Stop the Meeting Madness

Poking fun at meetings is the stuff of *Dilbert* cartoons—we can all joke about how soul-sucking and painful they are. But that pain has real consequences for teams and organizations. In our interviews with hundreds of executives, in fields ranging from high tech and retail to pharmaceuticals and consulting, many said they felt overwhelmed by their meetings—whether formal or informal, traditional or agile, face-to-face or electronically mediated. One said, "I cannot get my head above water to breathe during the week." Another described stabbing her leg with a pencil to stop from screaming during a particularly torturous staff meeting. Such complaints are supported by research showing that meetings have increased in length and frequency over the past 50 years, to the point where executives spend an average of nearly 23 hours a week in them, up from less than 10 hours in the 1960s. And that doesn't even include all the impromptu gatherings that don't make it onto the schedule.

Much has been written about this problem, but the solutions posed are usually discrete: Establish a clear agenda, hold your meeting standing up, delegate someone to attend in your place, and so on. We've observed in our research and consulting that real improvement requires systemic change, because meetings affect how people collaborate and how they get their own work done.

Yet change of such scope is rarely considered. When we probed into why people put up with the strain that meetings place on their time and sanity, we found something surprising: Those who resent and dread meetings the most also defend them as a "necessary evil"—sometimes with great passion. Consider this excerpt from the corporate blog of a senior executive in the pharmaceutical industry:

I believe that our abundance of meetings at our company is the Cultural Tax we pay for the inclusive, learning environment that we want to foster...and I'm ok with that. If the alternative to more meetings is more autocratic decision-making, less input from all levels throughout the organization, and fewer opportunities to ensure alignment and communication by personal interaction, then give me more meetings any time!

To be sure, meetings are essential for enabling collaboration, creativity, and innovation. They often foster relationships and ensure proper information exchange. They provide real benefits. But why would anyone argue in defense of excessive meetings, especially when no one likes them much?

Because executives want to be good soldiers. When they sacrifice their own time and well-being for meetings, they assume they're doing what's best for the business—and they don't see the costs to the organization. They overlook the collective toll on productivity, focus, and engagement.

For one thing, time is zero-sum. Every minute spent in a wasteful meeting eats into time for solo work that's equally essential for creativity and efficiency. For another, schedules riddled

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with meetings interrupt "deep work"—a term that the Georgetown computer science professor Cal Newport uses to describe the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task. (In a recent study, managers across the board in the United States and China told us that this happens "far too often!") As a consequence, people tend to come to work early, stay late, or use weekends for quiet time to concentrate.

Another issue is the stiff price companies pay for badly run meetings. For example, Simone Kauffeld, of Technische Universität Braunschweig, and Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock, of the University of Amsterdam, found in a study of 20 organizations from the automotive supply, metal, electrical, chemical, and packaging industries that dysfunctional meeting behaviors (including wandering off topic, complaining, and criticizing) were associated with lower levels of market share, innovation, and employment stability.

Happiness at work takes a hit too. A study by Steven Rogelberg, of the University of North Carolina, and colleagues showed that how workers feel about the effectiveness of meetings correlates with their general satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their jobs, even after controlling for personality traits and environmental factors such as work design, supervision, and pay. Instead of improving communication and collaboration, as intended, bad meetings undermine those things. Consider the executive who stabbed her leg with a pencil. Did that staff meeting advance teamwork or set it back? A few positive experiences a week cannot make up for a lot of excruciating, wasteful ones.

The good news is, we've found that changing the way your team and your organization approach meetings is possible. In this article we describe a five-step process for that—along with the diagnostic work you'll need to do in advance. Often the results can be dramatic and extend far beyond the conference room. At a financial and regulatory consultancy we studied, for example, three months after managers began to rethink the firm's approach to meetings, a survey showed that employees perceived significant improvements in team collaboration (a 42% increase), psychological safety to speak up and express opinions (a 32% increase), and team performance (a 28% increase). Other aspects of organizational life improved as well, and respondents' ratings of satisfaction with work/life balance rose from 62% to 92%.

We have seen how much organizations can benefit when they focus their energy on transforming meetings instead of just tolerating them. Here's how to identify and address the meeting problems your group may face.

How Is Your Group Vulnerable?

Problems ensue when meetings are scheduled and run without regard to their impact on both group and solo work time. Often groups end up sacrificing collective or individual needs—or both—by default. Balancing those needs effectively is ideal, but few organizations do that. In a recent survey we conducted with nearly 200 senior executives from diverse industries, only 17% reported that their meetings are generally productive uses of group and individual time. Other respondents said their meetings fall into one of these categories:

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Wasters of group time.

Some organizations have relatively few meetings but run them poorly. As a result, individuals have sufficient time for solo tasks and deep thinking, but group productivity and collaboration are weakened because each meeting is inefficient. About 16% of the executives in our sample said this is true where they work.

