

Why meetings can harm employee well-being

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the organisational and human costs of poorly designed meetings, drawing on a series of studies conducted during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors argue that the central problem is not the quantity of meetings but their design, purpose clarity, and the structural inequalities they reinforce. Key findings presented include: managers spend an average of 23 hours per week in meetings; excessive meetings correlate with burnout and turnover intent, while well-structured ones can enhance engagement; women report greater difficulty speaking in virtual settings due to interruptions, screen invisibility, and nonverbal cue deficits; and no single meeting modality is universally effective across all objective types. The authors classify meeting objectives into four categories — information sharing, decision-making, emotional expression, and relationship-building — and identify practical design levers such as pre-shared agendas, structured speaking tools, and active moderation. The article concludes that meetings function as mirrors of organisational culture and power dynamics, and that improvement lies in intentional design rather than reduction in frequency.

Key Insights

1. Excessive meetings can cause burnout and increase turnover intention, yet well-structured meetings can simultaneously enhance employee engagement — indicating that volume and design are distinct variables.
2. Virtual meetings disproportionately suppress women's speaking time relative to in-person formats, driven by interruption patterns, screen invisibility, and dual cognitive loads from home-based participation.
3. No single meeting modality — audio, video, hybrid, or in-person — is universally optimal; effectiveness depends on alignment between modality choice and the specific objective of the meeting.

Practical Takeaways

- Meeting organizers can improve inclusivity and participation quality by using structured speaking tools such as hand-raising features, anonymous chat, and round-robin turn-taking to counteract dominance by vocal participants.
- Defining the primary objective of a meeting — whether informational, decisional, emotional, or relational — before selecting its format is identified in the research as a foundational design step.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article synthesises empirical findings from multiple studies involving thousands of meetings and hundreds of employees, lending reasonable breadth to its claims. The gender disparity finding is specific and grounded in survey data. The four-category typology of meeting objectives offers a structured analytical lens. **Limitations:** No specific studies are named, cited, or linked, making independent verification of the underlying research difficult. Methodological details — such as sample composition, study design, or effect sizes — are absent throughout. The article blends research findings with normative prescription in a way that is typical of practitioner-facing journalism rather than academic reporting. The co-authorship with a science communication expert signals public engagement intent, which may introduce simplification. The framing throughout leans positive toward meeting reform advocacy, which may compress the complexity of findings related to when fewer meetings are genuinely the better option.

Organizational Practice

The article describes widespread organisational practices including high-frequency meeting schedules averaging 23 hours per week for managers, adoption of virtual and hybrid meeting formats accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and informal norms in which meeting modality is chosen by habit or technological convenience rather than by purpose. It also notes the organisational tendency for meetings to beget further meetings as a corrective response to poorly run ones.

Strategic Implications

The research signals a growing body of evidence — categorised under 'Meeting Science' — that positions meeting design as a lever for workforce well-being, retention, and inclusion outcomes. The gender disparity data points to virtual meeting formats as a structural risk factor for inclusion initiatives if left unmanaged. The four-objective typology implies that organisations may benefit from differentiating meeting formats by function rather than applying uniform policies. The framing of meetings as cultural mirrors suggests that PMS diagnostics examining meeting behaviour could surface information about broader organisational dynamics around voice, power, and equity.

Validation Status: passed
