Why Meetings Kill Productivity

Ray Williams - Wired for Success

Cancel 50 percent of your meetings and you'll get more work done.

How often have you sat through a meeting and said to yourself, "what a waste of time, I could be doing something better!" If your answer is yes, you are not alone. Meetings take up an ever-increasing amount of employees', and particularly managers' time. My experience in working with executives and managers is that 40-50 percent of their time is taken up with meetings, that either they call, or have to attend. Which leaves precious little time left to actually get work done.

What is the solution? Unfortunately it has been to expand the working day. According to the Center for Work Life Policy, the average professional workweek has expanded steadily over the last decade, with many people logging 60-70 hours per week. Some people even read their email messages while going to the bathroom.

A variation of Parkinson's Law applied to meetings goes something like this: "Meeting activities expand to fill the time available." *Ergo,* more time, more activities. If you set an hour for the meeting, people will use the hour, regardless of how much is on the agenda.

 As renowned economist John Kenneth Galbraith once said, "meetings are indispensable when you don't want to do anything."

In a survey reported in *Industry Week,* 2000 managers claimed that at least 30 percent of their time spent in meetings were a waste of time. According to a 3M Meeting Network survey of executives, 25-50 percent of the time people spend in meetings is wasted. And according to a survey by Office Team, a division of Robert Half International, 45 percent of senior executives

surveyed said that their employees would be more productive if their firms banned meetings for a least one-day a week.

Lisa Belkin, writing in the *New York Times*, describes a collaborative study by Microsoft, America Online and Salary.com regarding the actual amount of time workers worked in an average day and week. The study concluded that the average worker actually worked only three days per week or about 1.5 hours per day. The study identified that the rest of the working time was "wasted," with unproductive meetings heading the list.

According to a new Clarizen/Harris Interactive surey, only 40 percent of employees think status update meetings waste valuable time, and 70 percent say these meetings don't help them get any work done. And 67 percent of those surveyed say they are spending up to four hours per week getting ready for their next status update meeting.

And brain research may provide us with another reason to not have meetings. Research by University of Minnesota psychologist Kathleen Vohs and her colleagues as well as other neuroscientists, indicates that we have a limited amount of cognitive or what they call "executive" resources. Once they get depleted, we make bad decisions or choices. Business meetings require people to commit, focus and make decisions, with little or no attention paid to the depletion of the finite cognitive resources of the participants--particularly if the meetings are long. So if that is true, the three or four hour project meetings may be counterproductive.

Former Ernst & Young executive, Al Pittampalli, author of *Read This Before Our Next Meeting*, argues most meetings are mediocre and not necessary, "not about coordination but about a bureaucratic excuse-making and the kabuki dance of company politics. We're now addicted to meetings that insulate us from the work we ought to be doing." He contends that traditional meetings create an unnecessary culture of compromise and kill our sense of urgency. He outlines three types of meetings: convenience, formality and social in which a false sense of

urgency is created. Pittampalli argues that informal conversations, group work sessions and brainstorming sessions are not really meetings, and shouldn't be treated as such.

He presents 7 principles for good meetings if they need to be held. Of these principles, the Three most striking are:

1. **Meet only to support a decision that has already been made; do not use the meetings to make decisions;**

2. **The meeting should always produce a committed action plan;**

3. **A meeting should never be held for informational purposes.**

If you absolutely must have meetings, here's some suggestions on making them more productive, other than the standard criteria of having an agenda, and distributing it in advance with relevant information:

- Always start the meeting on time, regardless of people who are late;

- Do not review the contents of the meeting with the people who are late for the part they missed;

- Reduce the length of meetings to one hour maximum, and preferably less—try 30 minutes, even try 15 or 10 minutes;

- End the meeting on the agreed-upon time, even if the agenda is not finished;

- Invite fewer people to the meeting—productivity goes down with increasing numbers of participants;

- Allow the right for employees to decline their attendance, without having to justify themselves and without penalties;

- Reward those people who show up on time and even early with some kind of small gift or reward;

- Don't let people who are late to the meeting by more than 15 minutes join;

- Don't allow individuals to hijack or dominate meetings by frequent and endless conversation. It's the responsibility of the meeting leader to control this;

- End meetings early. People will be more positive about participating as a result;

- No laptops or phones are allowed to be active in meetings. Allowing people to be interrupted or diverting their attention lowers the value of the meeting;

- Don't tolerate meeting participants working on other things during the meeting. Ask them to leave;

- The meeting leader should enforce only one person speaking at a time, and to the point;

- Ask each meeting participant to prepare for the meeting in advance in response to a meeting question that will be dealt with in the future, not a rehash of the past (not just an agenda item);

- At the beginning of the meeting, ensure that the desired outcome(s) are stated clearly;

- Limit the action items of your meeting to no more than three;

- Interrupt people who either repeat what they have said, or repeat what someone else has already covered. These are time wasters.

- Whoever calls the meeting should "own" the meeting; don't allow someone in the group to try to take it over;

- Table any discussion that is not relevant to the agenda.

You'll have to excuse me now, I have a meeting to go to.