

How to make meetings worthwhile and productive – for everyone involved

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the persistent organisational problem of unproductive workplace meetings. The author argues that meetings are frequently ineffective due to poor planning, unclear objectives, and habitual scheduling rather than intentional design. Key evidence presented is largely anecdotal and normative, drawing on commonly cited practitioner wisdom — including a reference to a 1976 Harvard Business Review article — rather than empirical research. The author identifies core structural elements of effective meetings: defined objectives, appropriate attendees, pre-distributed materials, a clear agenda, and post-meeting follow-through. The piece also explores a psychological dimension, acknowledging that human social needs — such as belonging, status, and the desire to feel heard — drive the persistence of unnecessary meetings. The article concludes that the goal is not to eliminate meetings but to make them purposeful, shorter, and less frequent. The implications drawn are broadly practical, suggesting that conscious effort from all participants is required to convert meetings from a productivity drain into a functional organisational tool.

Key Insights

1. Meetings are often called out of habit rather than necessity, and the first discipline required is questioning whether a meeting is the appropriate format for the task at hand.
2. Human psychological needs — including social belonging, status, and the desire to feel heard — contribute to the perpetuation of unnecessary or poorly structured meetings.
3. Clearly defined roles for each participant, not just the right attendance list, are identified as critical to preventing discussions from losing focus and to encouraging active participation.

Practical Takeaways

- Organisations can reduce time lost in meetings by shifting information-sharing tasks to asynchronous tools such as email or online discussion platforms, reserving meetings for complex decision-making and collaborative problem-solving.
- Limiting both the frequency and duration of meetings, with a focus on specific problems rather than general updates, is presented as a method to protect employee time for independent work.

Critical Analysis

The article's primary strength is its accessibility and its acknowledgement of the psychological underpinnings of meeting culture, which is a less commonly addressed dimension in practitioner-facing content. However, the piece has significant limitations: it presents no original data, no referenced empirical studies, and relies entirely on widely circulated conventional wisdom. The single academic reference — a 1976 Harvard Business Review article — is cited by title only with no substantive engagement with its content. The advice offered (define objectives, set an agenda, follow up) is generic and has appeared in virtually identical form across decades of management literature. The article does not engage with contextual variables such as organisational size, remote versus in-person dynamics, or cultural differences in meeting norms. There is a mild positive bias toward the view that meetings are redeemable, without seriously examining structural or managerial conditions that make reform difficult in practice.

Organizational Practice

The article describes common organisational practices including recurring scheduled meetings, use of agendas, pre-meeting material distribution, post-meeting minutes or conclusions, and the use of online discussion tools as alternatives to synchronous meetings.

Strategic Implications

The article reflects a broader trend in PMS discourse toward protecting employee time and reducing non-value-adding activities as components of productivity measurement. The framing of meetings as a variable cost on organisational output — rather than an inherent good — aligns with emerging interest in workload management and meeting audits as part of performance improvement initiatives. The psychological dimension raised suggests that PMS frameworks addressing engagement and inclusion may need to account for the social functions that meetings serve, beyond their informational or decisional utility.

Validation Status: passed
