



Meetings

Time wasted and three simple fixes

Meetings are an important part of how we get work done and in most jobs they're vital. However, there are a lot of statistics which suggest that they aren't always as effective as we'd like them to be. In a survey about what participants did during meetings:

- 91% admitted to day dreaming
- 73% had taken in other work
- 39% had dozed off during a meeting
- and 47% complained that meetings were the number one time-waster at the office.

But perhaps one of the most important findings, and one which many can relate to, is that people said 25-50% of meeting time is wasted. The question is how can this time be reclaimed?

Here are three things people are doing to increase meeting efficiency.

The first is, planning meetings to last for 45 minutes instead of an hour. They're finding that the same amount of work gets done in less time, and the saying that work fills the time available can also apply to meetings.

Next, people often find themselves in meetings that aren't relevant to them and they can't make a contribution. Sometimes the reason for this is that they've accepted the meeting invitation without questioning whether they should attend.

Of course, not all meetings are optional, but when they are, here are three questions you can ask yourself.

- Do I know the purpose of the meeting?
- Is there an agenda?
- Do I know why I've been asked to attend?

If you can't answer these, you might want to find out more before accepting.

Thirdly, reviewing meetings to see whether things still need to be done in the same way. Especially when they've been set up on a regular basis such as a weekly or monthly.

For example:

- Does the meeting need to be held as frequently as it is now?
- Are the right people attending?



- Would a different way of working, such as by phone or video conference, be more effective?
- Or is there something else which would help?

If you feel a large part of the time you spend in meetings is wasted, then cutting the meeting length, making sure you attend the right meetings, and regularly reviewing how the meetings are organised and run, could all help to reduce the amount of time you spend in meetings.

Time and money

Time and money often go hand in hand and meetings can certainly waste a lot of both. Usually we calculate the cost of a meeting by multiplying the average hourly cost of the participants by the length of the meeting, then multiplying this by the number of participants.

So if the average participant cost is £20 an hour, the meeting lasts an hour, and there are 10 participants the meeting will cost £200. If it's a weekly meeting, that's about £800 a month, or roughly £10,000 a year. And this doesn't include time for preparation, travel or other expenses.

It's easy to see how the amount goes up with higher paid workers, or if there are more participants. There are plenty of apps which can help you calculate the cost of your meeting, or show how much a meeting is costing in real time – just search for something like 'meeting cost calculator'.

But there's another cost. Jack works a 40-hour week, and on average has four one hour meetings. As it is he complains that there aren't enough hours in the day to get his work done, and the more meetings he goes to, the less time he has to do his other work. Jack finds this frustrating especially if he feels the meeting isn't a good use of his time.

When setting up a meeting, or deciding whether to attend, both the financial cost, and the cost in terms of time, are worth considering. The savings may appear small, but over a period of time they add up.

Agenda and preparation

A little bit of time spent on meeting preparation can go a long way, and this is especially true when it comes to the agenda. Let's have a look at some of the biggest complaints about meetings, and how having an effective agenda can help.



The first complaint is that meetings are poorly structured and have no agenda. Clearly people like to know why they are going to a meeting and what to expect. And obviously if there's no agenda, there's unlikely to be any sort of structure.

Next, meetings are too long and go off topic. One way to help people keep on track, is by making the agenda items precise so that everyone knows what needs to be achieved, and if the items are allotted a set amount of time, it can help to stop the meeting from dragging on.

The other big complaint is that people don't prepare for meetings. But if there's no agenda, or the items aren't clear and people don't know what's expected of them, then it's hard to prepare.

So let's have a look at an agenda item and see how we can make it better.

The item is: to discuss the new team structure.

Discuss doesn't really tell us very much. Meetings are often held to discuss things. So what is it this item needs to achieve?

At the moment it could be:

Why there's a new team structure

What are the new roles

Who's going to do what

or it could be something completely different like proposals for a new structure.

The agenda item could be much clearer, for example:

- To explain why we are moving to a new team structure
- To agree new team roles and decide who will be responsible for what
- To answer any questions or concerns

If the agenda item states what outcomes are expected, like to agree new team roles, then it'll be easier to keep the discussion on track.

