

Smarter Meetings scenario



Principles Whitepaper

Productivity scenario: **Smarter Meetings**

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1 Introduction

Meetings. It's a simple word, but one that usually draws a negative response from executives, managers and employees alike. The reasons are many and varied:

- We hold too many meetings;
- Meetings around here are inefficient and a waste of time;
- I spend so much time in meetings I can't get any work done.

Indeed, it is currently fashionable to hate meetings. Yet meetings play a central role in coordinating action, communicating intent, and creating the conditions for collaboration. With so much time invested in meetings in most organisations—often for questionable outcomes—learning to hold better meetings is a key discipline toward increasing organisational effectiveness.

This principles whitepaper is our exploration of the state of meetings today, a look at the research on meetings, and a casting of our vision for Smarter Meetings.

2 General Observations about Meetings

In looking at the state of meetings today—something of a complex and multi-faceted organisational practice—we can summarise with seven general observations:

2.1 People Meet a Lot, For a Variety of Reasons and Purposes

It is hard to get accurate macro-level figures on what percentage of a workday people spend in meetings. Commonly cited numbers range from 15%¹ to 37%² of every workday, a total of 11 million³ to 55 million⁴ meetings held per day in the United States. For CEOs specifically, a recent study in Italy found they spent 85% of their time meeting or working with others.⁵

While macro-level figures are challenging to validate, a quick review of your schedule for the past couple of weeks will give a sense of how much of your time is consumed by meetings. Although while macro-level numbers make for interesting newspaper headlines, it is the reality of your situation that can ultimately drive change.

Types of Meetings

Meetings can be categorised in several ways, for example, informing, parading, exploring, aligning and deciding. The first two are inherently one-way: a manager has an update to communicate, or an executive wants to show off their power by parading in front of their direct reports (Peter Drucker called these meetings the “penalty of rank”). Both should be minimised or eliminated. At their best, the other three demand a multi-way discussion that requires presence, attention, social competence and commitment from multiple people. Even so, current ways of meeting should be explored for effectiveness and whether there are alternative ways of achieving the same outcomes without needing to meet.

¹ SmartDraw, [Real-Time Visuals for Better Meetings](#), February 2011

² Verizon Conferencing, [Meetings in America I: A study of trends, costs, and attitudes toward business travel and teleconferencing, and their impact on productivity](#), 1998

³ Verizon Conferencing, [Meetings in America I: A study of trends, costs, and attitudes toward business travel and teleconferencing, and their impact on productivity](#), 1998

⁴ Elise Keith, [55 Million: A Fresh Look at the Number, Effectiveness, and Cost of Meetings in the US](#), Lucid Meetings, December 2015

⁵ Oriana Bandiera et al., [What Do CEOs Do?](#), HBS Working Knowledge, March 2011

2.2 Meetings Have a Valid Role to Play in Organisational Life

Meetings are commonly used to further valid organisational outcomes, such as:

- Aligning intent and action between multiple people;
- Gathering different perspectives on a current decision; and
- Actually making a decision that has implications for many people.

Most meetings exist within a framework of the current business strategy and intent, thereby providing boundary markers for participants in the meeting.

2.3 Meetings Consume Time and Energy, Incur Significant Costs, Getting A Return Is Essential

Two hours of meetings a day represents 25% of a standard corporate day on a time basis, and the cognitive demands of being present and engaged during the meeting can easily consume at least that percentage of participants' energy. Walking to a meeting room adds time before and after the meeting, and whenever travel is required across the city, country or globe for a meeting, significant time, employee stress, and financial cost is quickly added to the equation. While new technology-enabled methods of meeting are used to reduce travel time and cost, the essential requirement—regardless of how you actually meet—is to derive sufficient value from a meeting to warrant the investment of time, energy, and cost.

2.4 Fewer Meetings Are Preferred Than More, But Some Meetings Are Essential

Given that meetings can further valid organisational outcomes, some meetings are essential. But not all meetings fit into that category: many are a waste of time. Such meetings are:

- Poorly designed;
- Poorly facilitated;
- Poorly attended. For example, the right people aren't in the meeting, or those that are attending aren't paying sufficient attention;
- Poorly concluded.

Meetings in the latter category must be examined for rectification opportunities, but if that is not possible, such meetings should be eliminated. A flow-on implication of “fewer meetings” is that meetings as a device for achieving an outcome should never be the only device, approach or tool in a team’s toolkit.

2.5 Six Basic Ingredients Can Make Meetings More Effective

Six ingredients mixed consistently well would eliminate the vast majority of the current discontent around meetings:

1. A clear and actionable agenda;
2. Sufficient investment in pre-meeting preparation;
3. The right people attending and participating;
4. A good meeting process (including facilitation);
5. Capturing of accurate meeting notes or task assignments;
6. Timely post-meeting follow-up.

If one or more of these six ingredients are left out, meetings will tend to be unproductive and inefficient:

Figure 1. The Six Ingredients of Effective Meetings



The recipe for an effective meeting has six ingredients. Leaving any one ingredient out ruins the meeting, leading to unproductive meetings and inefficient use of organisational resources.