The Science and Fiction of Meetings

Article *in* MIT Sloan Management Review · December 2007

Impact Factor: 0.97

Cliff W. Scott
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

WINTER 2007 VOL.48 NO.2

MITSloan Management Review

Steven G. Rogelberg, Cliff Scott and John Kello

The Science and Fiction of Meetings

Please note that gray areas reflect artwork that has been intentionally removed. The substantive content of the article appears as originally published.

REPRINT NUMBER 48207

The Science and Fiction of Meetings

Employees spend increasing amounts of time in meetings and love to complain about them. But privately they see meetings as a productivity tool — one that companies can learn to use better.

STEVEN G. ROGELBERG, CLIFF SCOTT AND JOHN KELLO

Meetings are a central fact of organizational life. As a vehicle for communication, they can be extremely valuable, providing leaders with a mechanism to disseminate their vision, craft strategic plans and develop responses to the challenges and opportunities impacting their businesses. They can also be helpful for gathering ideas, brainstorming and generating higher levels of employee involvement. Yet as valuable and energizing as good meetings can be, too many meetings are seen as a waste of time — as a source of frustration rather than enlightenment.

Within organizations, meetings play a large role in employee socialization, relationship building and shaping of the culture. Beyond the subject matter at hand, they reinforce formal and informal reporting structures, and provide clues about organizational values and how power is distributed. In terms of cost, no meeting is free. The fully loaded cost of getting a chief executive officer and several vice presidents together for a couple of hours can run into the tens of thousands of dollars.

Ironically, there has been relatively little academic research on meetings in general and what makes the difference between a breakthrough meeting and one that becomes fodder for the comic strip "Dilbert." So we set out to explore some basic questions: How much time do people really spend in meetings? Are employees burning out from meetings overload? To what extent do people consider their time in meetings unproductive? And how can companies better use the time in meetings? To answer these questions, we looked at a variety of sources: research and application literature; our own experiences working with clients; and data from two multinational studies of employees. Based on these inquiries, we developed insights into the world of meetings and how organizations can use them more effectively.

How Much Time Do People Spend in Meetings?

Each day, workers in the United States attend about 11 million meetings, according to a 1998 MCI Conferencing white paper. Conservatively, the average employee spends approximately six hours per week in scheduled meetings, with supervisors spending more time than non-supervisors. According to some estimates, senior managers attend nearly 23 hours of meetings every week, and people working for large organizations tend to have more meetings than those in smaller ones.

There are few signs that meeting activity is leveling off or waning. One study suggests that the number of meetings attended by the average executive doubled between the 1960s and the 1980s. In a survey of 1,900 business leaders, 72% reported spending more time in meetings than they did five years ago; 49% expected time in meetings to increase in the future. To a large extent, the increases can be explained by changes in organizations. Today's organizations are flatter and less hierarchical; they make use of self-directed teams; they rely on empowerment; and they pursue improvement initiatives. The assumption is that employees have information and other resources that the organization needs to tap — that important ideas and innovation can emerge through employee interaction. The meeting is often the vehicle of choice.

Are Employees Experiencing Meetings Overload?

While one might expect that too much time spent in meetings would eventually affect employee morale, researchers have found no direct relationship between a person's obligations to attend meetings (the number of meetings and time spent) and his or her job satisfaction. Instead, they have found that a relationship between the demands of attending meetings and job satisfaction depends on an individual's level of "accomplishment striving." People with a strong desire to accomplish work goals tend to report poorer job satisfaction as the number of meetings they attend increases; those who are less goal oriented indicate that attending more meetings was actually desirable (perhaps for social reasons or to provide structure to an unstructured day).

When it comes to quality, meetings perceived as ineffective appear to have a large negative impact on how an employee feels at the end of the workday as well as on overall job satisfaction. In three different studies, the single most powerful factor in job satisfaction was how one feels about the effectiveness of the meetings he or she attends; negative feelings were exacerbated as the amount of time spent in meetings increased. Employees who attend a rash of bad meetings are stressed, dissatisfied with their jobs and more predisposed to leave.

What Do Employees Think About the Meetings They Attend?

The minute we tell an employee or leader we are studying meetings, many launch into what we refer to as the "meeting hell" lament: "If you want to know about bad meetings, you should shadow me for a day!" was a common response. Some of the data we collected was consistent with this anecdotal experience: More than half of the employees we surveyed said they publicly complain about their meetings. But there was an intriguing paradox within this self-characterization. The majority of the individuals in the "complainer group" actually admitted that they did not feel as negatively as they indicated publicly. Indeed, in private surveys employees offered accounts of effectiveness in meetings that were quite favorable. When asked about meetings in general from a productivity perspective, a significant majority responded positively: in round numbers, 17% called them very good to excellent; 42% rated them good; 25% rated them neither good nor bad; and just 15% rated them poor or worse. When asked to rate the productivity of their most recent meeting, the responses were even more positive: 36% rated them as very good to excellent; 33% rated them as good; 16% rated them as neither good nor bad; and 16% rated them as poor or worse. As positive as employees were about their most recent meetings, half of those surveyed saw opportunities for improvement.

Making Meetings Better

Given the amount of time and money that organizations spend on meetings, improving their effectiveness should be an important goal. In order to make that happen, companies need to focus on three fronts: improving employees' skills in meetings; improving managers' skills in meetings; and implementing best and innovative practices for running particular types of meetings.

