

INBOX HERO

Tools, Habits and Best Practices for
Skyrocketing Your E-mail Productivity



TIMO KIANDER

E-mail Productivity Secrets: Tools, Habits and Best Practices for Skyrocketing Your E-mail Productivity

By Timo Kiander

<http://www.productivitybooks.com/>

Nowadays, e-mail is an integral part of our work days. It's also a very effective communication tool that can deliver your message across the globe very quickly.

Unfortunately, e-mail has also its downsides and it can turn us from productive workers into distraction-exposed slaves, making our days stressful and very ineffective.

To tackle the e-mail overwhelm, I have compiled a list of tools and best practices to help you become more productive with your e-mail. This document is divided into three sections.

In section 1, I list 9 essential tools for improving your Gmail productivity.

In section 2, I list my e-mail checking procedure. You may already know this procedure if you have read any of my other titles, like the **Work Smarter Not Harder** book.

Yet, I felt that this section is important, so that you know at least one way to keep your inbox clean (and, hey, nothing is stopping you from building your own e-mail routine based on my steps, if they are not applicable to your situation).

Finally, in section 3, I talk about e-mail best practices that can help you to improve your e-mail effectiveness and also save your time with e-mail.

But before I let you access the Gmail Tools section, there is something worth understanding first. The thing is that the majority of these tools require access to your inbox before they can be activated. Because of this, I have included a link to respective services' FAQ/privacy pages, where you can learn more about how the service works.

SECTION 1: Gmail Tools

1. UnRoll.me

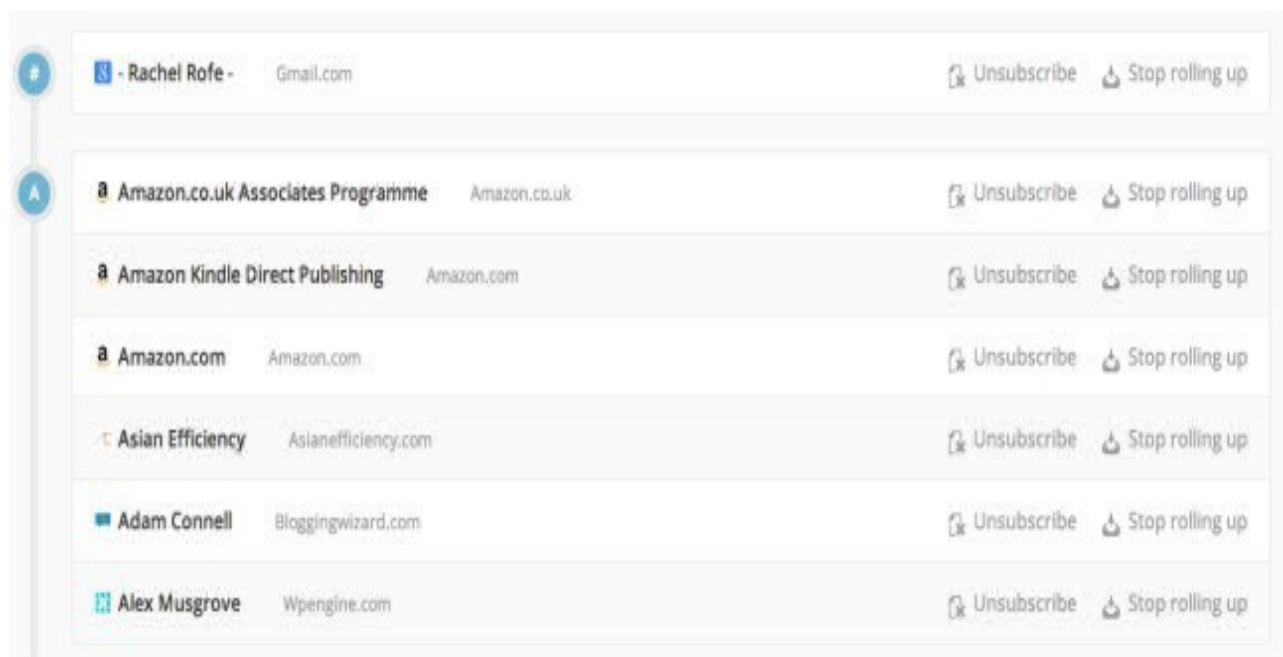
If there is one tool that has saved me a lot of time then it must be UnRoll.me. I belong to a lot of different e-mail lists and at some point over 90% of my daily messages were related to an e-mail list.

The previous matter, combined with the fact that I had a very ineffective routine for checking for e-mails, created a mess.

Fortunately, I found UnRoll.me and it greatly helped to clarify my e-mail usage. Although I now have a routine that I follow with my e-mail (see Section 3), this free service helps me to keep my inbox decluttered most of the time with these two features:

