How Managers and Founders Spend Their Time Inside Email

A rough estimated breakdown, its construction, and its evidence base. Third-party sources are dated inline.

1. The statement

For a manager or founder handling a high-volume inbox, we estimate that time spent inside email divides roughly as follows: **triage** (scanning, deleting, filing, unsubscribing) 30-40%; **substantive replies** (decisions, approvals, negotiation, hiring, investor and customer threads) 30-40%; **being copied in / staying informed** (FYI chains, status, notifications) 15-20%; **searching and re-reading to reconstruct context** 10-15%.

2. Status of these figures

These four percentages are our own estimate. They are not drawn from any study, and we could locate no research that partitions time *within* email by activity. The published literature measures the total share of the workweek email consumes, and separately measures per-message behaviour such as reply rates and open latency. The split above is an inference joining those two bodies of evidence; it should be treated as a working hypothesis, not a finding.

3. How it was constructed

(a) The total envelope is well established: McKinsey put email at 28% of the knowledge-worker week, and the Porter and Nohria CEO study put it at roughly 24% of chief-executive time. That fixes the size of the pie but says nothing about its slices. (b) The triage-heavy skew is inferred from Kooti et al., who found that recipients of 100 or more emails a day replied to only about 5% of them, against roughly 25% for lighter inboxes. Since leaders sit in the high-volume group, most messages they touch are handled without a reply. (c) We converted that count-based finding into a time share by weighting each non-reply action as brief and each substantive reply as long. Jackson et al. found 70% of emails opened within six seconds of arrival and an average 64 seconds to resume the interrupted task, which supports treating triage as many cheap actions rather than few expensive ones. This count-to-time conversion is the weakest link in the chain and the main reason the figures are given as ranges. (d) The search component is anchored to McKinsey's separate finding that 19% of the workweek goes to searching for internal information, of which we attribute a portion to the inbox.

4. Caveats a reader should apply

The canonical 28% figure comes from a 2012 report that has never been re-benchmarked, yet is still cited as current throughout 2026. Survey-based estimates also conflict sharply with logged measurement: one logging study recorded only 34.5 minutes per day on email, far below what self-report suggests. Several widely circulated statistics on email composition originate from vendor marketing content without primary citation and are flagged as such below.

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5. References

[1] McKinsey Global Institute, *The Social Economy: Unlocking Value and Productivity Through Social Technologies*, July 2012. Source of the 28% of workweek figure and the 19% internal-search figure.

[2] M. E. Porter and N. Nohria, HBR CEO time-use study; 27 CEOs, 60,000+ logged hours, fieldwork 2016. Email at approximately 24% of CEO time. Summarised at inc.com, January 2025.

[3] F. Kooti, L. M. Aiello, M. Grbovic, K. Lerman and A. Mantrach, "Evolution of Conversations in the Age of Email Overload", WWW 2015 (Yahoo Labs / USC ISI); 2 million users, 16 billion messages. arXiv:1504.00704. Reply rate falls to about 5% at 100+ messages per day.

[4] G. Mark, S. T. Iqbal, M. Czerwinski and P. Johns, "Email Duration, Batching and Self-interruption", CHI 2016. Reports the 34.5 minutes per day logged figure and cites Jackson et al. on six-second open latency and 64-second task resumption.

[5] Lower-confidence, vendor-published, cited for completeness only: Soocial email-time statistics roundup (May 2023), source of the widely repeated "71 of 100 messages deleted" claim; MailOver email-overload statistics (5 February 2026), source of the claim that under 12% of messages carry an action item. Neither gives a primary citation.