email → Meeting Prep

When a qualified prospect lands in URGENT with meeting request:

1. **Respond within 2 hours** confirming time
2. **Trigger:** Create meeting prep document (link in your email)
3. **Use prompt:** 'Email says [PASTE]. Generate a 1-page pre-call brief: their pain, our angle, 3 questions to ask'
4. **15 minutes before call:** skim brief. You're now dangerous.

Outcome: Prospect emails that used to eat 30 min of your week (re-reading, prep, context-switching) now get handled in a structured 45 minutes total.

The secret: Prospect email is the trigger for a whole workflow. Not a one-off message. Once you see it as the start of a process, triage becomes part of something bigger.

Weekly Email Metrics: Are You Improving?

Every Friday at 5 PM, spend 2 minutes asking:

1. **What % of emails did I DELETE? Anything I shouldn't have?**

If you deleted < 20%, your threshold is too strict. If > 50%, you might be discarding important signals.

2. **Which IMPORTANT emails took longer than 30 min? Should I break them into smaller pieces?**

If you're spending 2 hours on one email, it's not IMPORTANT. It's a project. Move it to a project task instead.

3. **Did any URGENT thing actually need to be URGENT?**

If you misclassified > 20%, recalibrate your definition of urgency.

4. **Did I stick to the schedule? What got in the way?**

If you never stick to the schedule, your schedule isn't realistic. Adjust it.

The goal: 90%+ accuracy on triage after 2 weeks. After a month, you're on autopilot.

REFERENCE

Decision Tree (Laminate This)

Email lands. You have 10 seconds. Ask in order:

- 1. Does this need action in the next 4 hours?**
YES → URGENT. Respond ASAP.
NO ↓
- 2. Does this need a thoughtful response, but not urgent?**
YES → IMPORTANT. Schedule 30 min this week.
NO ↓
- 3. Is this repetitive/routine? Could you process it in bulk?**
YES → BATCH. Process Friday.
NO ↓
- 4. Will ignoring this cause a problem in 6 months?**
NO → DELETE. Trash it.
YES → Go back to Q1. You misclassified.

Target Breakdown (per week)

Category	% of Emails
URGENT	10–15%
IMPORTANT	20–25%
BATCH	30–40%
DELETE	20–30%

Time Investment (per week)

Activity	Time
Triage	1 hour total (15 min × 4 days)
URGENT responses	2–3 hours
IMPORTANT batch	2 hours
BATCH processing	30 min

Total	~6-7 hours per week (15% of a 40-hour week)
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What Goes Wrong (And How to Fix It)

Mistake 1: Everything Becomes URGENT

You're overloaded because you classified 60% of emails as urgent.

Fix: Recalibrate. URGENT = 'breaks if I don't respond in 4 hours'. For most email, that's false. Be ruthless with DELETE and BATCH.

Mistake 2: IMPORTANT Folder Gets Ignored

You scheduled 30 min daily for IMPORTANT but then skipped it 3 days in a row.

Fix: Block it on your calendar. Treat it like a meeting. Or move to just Tuesday/Thursday if daily is unrealistic.

Mistake 3: Re-Triage the Same Email

You sorted it BATCH on Monday. You look at it again Wednesday and wonder if it should be IMPORTANT.

Fix: Trust your first decision. If you were wrong, you'll catch it when you process the folder. Re-triaging = decision fatigue.

Mistake 4: Checking Email During Deep Work

You're supposed to triage once at 9 AM. But you check at 10, 10:30, 11...

Fix: Close the app. Put phone in another room. Email notifications = OFF. Check happens at scheduled times only. Use this prompt with your team: 'If you need me urgently, call or Slack. Email is not urgent.'

Mistake 5: Too Many BATCH Emails = Saturday Work

Your BATCH folder has 80 emails. 30 min Friday isn't enough. You're working Saturday morning.

Fix: Be more aggressive with DELETE. Or use the speed protocol: skim, decide, move on. Quantity > perfection.

Mistake 6: No Follow-Up System

You triaged an email IMPORTANT. It's now Friday and you haven't touched it.

Fix: Use a follow-up mechanism. Create a "Follow-up" label for stuff you need to return to. Or block calendar time for IMPORTANT immediately after triage, not 'sometime this week'.

Related Materials & Next Steps

In the Client Communication Hub

- Email response templates (more complete versions)
- How to deliver bad news via email
- Objection handling scripts
- Follow-up sequences for prospects

In the AI Prompt Library

- 'Email drafting for [role]' prompts
- Bulk email response generator (batch 10+ emails at once)
- Email tone calibrator (is this too aggressive? too soft?)
- Meeting prep from prospect email

Tools to Implement This

- **Gmail filters + labels** (free, built-in)
- **Superhuman** (paid email client, optimized for speed)
- **Zapier** (auto-label incoming emails based on rules)
- **Boomerang** (schedule sends, reminders, follow-ups)

The Real Secret

This isn't about email management. It's about decision-making under constraint.

Email is a test: Can you make quick, decisive calls? Can you commit to a decision and move on? Can you trust yourself?

If you can do that with 200 emails a week, you can do it with client decisions, hiring decisions, strategy decisions.

Email triage is management practice for your brain.

Start Monday. Stick with it for 2 weeks. Measure on Friday 5 PM.

Questions? Email: hi@localnerds.co | localnerds.co/fifc2026