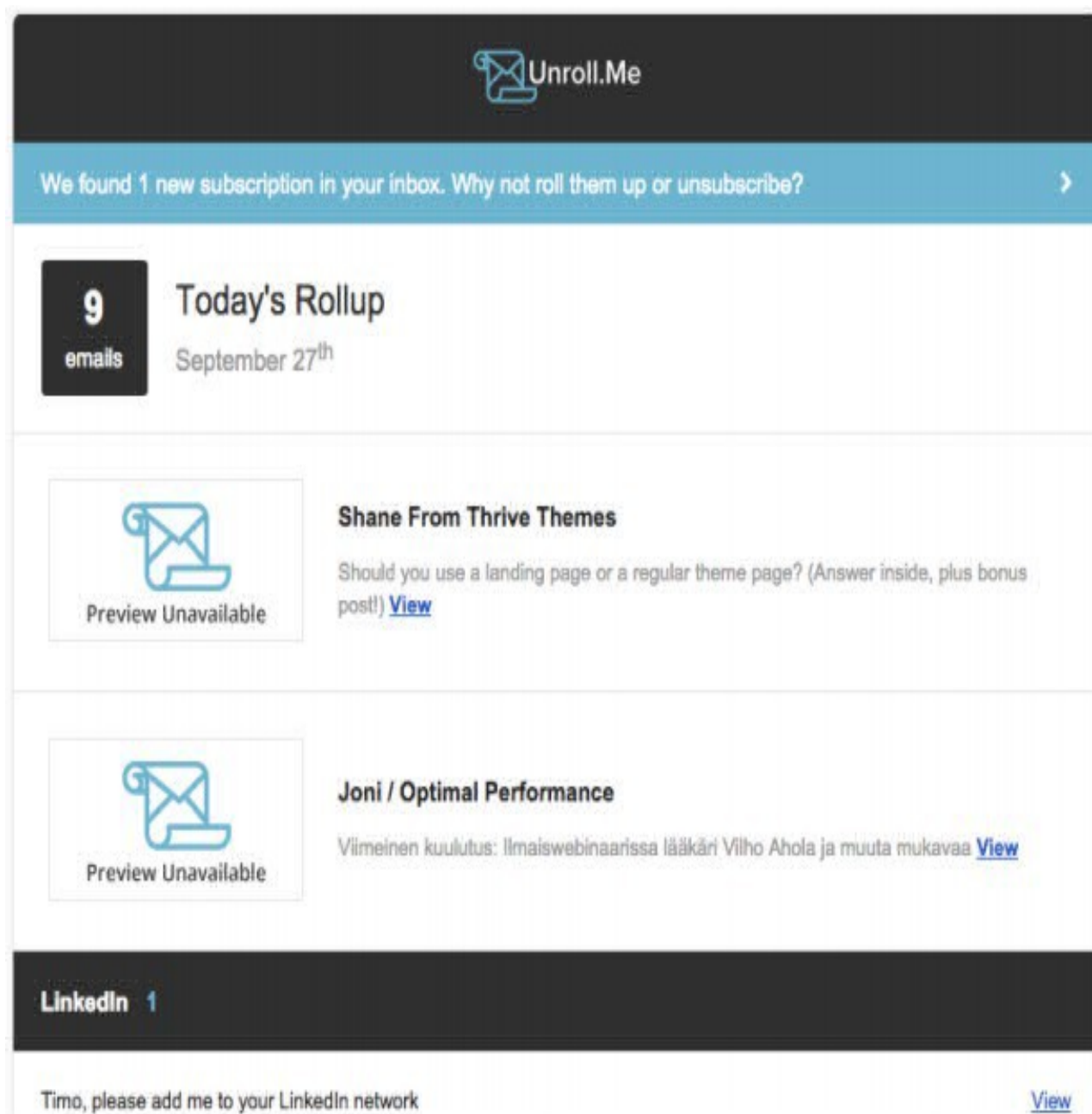
- It helps me to unsubscribe from multiple e-mail lists at once
- It bundles all my newsletter subscriptions into one neat package, delivered once a day

In the first case, when you sign into the service, you are shown the list of subscriptions you belong to. Then you can pick the e-mail lists you wish to unsubscribe from.



Within 5 minutes, I was able to get rid of 50 e-mail list subscriptions! Yeah, sounds crazy but that's how it went.

The second killer feature is bundling the rolled messages into a one package that gets delivered to your inbox once per day. When the daily roll-up message arrives, it looks something like this:



You can then click the message in the roll-up and read it through the UnRoll.me service.

Available for: Any web browser

Price: Free

FAQ/Privacy: <https://unroll.me/faq/security>


2. Batched Inbox

I think that people should treat their inbox more like a regular mailbox (note to self: I'm still working on this myself). With a regular mailbox, you check the mail once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Because you know that there isn't any mail coming in at other times of the day, you don't constantly go to your mailbox check if there is anything interesting there.


To avoid distractions and wasting your time, you could do the same thing with your e-mail too. And now you have a tool that helps you to achieve this 'regular mailbox' routine.

In other words, Batched Inbox sends you all the e-mails at once, at pre-determined times (either once, twice or three times per day). This way you don't have the temptation to check your e-mail all the time, hoping that something new has arrived.


Settings:

 Deliver emails:


☒

twice 


 daily at


10am 


 and

3pm 

☐ every hour on the hour

 Your timezone:

Europe/Helsinki 

Next 

need help or have any questions or suggestions? [email us](#), [hit us up on twitter](#), or [give back](#)

Since you know that the next batch of e-mails comes at a certain time, it's useless to keep checking your inbox on a frequent basis. But if you really need to check your next batch of messages before they have actually landed in your inbox, you can click the BatchedInbox label that is created when the application is installed.

On the other hand, you can also ensure that certain e-mails bypass the BatchedInbox filter if you want to.