The meeting organiser or leader usually prepares the agenda, but everyone can help by asking for clarification if they need it, and when submitting items for the agenda, by making sure they're clear.

If a specific contribution is called for, this will need to be agreed with the presenter before the meeting, and it helps if the other participants also know what's expected of them.

Having an agenda like this doesn't guarantee that everything will go smoothly, but it does improve the chances of a more effective, and less time consuming meeting.



This requires a little more preparation, but time saved in the meeting, will be time saved for all the participants.

The bike shed effect

Do you ever feel that a lot of time during meetings is spent discussing trivial things?

Look at what happened at this finance committee meeting.

There are three items on the agenda: The nuclear reactor, the bike shed, and the refreshment budget for the Joint Welfare Committee.

The first thing the committee needs to do is to decide whether to go ahead with the £10 billion contract to build a nuclear reactor.

This is a large, technical, and controversial item and many aren't sure which 'side' they should be on. They realise that if they speak out here, and say something which later turns out to be wrong, they could look bad. There's very little discussion and the committee moves on to the next item which is the proposal to spend £10,000 on a new bike shed.

Although not everyone has direct experience of a bike shed, everyone can imagine one. In general, it's seen as good thing and a lot of time is spent discussing the different roof types, colours, and costs.

The last item on the agenda is to discuss whether to continue the Joint Welfare Committee's budget for refreshments.

This opens the door to endless discussion and the meeting organiser is tasked with finding out more information so that it can be fully debated at the next meeting.

These are exaggerated examples, but illustrate that there can be a tendency to spend a lot of time discussing trivial things, while avoiding the big ones.

So what can be done?

First, if everyone is aware that this sometimes happens, it can be seen for what it is, and the participants, or the meeting leader, can control it.

Second, an amount of time can be allotted to each agenda item.

Third, less important items can be positioned strategically in the agenda. Perhaps right at the beginning with a strict time limit and on the understanding that if anyone feels more time is needed for discussion, then the item will be rescheduled.



And fourth, consider whether the item actually needs to be discussed. If it only needs to be approved, the case can be set out in the meeting invitation, and the group asked that any objections or points to be considered, be sent through prior to the meeting.

Trivial items, and 'old chestnuts', might create a lot of discussion, but they may also detract from the real purpose of the meeting, and are likely to frustrate participants especially when they feel their time could be better spent on other things.

Personalities and team players

Meetings bring people together and are often most effective when there's a diverse set of ideas and opinions. However, personality traits can impact on the outcome of the meeting. Here are some you might be familiar with.

The monopoliser or dominator who thinks everyone is there to listen to them and that their views are more important than others. The opposer or negator takes the opposite view to everything and tends to put other people's ideas down. The cynic who has seen it all before and scoffs at most things and the joker who disrupts meetings by turning everything into a joke.

These personality traits, and variations of them, are fairly common. So what can we do?

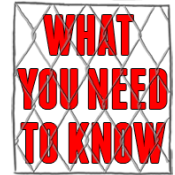
Perhaps the first thing is to recognise that we all have our own personalities, that we make up part of the dynamics in a meeting, and well, we're not perfect.

Secondly, being an effective participant in a meeting and being an effective team player are very similar. They're life skills which will always be helpful at work and in our personal lives. So let's look at some of the qualities of good team players and meeting participants. They

They help, support and value others. They communicate effectively and are good listeners. They understand they're there for a shared purpose and share information and resources. They are reliable, active, willing to collaborate or take the initiative.

It can be difficult to put the purpose of a group before our own feelings, to listen carefully and be supportive especially if we think a proposal or suggestion isn't the right thing to do.

But being supportive doesn't necessarily mean agreeing, listening isn't the same as keeping quiet, and being part of a team or a group doesn't mean giving up our individuality. But it is about whether what we do helps or hinders.



So are the meetings you attend more about the personalities and less about the agenda? Would it be helpful if part of your next meeting was used to talk about ways to improve the meeting process?

It's rare that this is discussed, and that might go some way to explaining why so many people feel meetings waste such a lot of their time, but that doesn't mean things can't change.