A team at a global e-commerce company we studied had just one or two meetings a week, but they still felt like a waste of group time for several reasons. First, hours and locations often changed at the last minute, so many people arrived unprepared or didn't come at all. Second, the agenda was often vague or redundant with side conversations that had already occurred, so the meetings felt like a rubber-stamping of decisions made elsewhere. Third, when new issues were raised, next steps were usually left unclear, leading to more sidebar conversations outside the room. One software developer told us that he kept showing up for the meetings even though he rarely got anything out of them, because his attendance was expected by his manager and everyone else. As a workaround, he covertly did his own tasks during meeting time. While this may seem like a harmless way to maintain individual productivity in the short term, it causes group productivity and camaraderie to deteriorate over the long term. When people don't contribute to the discussion or pay attention to what's being said, the team fails to reap the full benefits of convening, and the meeting wastes everyone's time.

Wasters of individual time.

Sometimes meetings are relatively high in quality and therefore technically a good use of group time—but individuals' time dissipates because the sheer quantity of meetings crowds out solo work, and poor scheduling disrupts critical deep thinking. In our survey of executives, 13% said that their organizations struggle with this particular problem.

Here's an example of how it plays out: One private equity firm we examined had a rigorous protocol for running effective meetings. For each session, prework was sent out with adequate notice, clear goals were established, and meeting time was managed against an agenda. Group updates and decisions were consequently handled efficiently. However, as the firm grew over time, more and more meetings were added to the weekly calendar. Although they were well run, their sheer volume interrupted work flow and took away time that the investment staff could dedicate to critical individual tasks, such as sourcing new opportunities and deepening relationships with managers at companies the firm owned or sought to own. As this firm's experience demonstrates, excessive meetings force people to make trade-offs concerning how and when to accomplish their solo work. Sometimes tasks get dropped or shortchanged. But more often people steal from their personal time to get that work done, a sacrifice that research and practice have shown can lead to burnout and turnover—steep prices for both employees and organizations.

Wasters of both individual and group time.

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Many organizations we have worked with endure the triple whammy of meetings that are (1) too frequent, (2) poorly timed, and (3) badly run, leading to losses in productivity, collaboration, and well-being for both groups and individuals. This is the worst-case scenario—and, unfortunately, the most prevalent. The majority of our survey respondents—54%—put their meetings in this category.

One manager at a pharmaceutical company described finding herself in a one- to two-hour "market readiness" meeting every other week because the organizer really wanted her to attend, claiming that everyone's input was extraordinarily valuable. However, the group also typically sent out slide decks for the team to review in advance and then just walked through those decks during the meetings. As this manager asked herself and her team, "Why would you need to get one person from each sub team from every department into a room just to go over each slide individually when you've already sent us the entire deck?" Her team members commiserated, reporting that they each attended scores of similarly wasteful meetings that left them with little or no time for their "real work" throughout the day. In situations like this, group time is wasted, and individual time is obliterated.

Striking the Right Balance

Unfortunately, individuals can't solve these problems on their own. Just think how many times you've tried to reduce the number of meetings on your calendar—probably with limited success. Because so many people are involved in scheduling and running the meetings we attend, it takes a collective effort to fix them.

However, with a structured approach to analyzing and changing meeting patterns throughout your team or unit, you can make significant improvements. We've seen groups escape the meeting trap by working together to follow five basic steps:

1. Collect data from each person.

To get a clearer view of how meetings are affecting your group, use surveys or interviews to gather data and impressions from every individual. That will help you gauge the full extent of the problem: You'll learn how much resentment is bubbling under the surface and how much work isn't getting done during the day.

2. Interpret the data together.

Next, it's critical to come together as a team or a unit to digest everyone's feedback and analyze what is working and what is not. This must be an open, nonjudgmental discussion of the survey or interview findings. Neutral facilitators can help keep the conversation constructive. However, delegating the data interpretation to an outside consultant—or even just a subset of the team—can undermine success. You'll need contributions and analysis from all team members to generate the widespread understanding and buy-in required for the remaining steps.

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At the financial and regulatory consultancy we studied, for example, exploratory interviews revealed that meetings were chopping up calendars so badly that very few two- or three-hour blocks were left for deep-thinking work. Without enough quiet time to concentrate, the consultants felt that their creativity and productivity were being sapped. These disclosures served as a wake-up call for the managers who had been scheduling meetings without a full awareness of the impact they were having.

3. Agree on a collective, personally relevant goal.

We have found that personally benefiting from the group's initiative is a great motivator. For example, you might designate a certain amount of time each week for people to focus on independent work—whether in the office or at home. Giving them such flexibility and freedom can provide necessary relief in their schedules, along with an incentive to make the arrangement work. Declaring "meeting free" periods also forces the whole group to reevaluate meetings that were normally scheduled during those times and to ask who really needs to attend. As a result, we find, teams hold fewer meetings overall, and fewer people go to each one. The additional "white space" in everyone's calendar increases individual productivity and reduces the spillover into personal time.