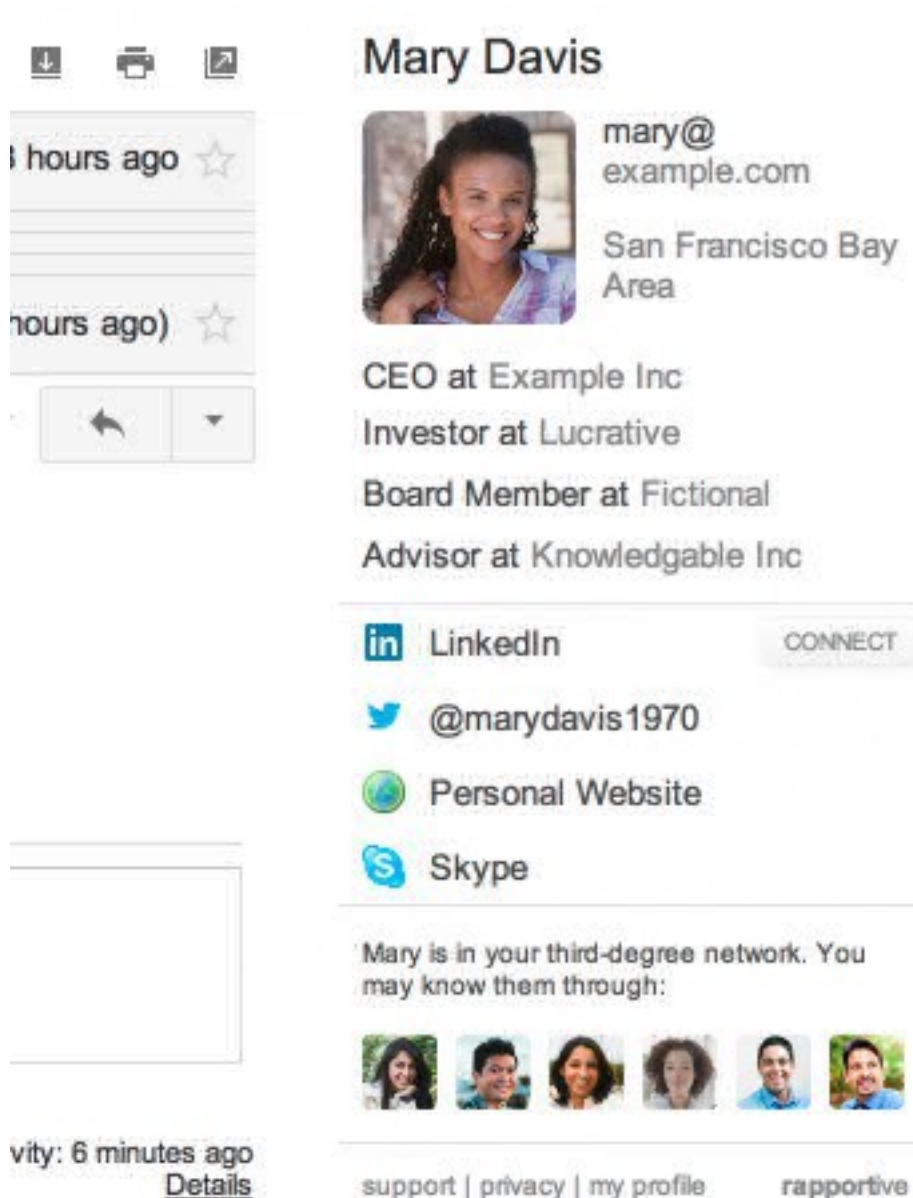
Available on: Any web browser

Price: Free

FAQ/Privacy: <https://www.batchedinbox.com/faq/>

3. Rapportive

This tool is a handy one since it shows you various details about your contacts inside Gmail. Rapportive grabs the profile information from LinkedIn and displays information such as social media contacts, job titles or shared connections on the right-hand side of your inbox. It replaces the space that is normally filled with ads with the contact information of your recipient.



Available on: Chrome, Firefox

Price: Free


FAQ/Privacy: <https://www.linkedin.com/legal/privacy-policy>

4. Boomerang

This application adds some powerful features to your Gmail that it's currently lacking:

- **Scheduled e-mails**

You can write a message and schedule it to be sent whenever you want it to be. Once you have installed the application, just click the Send Later button and schedule your message to be sent at a given time. For instance, you could write an e-mail now and schedule it to be sent on your friend's birthday.

Send Message: 

In 1 hour

In 2 hours

In 4 hours

Tomorrow morning

Tomorrow afternoon

In 2 days

In 4 days


In 1 week

In 2 weeks


In 1 month

At a specific time:

Examples: "Monday 9am", "Dec 23"

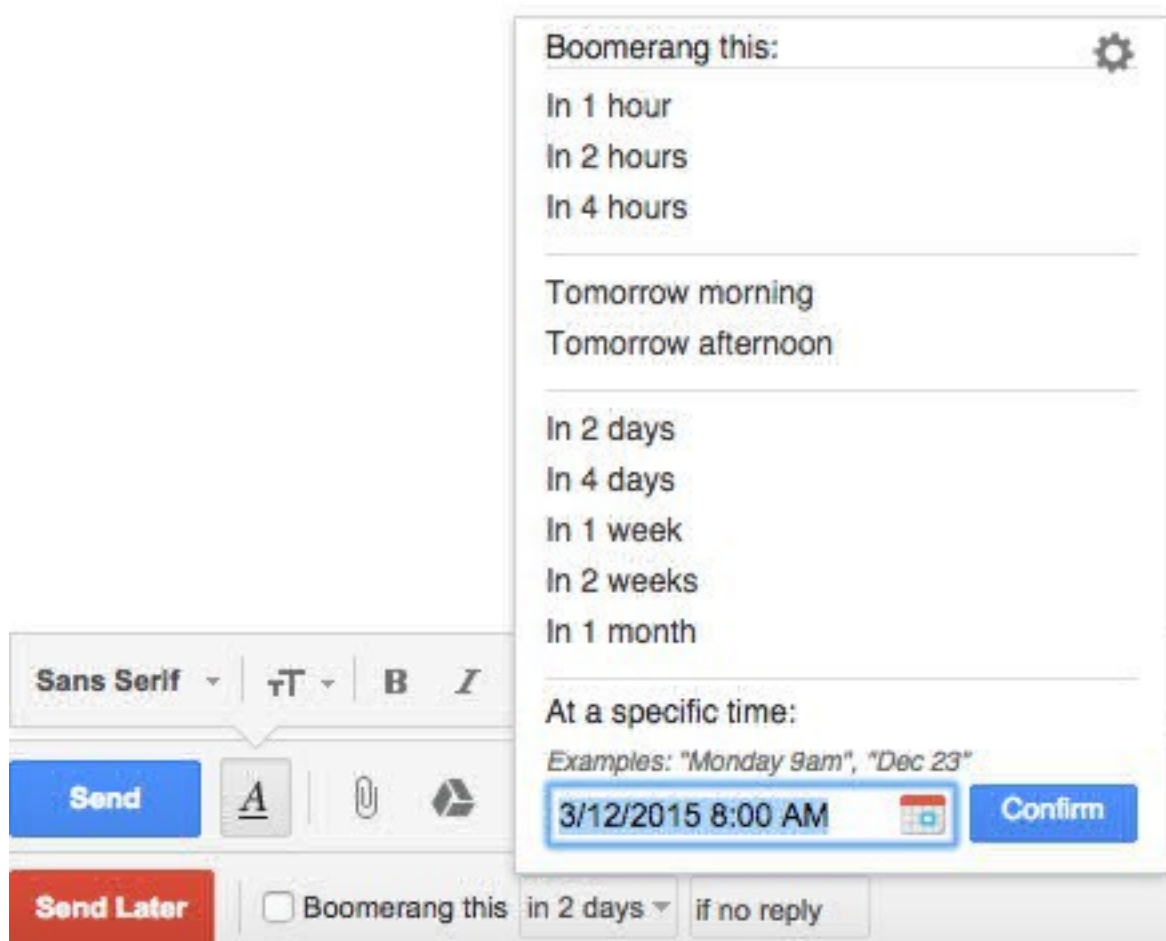
3/12/2015 8:00 AM 

Confirm

 Schedule recurring message

- **Powerful reminders**


Sometimes you need to do some follow-up after sending a message. This is where the reminder functionality is powerful.