Assessing and Upgrading Skills Although most employees believe that they have above-average meeting-oriented skills, that cannot be so. The reality is that many companies would see significant improvements if employees simply learned some of the basics: when to call meetings, how to prepare an agenda, how to encourage participation and how to manage cultural differences and resolve conflicts.

Given how much organizations invest in meetings, it is surprising how few bother to monitor employee skill levels or keep track of how meetings are being viewed internally. First, companies should conduct periodic surveys of how employees evaluate meetings; it could be part of the annual employee survey process. Examining the results by department, division and the organization as a whole is an effective way of diagnosing problems in meetings and laying out an improvement agenda.

To encourage skill development, organizations should include a behavior dimension on their performance appraisal instruments so that employees are held accountable. In addition to providing feedback from supervisors, organizations could provide a 360-degree view of an employee's effectiveness skills in meetings, drawing on comments from subordinates and peers.

Setting Standards The first principle of management of meetings is knowing when one is necessary and when other approaches will work just as well or better. Rather than leaving it up to individuals, organizations should have some general guidelines. For example, one might be that you call a meeting when unresolved issues are inhibiting the progress of interdependent projects. Another would be to meet only when a compelling agenda exists that requires full group input. The goal should be to meet not just for the sake of meeting and not just because a certain meeting is a weekly "habit." Once organizers opt to hold a meeting, they need to determine who actually needs to be there, who does not, and how they will keep interested parties who do not attend apprised of what's happening. Companies should make it acceptable for employees to opt out of meetings on subjects that are outside of their areas of interest or expertise.

Different parts of the organization will set their own standards on attendance at meetings. We favor a two-tier approach, with core group members and peripheral members participating in different ways. Core group members are the individuals directly involved in driving the subject areas on which the meetings are focused; their participation is crucial for maintaining momentum. The peripheral members will have important expertise and input to offer, but their involvement will not be necessary for every decision; rather than include them in every meeting, it may be more efficient to involve them only when their input is critical. Good communication about the importance of the two roles and why both exist will help guard against potential hard feelings associated with not attending each and every meeting.

Implementing Best Practices To run good meetings, organizers need to be aware of what works and what does not, and be prepared to adopt best practices. Here are some essentials to keep in mind:

Plan meetings in advance to maximize efficiency. Organizers should send out an agenda along with any relevant background materials before the meeting. When appropriate, they should invite attendees to suggest additional agenda items. The agenda should show time estimates for each topic, both to promote efficiency and to convey that each item will get sufficient time for discussion.

It is also important to pay attention to the sequence in which topics will be discussed. For example, in a meeting focused on problem solving, be sure to agree on a definition of the problem before talking about potential solutions. Likewise, solutions criteria need to be discussed before weighing specific solutions.

Establish clear ground rules. Meetings should be structured to encourage participation, focus and results. If the group is scheduled to meet on an ongoing basis, ground rules should be worked out in the first session. It is also helpful to define roles and expectations for both leaders and participants, and provide mechanisms for constructive feedback when these roles and expectations are violated.

Do not be afraid to experiment with new techniques and new locations. Meeting organizers should be open to trying new ways of stimulating participation and ideas. For example, it is sometimes helpful to divide participants into small groups during the meeting or to ask people to spend a few minutes quietly brainstorming. Another method is to appoint certain group members to play particular roles (for example, devil's advocate, the role of a customer or the role of a stakeholder not represented in the meeting). Similarly, it often helps to hold meetings in new environments to aid in stimulating creativity and breaking out of established ruts.

Build in mechanisms for assessment of meetings. To increase the effectiveness of a meeting, attendees should periodically critique it for what can be improved — if not for the remainder of the current meeting, then for the next one. Among other things, they should examine the pace and flow, and revisit the ground rules and their effectiveness.

SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATIONS DO NOT treat meetings as a necessary evil. Instead, they view them as a strategic resource and seek out ways to get the most from them. Rather than accepting meetings as a fact of life, they use them to solve problems and build more competitive organizations. Major improvements do not occur overnight but gradually — one meeting at a time. Improving just one meeting per week can lead to significant benefits for the organization while also contributing to the health and motivation of employees.

***Steven G. Rogelberg** is a professor of organizational science and psychology at the University of North Carolina, at Charlotte. **Cliff Scott** is an assistant professor of organizational science and communication studies at the University of North Carolina, at Charlotte. **John Kello** is a professor of psychology at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina. Contact the authors at sgrogelb@email.uncc.edu, cwscott@email.uncc.edu and jokello@davidson.edu.*

Reprint 48207. *For ordering information, see page 1.*

MITSloan
Management Review

PDFs ■ Reprints ■ Permission to Copy ■ Back Issues

Electronic copies of MIT Sloan Management Review articles as well as traditional reprints and back issues can be purchased on our Web site: *www.sloanreview.mit.edu* or you may order through our Business Service Center (9 a.m.-5 p.m. ET) at the phone numbers listed below.

To reproduce or transmit one or more MIT Sloan Management Review articles by electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying or archiving in any information storage or retrieval system) **requires written permission.** To request permission, use our Web site (*www.sloanreview.mit.edu*), call or e-mail:

Toll-free in U.S. and Canada: 877-727-7170
International: 617-253-7170
e-mail: smrpermissions@mit.edu

To request a free copy of our article catalog, please contact:

MIT Sloan Management Review
77 Massachusetts Ave., E60-100
Cambridge, MA 02139-4307

Toll-free in U.S. and Canada: 877-727-7170
International: 617-253-7170
Fax: 617-258-9739
e-mail: smr-orders@mit.edu