Here's how this approach worked at a technology consultancy we examined: Members were based in the United States and India, so a handoff meeting was held each day—early in the morning for some and late at night for others to accommodate the 12.5-hour time difference. The long days were causing significant stress and fatigue on both sides: Early-morning calls were required, family dinners were missed, workdays were more than 12 hours long. Once the team had collected survey data from its members and realized the magnitude of the problem, it altered its approach: Each person was given one workday a week when he or she didn't have to participate in the handoff call.

In order to ensure the appropriate information exchange, team members had to find ways to cover for one another and keep everyone updated. Learning how to do that gave individuals the break they needed, but it also resulted in more shared knowledge and versatility in the group. Furthermore, people gained a deeper understanding of their colleagues' work, which led to better-integrated offerings for customers.

4. Set milestones and monitor progress.

As with any change effort, it is important that concrete and measurable progress be assessed and discussed along the way. Small, tangible wins provide something for people to celebrate, and small losses provide opportunities for learning and correction. Consider this example: At a global e-commerce company, a team of 30 employees spanning the United States and China told us that their weekly all-hands meetings were a pain point. Attendees were often on their phones or laptops. Because people were continually distracted, those who spoke had to repeat themselves frequently, making the time spent not only longer but also much less effective. To help address these problems, the team decided on a simple, tractable goal: Allow no outside technology at the meetings.

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At first several vocal engineers and even the team leader were resistant, feeling that they should have the right to use their devices, especially when meetings became boring or turned to topics outside their purview. For a while after the initiative was launched, friendly reminders ("No tech, man!") were necessary. But over time the new norm took hold, and even the manager self-corrected when he instinctively started to check his phone. The team began to see the benefits of this experiment. Meetings became more productive, and people were more engaged. As one engineer said, "This no-tech rule is fantastic! Now that people are more focused on the meeting, it's more efficient." Another team member started bringing a notebook to jot down thoughts rather than playing games on her phone. This small victory opened the door to setting other new norms, such as preparing materials more thoroughly ahead of time, keeping meetings as brief as possible, and ultimately reworking meeting cadences to better fit the team members' schedules.

5. Regularly debrief as a group.

Finally, we have found that it is critical to regularly and openly take stock of how people feel about the meetings they attend and about their work process more generally. Frustration, resentment, and even hopelessness are signals that people are falling back into bad patterns. Moreover, changing protocols and behaviors takes time, and sustaining momentum requires consistent attention and contact.

At a pharmaceutical company we worked with, the global medical-affairs division established two regular "pulse checks" to monitor the progress of an experiment it was conducting with meeting-free days: one check within the subteam and one across the division. At the beginning of each pulse check, participants answered four questions: How are you feeling? How valuable are the ways in which you are spending your time? How well are you working as a team? Is this sustainable?

The answers to these questions triggered substantive discussions, rich in emotional, strategic, and tactical content. Early conversations focused specifically on the meeting problem, but over time they increasingly addressed how team members approached their work—and one another. One manager said, "I'm impressed with how these meetings have allowed people to open up, particularly with [the manager] listening….Pulse checks are really insightful—they give me a good dose of reality…and they surfaced issues that resulted in more cross-coverage, people development, and teamwork. It sounds crazy that this little experiment could create these sorts of results, but it has profound implications far beyond the initial goal."

We suggest brief weekly check-ins for a few months, until the new norms, processes, and attitudes are in place. After that, every other week should do it. Regardless of the frequency of pulse checks, people should have regular, structured forums in which to express their frustrations and surface problems as well as to improve how the team works together.

For all these steps, leadership support is critical—but it doesn't necessarily need to come from the C-suite. We have found that a group can change its approach to meetings as long as

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the team leader has the authority to encourage people to raise issues, take risks, make mistakes, and discover new ways of working together. This can happen even if the group is closely connected to other groups in the organization. For example, the global medical-affairs division's refusal to attend interdivisional meetings on meeting-free days was met first with consternation, then with curiosity, and ultimately with change throughout the organization as norms were shattered and new ways of working were modeled.

A Conduit for Change

As we have witnessed at multiple companies in a range of industries, altering something as basic as meetings can have far-reaching implications. One manager reflected, "We started communicating more openly and honestly, which enabled us to better help each other….We helped each other prioritize, we helped each other find access to other resources, and sometimes we reallocated tasks or simply helped each other do the work."

Meetings do not have to be a trap; they can be a conduit for change. A process like this one can improve productivity, communication, and integration of the team's work, not to mention job satisfaction and work/life balance. In the end, better meetings—and better work lives—result.

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