When you have your message open, click the Boomerang this checkbox and then pick the date when the message will be brought back to your inbox—in the case that a person hasn't replied to you before the date you set.

- **“Boomeranging” a message**

To clean your inbox a bit, you can use a Boomerang feature to take the message out of the inbox, to then be taken back to your inbox sometime later.

 **Boomerang**

Return Conversation to Inbox:  

☐ Only if nobody responds

In 1 hour

In 2 hours

In 4 hours

Tomorrow morning

Tomorrow afternoon

In 2 days

In 4 days


In 1 week

In 2 weeks

In 1 month

At a specific time:

Examples: "Monday 9am", "Dec 23"

3/12/2015 8:00 AM 

Confirm

Random time ▼

- **Recurring messages**

Sometimes you need to do something on a repeated basis. This is where the recurring messages feature comes in handy. After clicking the Send Later button and choosing Schedule Recurring Message at the bottom of the window, you get to choose the schedule for your recurring activity.

Send Message:

In 1 hour

In 2 hours

In 4 hours

Tomorrow morning

Tomorrow afternoon

In 2 days

In 4 days

In 1 week

In 2 weeks

In 1 month

At a specific time:

Examples: "Monday 9am", "Dec 23"

3/15/2015 8:00 AM

Confirm

Sun, Mar 15, 2015 8:00 AM


Schedule recurring message


Send Later

☐ Boomerang this

in 2 days


Schedule Recurring Message

Starts  Send Time:

Repeats 

Every week

On ☐ Sun ☐ Mon ☐ Tue ☐ Wed ☐ Thur ☐ Fri ☐ Sat

Ends ☒ After messages
☐ On 
☐ No end date

Summary:

Schedule

Cancel

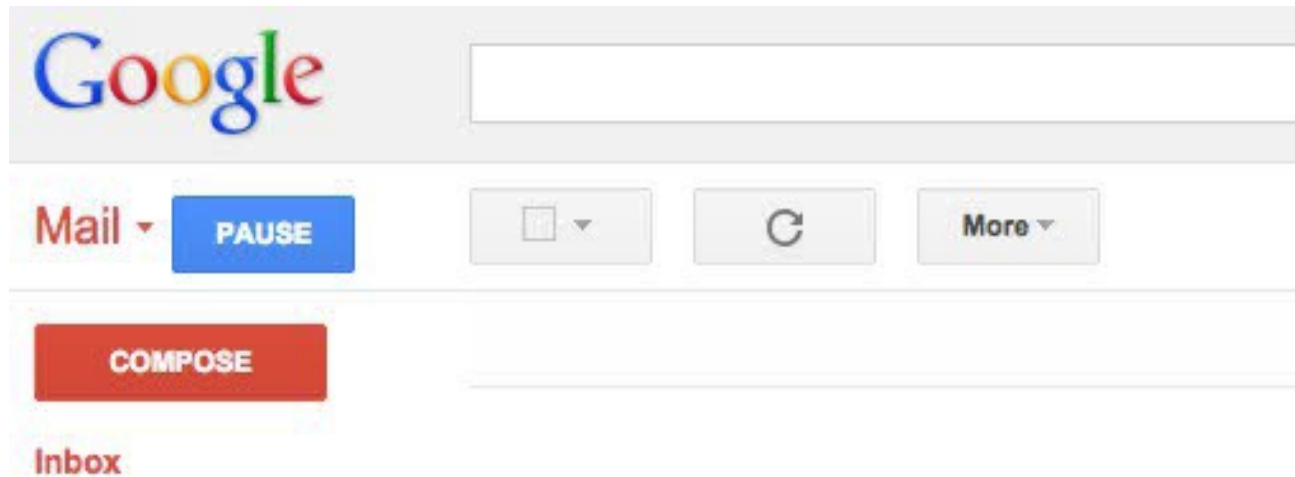
Available on: Gmail

Price: Basic plan is free

FAQ/Privacy: <http://www.boomeranggmail.com/faq.html#Privacy>

5. Inbox Pause

This is yet another tool that controls the arrival of incoming messages (Batched Inbox was the other one, see tip #2). In other words, rather than letting your inbox be populated by messages in real time, you can temporarily stop them landing your inbox with a click of the Pause button.



Once your inbox is on pause, all the incoming messages are stored under a special label (Inbox Paused) in your Inbox. You can even set a vacation responder, letting anyone know that a message they just sent hasn't landed in your inbox just yet.

Let's Pause Your Inbox!



While you pause your Inbox, your messages will be rerouted to a special label, so **you won't see them until you unpause**. When you unpause, we'll move all of those messages back into your Inbox.

☒ **Turn on Auto-Responder**

Subject:

Thanks for emailing! I paused my Inbox, so I won't see your email for a while. If this is urgent, please contact me another way!

Want to pause your Inbox? Visit <http://inboxpause.com>

☒ **Hide label while paused**

☐ **Move messages to Inbox on a schedule**

Pause

Cancel

You are also greeted with a special message at the top of your inbox:

Your inbox is currently paused. Please visit your [Inbox](#) and click the blue UNPAUSE button to see what's waiting for you.

Once you decide to stop the pause mode, all you have to do is to click the blue Unpause button.

