How I maintain “inbox” zero

Your 'inbox' is you, the one receiving the constant stream of information. Some of this information is relevant and pertains to your current work. Much is relevant but doesn't pertain to current work, and more yet is not relevant at all.

It’s necessary to have a set of habits to stay on top of this or things get lost and then your way of dealing with complexity is having other people make up for your shortcomings.

Information Stream Management

Email is one stream among many:

- Email
- In-person conversations
- Phone calls
- Text messages
- Group chats (Slack, Teams, etc.)
- Self-discovery (observations, calculations, realizations)
- Document reviews
- Meeting discussions

Rules for Information Stream Management

Information arrives through multiple streams (email, meetings, calls, texts, chats, self-discovery). Process it systematically:

Rule 1: Triage at Regular Intervals

Process each information stream at defined intervals to prevent accumulation. Batch processing with boundaries, not constant monitoring.

Rule 2: Categorize by Type, Not Source

Classify information by what it IS, not where it came from:

- **Scope** (boundary definition)
- **Schedule** (timeline)
- **Decision** (choice point)
- **Action** (work required)
- **Deliverable** (output)
- **Contract** (commitment)
- **RISK** (uncertainty flag)

Multiple categories can apply. RISK always combines with another category.

Rule 3: File by Work Context

Organize information by project and package (where it will be used), not by source stream (where it came from).

Rule 4: Mark Signal, Archive Noise

Actively categorize what requires attention. Leave context accessible but passive. Archive or delete everything else.

Rule 5: Flag for Transfer

Mark information that needs formal tracking (RAIL, decision log, TODO) but hasn't been transferred yet. Transfer during regular review cycles.

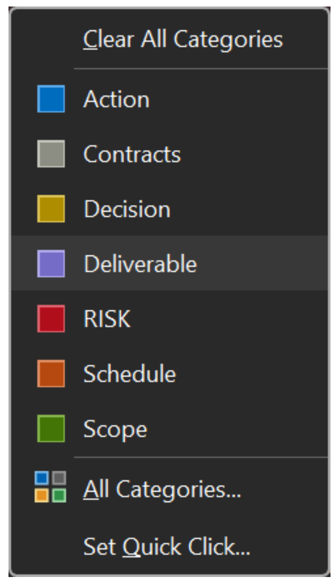
Rule 6: Evolve Status

Information state changes as processed: Action → Outcome → Documented. Update or remove markers as status evolves.

These rules apply to ALL information streams, creating consistent processing regardless of how information arrives.

Specifically how I maintain inbox zero with Outlook

1) Move emails out of the inbox daily, or more frequently but limit interruptions.
2) File by project. For large projects file also by package.
3) Flag emails that you recognize requires some form of follow-up but you haven't transferred to a RAIL or your own TODO
4) Categorize emails when you first read them and / or when you file them.
    a. Use these seven categories (and the color scheme to easily distinguish visually):
        i. Scope
        ii. Schedule
        iii. Decision
        iv. Action
        v. Deliverable
        vi. Contract
        vii. RISK.



5) Leave any other emails that have references or other discussion / context un-categorized.
6) Emails with references usually come with attachments and can be sorted that way.
    a. If you need to file the reference it's an "action".
7) Discussion or context can be found by the email subject, or just by you remembering the data or sender – but record the final email that resulted in a decision, or an action, or scope, or schedule, or a deliverable, or a contract.
8) RISK is used to cover all the other categories but to flag a risk. It is optional.

9) Multiple categories can be applied.
    a. Decision is often appended to another category.
    b. RISK always is applied to another category.
    c. Action should not be combined with other categories unless there are other categories because of the email contents
        i. "Action" = someone needs to do something based on this email
        ii. Action often results in a decision, or scope, or schedule, or a deliverable, or a contract (remove “Action” category tag once complete)
10) Archive all your other emails that arrive in your inbox, unless you want to save it for personal reasons or for “corporate” reasons.
    a. Saves your archived emails so you can search them later if necessary
    b. Deleted emails are for junk