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## How to Reduce Meeting Footprint in Your Organization

Insight from Nathan Zeldes, March 30, 2014

### The *other* productivity stomper

If the number one cause of lost workplace productivity is [Information Overload](#), a close second is Ineffective Meetings. Unfortunately, while the former problem has [numerous remedies](#), the second suffers from a more limited selection of solutions. Most of these involve delivering to meeting attendees and chairpersons “Effective Meetings” classes and workshops, which tell them how to behave effectively during the meeting – a necessary and useful approach.

But there’s another thing you can add as you seek to reduce the negative impact of meetings in your organization: have less of people’s time spent on meetings, thus freeing them to do other work. At first this seems to mean holding fewer meetings, but of course that is an oversimplification: meetings are a vital part of doing business. What you really need is to optimize what I like to call the **footprint** of the meetings you hold.

### The concept of meeting footprint

**What you want to address** is the extent to which meetings interfere with the rest of the work across the entire workforce; this can be quantified in terms of total person-hours devoted to meetings per unit time (say, month). This is the footprint of your overall set of meetings, and you want to minimize it while retaining the functional benefit of the meetings you do need.

Obviously, this factor (in person-hours per month) can be represented as follows:

$F = n * a * t$ , where

n = number of meetings per month

a = average number of attendees per meeting

t = average duration of a meeting in hours

You can reduce F by reducing any of these three components; and ideally you also want to maximize at the same time the benefit of each meeting (a good measure may be the net value generated per attendee-hour); at the end of the day you want to have an optimal number of well-run meetings that support the organization’s bottom line. In this article, however, I focus on improving the footprint **F** by optimizing **n**, **a** and **t**. Every one of these factors has a benefit curve with a sweet spot in the middle; the trick is to find and attain this spot.

## Number of meetings

**The number of meetings held in any sizable organization** is huge, and a significant number of them are unnecessary or replaceable by better means. The calendars of many managers look like a solid swath of meetings, often double booked or worse. Since most meetings are set without a serious review of the need, it's a sure bet that the sweet spot lies below the current number of meetings. The trick is to identify which meetings can be cancelled without deleterious effects. Here are some concepts to consider:

- You can reduce the frequency of recurrent meetings – say, replace a weekly project review with a biweekly one (possibly while adding time, e.g. have a biweekly 1.5 hour meeting replace two weekly 1-hour meetings).
- You can eliminate entirely any meetings that have no discernible value. These may be remnants of long gone processes; they may also be meetings with a valid purpose but without the authority to make the decisions needed for that purpose.
- Merge two (or more) meetings into one combined meeting where it makes sense. For instance, if two project reviews have the same attendees, do them in one meeting.
- Explore asynchronous alternatives to traditional meetings. Today's sophisticated team collaboration tools allow you to create efficient distributed authoring, review and decision approval processes. You'll still need some face to face or teleconference meetings, but they can be short and far between, focusing on high value verbal interaction.
- Streamline decision making processes to empower meeting-free alternatives – not everything requires that ten people's approval to decide. The more empowered your people are to make decisions, and the crisper the processes for doing so are, the fewer meetings will be needed: in routine matters a phone call or a couple of emails may allow the right person to close the decision.

## Number of attendees

**The attendee roll in meetings** is seldom optimal. There are often people present who are not needed; meanwhile people that are needed for the meeting to work are often missing. Some ideas:

- Reduce the number of people invited to meetings. This is easy once you figure why each person was invited, and what they need to do. Questions to ask: can John represent Jane's position in the decisions to be made? Can Jill attend and later brief Jack? Is David there only because it was thought he'd be offended if he weren't invited? And so on.

Ultimately it all goes to standards of delegation and empowerment: you want fewer attendees (in fewer meetings, too) to be empowered to make the needed decisions.

- Excuse people from a meeting – or parts thereof – that they don't have to be in. Preferably do this ahead of the meeting: when you send out the agenda to a recurrent meeting, state which regular attendees are not required for the subjects to be discussed on this particular occasion – or which are required only in, say, the second half of the meeting (you can have someone text them to pop in at the right moment). Of course attendees achieve some of the same benefit by ignoring parts of the meeting and [doing email](#), but it's far better to have them out of the room.

An effective chairperson would also instruct attendees to leave the meeting once they're no longer required for the remaining part of the agenda.

## Meeting duration

**Meeting duration is the simplest factor:** you want to shorten meetings to the point that the work at hand is done – just. You're in search of the point where further shortening is not feasible.

- Redefine the goal or scope of the meetings you have. Parts of the agenda might be relegated to offline processes, which may be more effective and involve fewer people. Any 1-hour meeting you reduce to 45 minutes (or – dare we dream – half an hour?) is pure gain.
- Shorten meetings by improving their efficiency: run them well, in order to cover the same agenda in less time. For example, you might take action to have people all show up on time – that's 5–10 minutes saved right there.
- Introduce the concept of fractional-length meetings. Just because Outlook likes 30 minute increments doesn't mean you can't have meetings that last 50 minutes, or 20 minutes – or 37 minutes. "I'll give you back some time" is a common chairperson's phrase, but it's always reactive (when the agenda is exhausted early). Try to make it a proactive goal instead!
- Be creative! You gotta love the CEO who had all the chairs removed from the conference rooms...

## Managing your meeting ecosystem

**If you start from a bad state, your first concern** is to reduce the existing meeting footprint and free your employees to get some other work done. In this case you may want to consider:

- Map all the meetings in your organization, and tabulate what they're meant to accomplish; who calls them; how their duration, frequency and attendance are defined; who attends them and why...
- Analyze the collected data and identify opportunities for improvement. Involve all employees in this analysis exercise.
- Challenge each chairperson in your organization to reduce their meeting's footprint – and challenge attendees to push back on unneeded meetings and to suggest improvements.
- Educate employees to support all this – launch a PR campaign, cover it in meetings, provide training materials (but avoid the mistake of assuming a poster by itself will make a lasting change – you need to be more serious than that).

**In addition to optimizing existing meetings,** you'll want to put in place a system that will ensure *future* meetings are created and managed sensibly. To that end:

- Set up a norm of who may call meetings. It isn't at all absurd to limit this right (at least for recurrent or large meetings): as Intel cofounder Andy Grove once wrote, you need half a dozen approvals to buy a \$1000 copier, but anyone may call a meeting with 10 managers whose time may cost far more.
- Include in the lifecycle of a meeting a scrutiny of its parameters and continuing need. For instance, have a review system where any recurrent meeting needs to be reviewed and ratified by management every 6 months.

- Define indicators of meeting effectiveness and mandate they be tracked and reported by meeting chairpersons.
- Have managers lead and role model this attention to meetings' worth.
- Make sure the organizational culture is consistent with fewer and smaller meetings – this might involve elements of empowerment, delegation, CYA avoidance and more.

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**Nathan Zeldes has been leading improvement of knowledge worker effectiveness** for 20 years, at Intel and for other companies. He's exchanged knowledge with scores of organizations worldwide, and has founded the Information Overload Research Group, which he chairs. He now [advises managers](#) on improving their groups' results through improved tools and work processes.

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