I think that this application is unnecessary if you are using Batched Inbox already. But, hey, this is just my opinion and I'm not here to stop you :)

Available on: Chrome

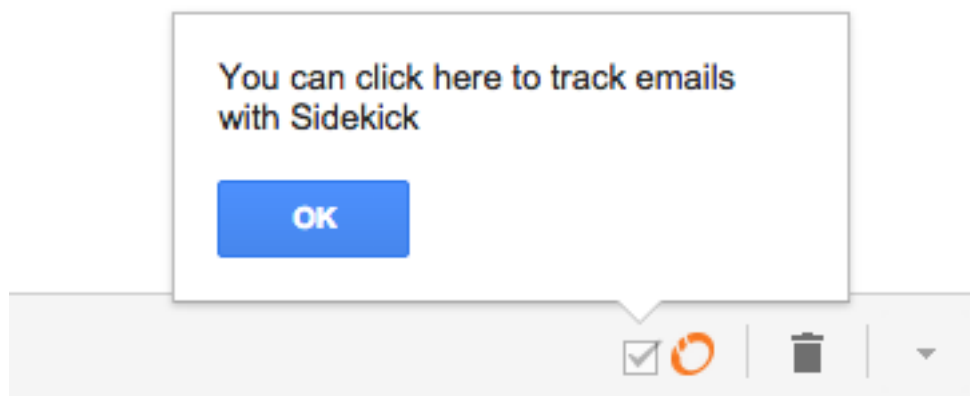
Price: Free

FAQ/Privacy: <http://inboxpause.com/help.html> (no separate privacy page, just help)

6. Sidekick by Hubspot

One of the prominent features of Sidekick is that it can show when a person reads your e-mail.

So when you click the checkbox at the bottom of your Gmail message compose window, you get to choose whether you want to track your message or not. And once the person opens your e-mail, you are notified of it.



To access the settings of Sidekick, click the newly created Sidekick label on the left.

Sidekick Activity Stream

Stream Upgrade Reports Settings Invite Support

ALL OPENED CLICKS SALESFORCE HUBSPOT

Sidekick Team has opened Test
Today at 7:41 AM in Sidekick HQ, Cambridge, MA 1 view

Mute Thread Expand

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

Peter Cepeda has opened New Investment 1 view
Yesterday at 11:06 AM in Cambridge, Massachusetts

Christopher O'Donnell clicked <http://hubspot.com/pricing> 2 views
Last Tuesday at 5:49 PM in Cambridge, Massachusetts

Someone has opened Enterprise Pricing 7 views
Yesterday at 9:23 AM in Cambridge, Massachusetts

Mute Thread Expand

Other than message tracking features, Sidekick helps with your e-mail productivity by enabling improved profiles of your contacts in your inbox or by allowing scheduled messages.

Available on: Chrome, Firefox

Price: Free (200 open/click notifications per month), Premium

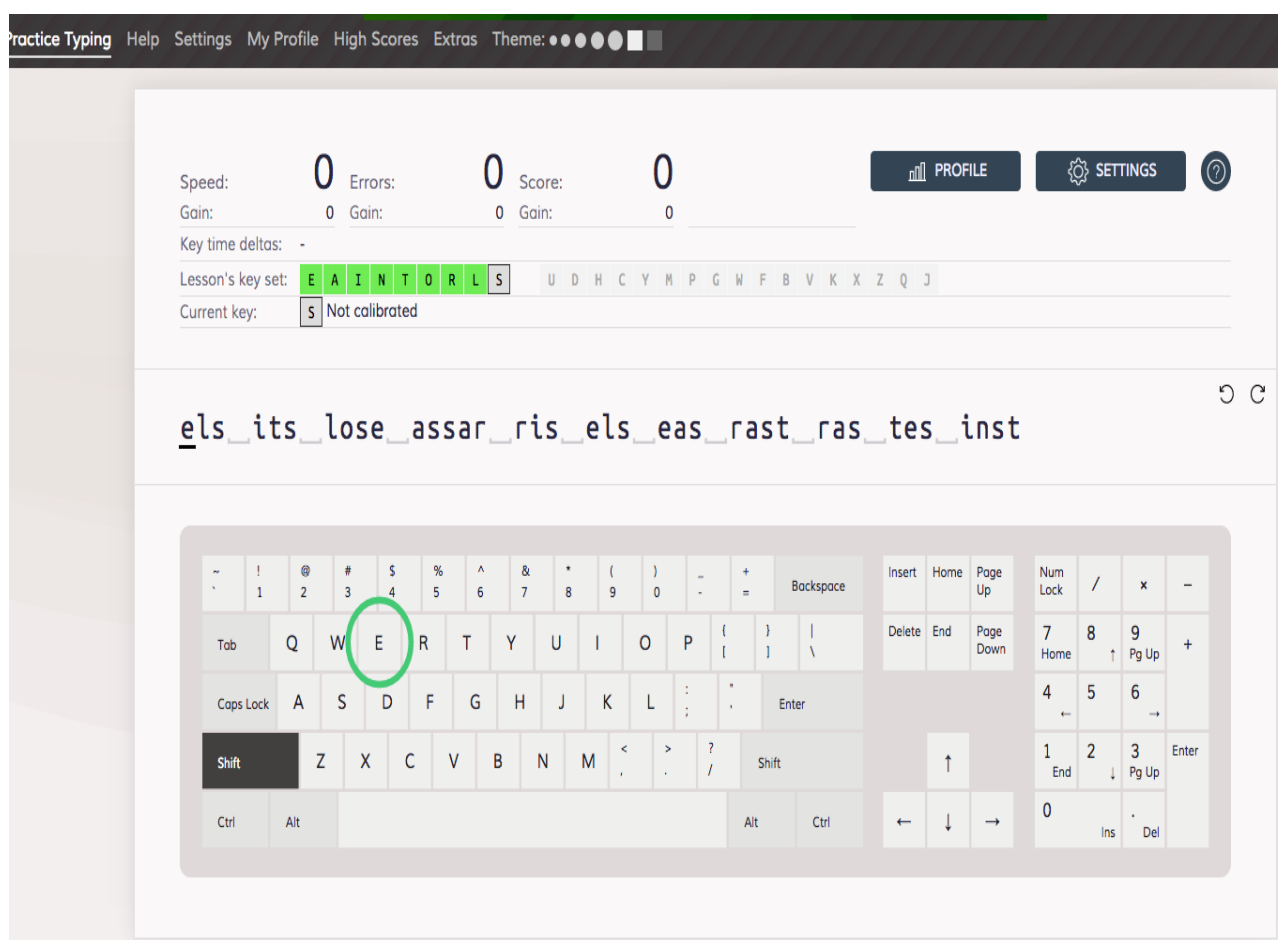
FAQ/Privacy: <http://www.hubspot.com/legal/privacy-policy?>

[hstc=254322903.02de6dd13055166a0d42955766d2a79f.1426051936893.1426051936893.1426224945106.2&hssc=254322903.1.1426224945106&hsfp=2088683431](http://www.hubspot.com/legal/privacy-policy?hstc=254322903.02de6dd13055166a0d42955766d2a79f.1426051936893.1426051936893.1426224945106.2&hssc=254322903.1.1426224945106&hsfp=2088683431)

8. Touch Typing

This next one is not a tool in the traditional sense; rather it's a skill that you should master. In fact, I have to say that touch typing has been one of the greatest productivity skills that I have learned so far. Once I got the hang of it, there was no returning back to the two-finger typing I was previously using.

If you haven't picked up touch typing yet, then this [tutorial](#) by WikiHow might help you out. You can also try a web-based tool called [Keybr](#), which teaches you to achieve this valuable skill.



Available on (Keybr): Any web browser

Price: Free

FAQ/Privacy: <http://www.keybr.com/pages/privacypolicy>

9. Gmail Labs

Ok, so far you have learned about plenty of tools that can help you improve your Gmail productivity. But did you know that Gmail itself also has plenty of tools that can make you more productive? These tools are found at Gmail Labs and here is a little tutorial on how to activate and use some of these extra features.

So what is Gmail Labs in the first place? Let Product Manager Keith Coleman [describe it](#):

“It has a list of experimental new features, and you can enable or disable each one. Some of the popular ones will become core parts of the product, and we'll eventually retire the ones that don't get much use.”

Enough talk, let me show you how to enter the lab and how to start using certain Gmail Labs features that could make a difference to your e-mail productivity.

Enter the Lab (no white coats required)

Enabling new functionality through Gmail Labs is very easy:

1. Log-in to your Gmail account
2. Click the Settings icon on the right:



3. Choose Settings in the dropdown menu
4. Click Labs on the horizontal toolbar:



5. Voila! You are in the Lab!
6. Then choose the features you want to activate in your Gmail (this screen shot shows only part of the Lab's features):

Enabled Labs

Insert

Refer to documentation

Status report template

FAQ

Canned Responses

by Chad P

Email for the truly lazy. Save and then send your common messages using a button next to the compose form. Also automatically send emails using filters.

☒ Enable
☐ Disable

[Send feedback](#)

Quick Links

[Unread mail in inbox](#)

[From family](#)

[NY flight itinerary](#)

[Directions to party](#)

[Add Quick Link](#)

Quick Links

by Dan P

Adds a box to the left column that gives you 1-click access to any bookmarkable URL in Gmail. You can use it for saving frequent searches, important individual messages, and more.

☒ Enable
☐ Disable

[Send feedback](#)

Available Labs



Apps Search

by the Apps Search team

Extends search with Google Docs and Sites results. Apps Search will find the most relevant Docs and Sites and show them below Gmail search results.

☐ Enable
☒ Disable

[Send feedback](#)

[« Back to Inbox](#)

[Archive](#)

Welcome to eBay!

 eBay to me

Authentication icon for verified senders

by E R

Displays a key icon next to authenticated messages from certain senders that spammers attempt to fake. [Learn more](#)

☐ Enable
☒ Disable

[Send feedback](#)

After archiving, deleting, or

☒ Go to the next (newer)

☐ Go to the previous (older)

☐ Go back to the thread list

Auto-advance

by Bruce D

Automatically shows the next conversation instead of your inbox after you delete, archive, or mute a conversation. You can select whether to advance to the next or previous conversation in the "General" Settings page.

☐ Enable
☒ Disable

[Send feedback](#)

Be more productive with Gmail with these 5 easy improvements

Now you are inside the Lab, I'll introduce 5 features that can improve your Gmail productivity.

1. Undo-Send. Did you hit the send button too soon? Well, with this functionality, you can withdraw a message within seconds of sending it.

2. Canned Responses. Do you need to send the same message over and over again, but hate copying and pasting it every time?

If so, Canned Responses is your tool. It lets you create email templates for the types of messages you use most often, helping you to save plenty of your time.

This feature is very simple to use. Start creating a new message as usual and then click the small arrow at the bottom-right corner of the message compose window (next to trash can icon). This shows you the Canned responses menu item:

Insert

Personoitu Viesti Tilaajille

Personalized Welcome to E-mail Subscribers - 5

Interview Request

GP Feedback Request & Thanks

GP Feedback Request & Thanks

Guest Post Request Reply

WLF Bonus

Save

Personoitu Viesti Tilaajille

Personalized Welcome to E-mail Subscribers - 5

Interview Request

GP Feedback Request & Thanks

GP Feedback Request & Thanks

Guest Post Request Reply

WLF Bonus

New canned response...

Delete

Personoitu Viesti Tilaajille

Personalized Welcome to E-mail Subscribers - 5

✓ Default to full-screen

Canned responses ▶

Label ▶

Plain text mode

Print

Check spelling

A window opens and you can then see the list of canned messages that are available to you (they can be found under the Insert section of the menu).

If you want to create a new canned message, choose the New Canned response... menu item and give your canned response a name and click OK. Once you have composed your email template, click the Canned Responses link again and choose Save [name of your canned response]. Now you're all set!

Personally, I use this feature when I request interviews from bloggers, when I ask for testimonials or when I pitch for guest-posting opportunities. You could also use it to reply to recurring requests instead of writing the same answer from scratch every time.

3. Custom Keyboard Shortcuts. Keyboard shortcuts make the e-mail processing faster. Although the shortcuts are available in Gmail after you enable them, custom shortcuts make them even more usable.

For example, creating a new mail message is possible just by clicking letter c, but if you feel that another letter would be more suitable for this action, you can define this with a custom keyboard shortcut.

To access custom keyboard shortcuts, go to Settings and then locate Keyboard Shortcuts on the horizontal navigation bar (on the right).

Action**Key(s)**

Compose

c

or

Compose in a tab (new compose only)

d

or

Search mail

/

or

Back to threadlist

u

or

Newer conversation

k

or

Older conversation

j

or

Select conversation

x

or

Rotate superstar

s

or

Remove label

y

or

Mute conversation

m

or

Report as spam

!

or

Delete

#

or

Previous message

p

or

Next message

n

or

Reply

r

or

Reply in a new window

R

or

Reply all

a

or

Reply all in a new window

A

or

Forward

f

or

Forward in a new window

F

or

Search chat contacts

q

or

Go to Inbox

gi

or

Go to Starred conversations

gs

or

Go to Sent messages

gt

or

Go to Drafts

gd

or

Go to All mail

ga

or

Go to Contacts

gc

or

Move focus to toolbar

,

or

Select all conversations

*a

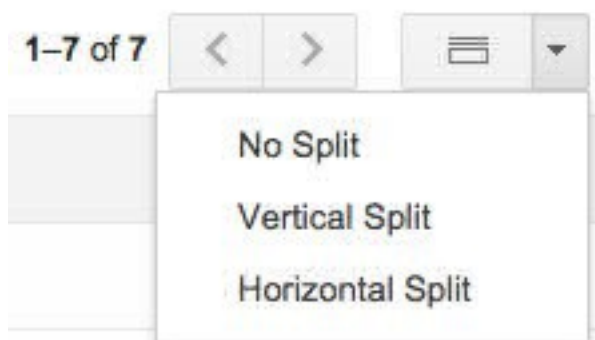
or

Deselect all conversations

*n

or

4. Preview Pane. This feature makes Gmail work in the same way as Microsoft Outlook. You can decide whether you want to split the screen vertically or horizontally to view your message. Based on your selection, your message is shown either on the right side (vertical align) or beneath the message (horizontal align):



<input type="checkbox"/>			WP Engine System	Migrated/Important	[WP Engine] Upgrade to WordPress 3.8 Complete - timok - Hey Timo Kiander, We've just finished updating your WordPress site to version 3.8. Everything
<input type="checkbox"/>			WP Engine System	Migrated/Important	[WP Engine] Upgrade to WordPress 3.8 Complete - onlinebp - Hey Timo Kiander, We've just finished updating your WordPress site to version 3.8. Everything
<input type="checkbox"/>			no-reply	Migrated/Important	[timok] FINAL NOTICE - Upgrade to WordPress 3.8 to begin in 4 hours - Hello Timo Kiander, This email is to notify you that in 4 hours at 8:00 PM Central we're going to
<input type="checkbox"/>			no-reply	Migrated/Important	[onlinebp] FINAL NOTICE - Upgrade to WordPress 3.8 to begin in 4 hours - Hello Timo Kiander, This email is to notify you that in 4 hours at 8:00 PM Central we're going to
<input type="checkbox"/>			no-reply	Migrated/Important	[timok] FIRST NOTICE - Upgrade to WordPress 3.8 to begin in 7 days - Hello Timo Kiander, This email is to notify you that in 7 days at 8:00 PM Central we're going to
<input type="checkbox"/>			no-reply	Migrated/Important	[psd] FIRST NOTICE - Upgrade to WordPress 3.8 to begin in 7 days - Hello Timo Kiander, This email is to notify you that in 7 days at 8:00 PM Central we're going to

[WP Engine] Upgrade to WordPress 3.8 Complete - timok

WP Engine Migrated/Important



WP Engine System <no-reply@wpengine.com>
to Timo

1/14/14

Hey Timo Kiander,

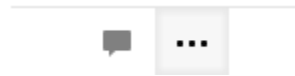
We've just finished updating your WordPress site to version 3.8. Everything should have gone well, and your site should be all souped up with the new WordPress 3.8 goodness. Awesome!

No further action on your part is required, everything is running smoothly. We just wanted to let you know that your site has been automagically updated and you didn't have to do a bit of work. Super awesome.

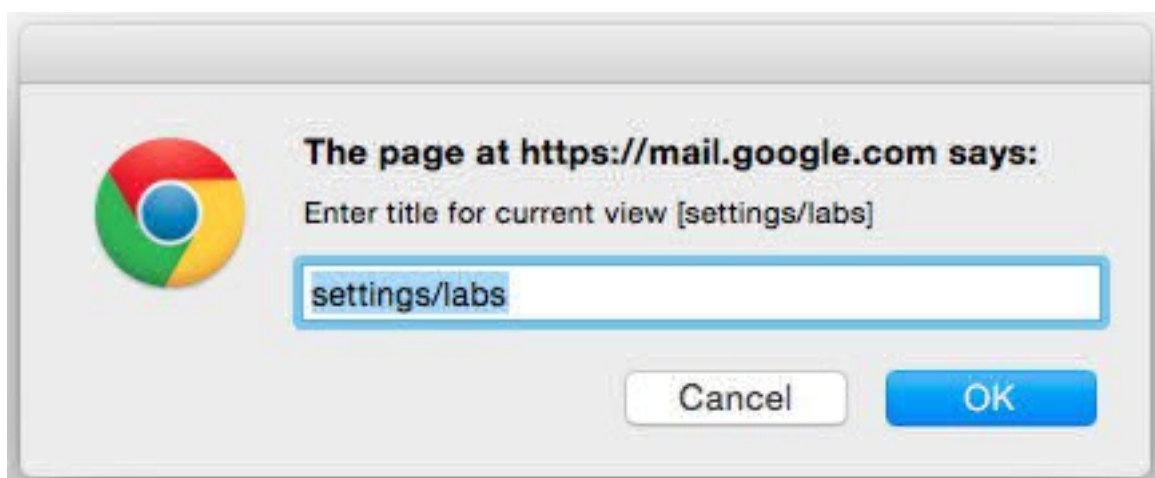
Thank you for choosing WP Engine!

The WP Engine Support Team

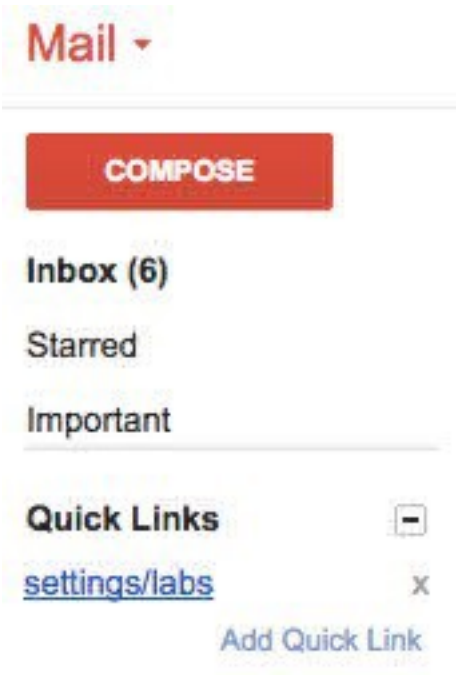
5. Quick Links is a feature that makes accessing certain parts of Gmail easier and quicker. Once you have enabled this feature, you can access it by clicking the three dots at the bottom of the screen (on the left-hand side):



The Quick Links menu will then appear on the left side of the page navigation. All you have to do next is navigate to the page on Gmail you want to list on your Quick Links menu and then click the Add Quick Link text. This opens a message dialog that is pre-filled with name of the page view, like this:



After you click OK on this dialog box, a link to that view is then added to your Quick Links navigation list:



SECTION 2: Routines and Principles to Use with E-mail

The fact is that e-mail can definitely be a time suck. If you keep checking e-mails as soon as they land your inbox, your work day become scattered and your ability to focus on your important tasks weakens.

To prevent this happening, take a more organized route for dealing with your e-mail messages:

- Define your e-mail checking times. This could be, for instance, 2-3 times per day, 30 minutes each. If possible, try to avoid checking e-mail first thing in the morning, since it's very likely you'll get off-track quickly. In other words, you could end up working on totally different tasks than what you were supposed to do.
- Open your e-mail client only when you check your e-mail. Otherwise, keep it shut.
- Turn-off the automatic notifications in your e-mail client (how you do this varies from the e-mail application).
- Let others know about your e-mail checking routine, so that you can set the expectations right. For instance, you can create an auto-reply message explaining that you check e-mails only three times per day, at pre-determined times.

Create a routine that you use every time you check e-mail. For instance:

- Once you open your inbox, scan any messages that you can delete or archive right away. If these messages are newsletters, perhaps you should unsubscribe from them (if you don't find them valuable), either one-by-one or all at once. If you get a lot of service-related messages (like Twitter notifications), you should log-in to the particular service and turn off the notifications in the first place. Another way to handle service notifications is to create filters or rules (how you do them depends on the e-mail application) to weed these kinds of messages out of your inbox.
- When you have opened an e-mail message, take a look at it and reply to it at once. If you suspect that the answer will take more time to reply, schedule this task to your task list and then archive the message. Just make sure to grab the URL of the e-mail message and add it as your reference next to your task list task description (this makes finding the archived message easier).
- If you suspect that replying to the message will become too time-consuming, call the person instead.
- If the message contains an assignment, add it to your task list and schedule it (or if the situation requires, handle it right away). Once

again, include the URL of the message as a reference in your task description.

I have used the previous strategy and it has helped me to keep my inbox clean. It's also worth mentioning that this strategy might not be suitable for everyone (say you have to be available through your e-mail all day). In that case, make sure to pick some of the above ideas that suit you best, to make your e-mail processing more effective.

SECTION 3: 5 E-mail Best Practices for More Effective E-mails

In this section, I talk about five principles that you should keep in mind when sending e-mails. This helps you to become more effective with your e-mail communications, save time and be better understood with your messages.

1. Send a message only to those who need it

Limit your usage of the To field when multiple people are part of the e-mail conversation. Only add those people to the To field who truly require your attention. Add those who still need to see your message (but don't require your attention) to the Cc field

When you put just the necessary names in to the To field, your message will be understood better and there is less chance of confusion.

Make sure to limit the participants in your Cc field as well. Since people get so much e-mail nowadays, dropping a name or two from your Cc field makes some people's lives a bit easier.

2. Write first, edit later

Most of the time, I tend to write e-mail messages the same way as I write a blog post or a book: in three phases.

First, I just spit the message to the document, to get it out of my mind, without thinking too much about the grammar or typos. Once this phase is finished, I start proofreading it.

Once the initial proofread is done, I read through the message once again to ensure that it flows well and it's understandable. I also fix typos, if I encounter them.

As a result, I have a message that is short and to the point, including all the necessary information.

3. Have a clear subject line

It's the subject line that catches your recipient's attention in the sea of other e-mails.

I try to make my subject lines as specific as possible, so that there is no guessing as to the content of my message.

For instance, having a line like this, "Let's meet" doesn't really tell the recipient what your message is all about. Rather, having a subject line like "Let's meet tomorrow, regarding Project X" is much better.

4. Just because you can, doesn't mean you should (using HTML in your e-mails)

I know that there are many people who can't stand HTML formatting in their e-mail messages. In fact, I'm not a big fan of HTML either—especially when its usage goes overboard.

So try to use such effects as bolding, bullets or colors sparingly. This way, the message becomes more readable and easier to understand.

5. The more you ask, the more you receive

Here is the deal: the more messages you send, the more replies you are going to receive. So in order to cut down the volume of e-mail, make sure to follow these principles:

- Don't ask the already answered question again. If you have a question to ask, take a look at the earlier conversation and find out if your question was answered already
- If possible, send an instant message instead of an e-mail
- If the message turns out to be too lengthy to write, call the person instead

Conclusion

I hope that these tools and best practices gave you some ideas on how to make your e-mail (Gmail) a more productive tool for you.

What I want you to do next is to implement this advice based on your personal preferences: pick the tools you like, implement an e-mail checking routine that suits you best and pay attention to common e-mail practices as well.

This way you can turn your e-mail from your master to your worker and take control of your work day again.

Cheers,
Timo