15 WAYS TO MAKE MEETINGS MORE EFFECTIVE

At A Glance

Meetings provide opportunities for people to come together to resolve problems, make decisions, and exchange information. Professionals spend 25 to 75 percent of their time attending meetings, but there are good meetings and bad meetings. Good meetings save time, increase productivity, and solve problems, while bad meetings waste time, money, and resources. Many meetings are unfocused, last too long, and are scheduled unnecessarily. These types of experiences cost organizations billions of dollars every year. This Information Capsule summarizes 15 research-based strategies for increasing the effectiveness of meetings.

Meetings are essential tools for accomplishing goals in any organization. They provide opportunities for people to come together to resolve problems, make decisions, and exchange information. It has been estimated that professionals spend 25 to 75 percent of their time in meetings (Performance Management Company, 2007; Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004; McDargh, 2001; Kloppenbog & Petrick, 1999). A Verizon Conferencing White Paper (1998) reported that professionals attended 61.8 meetings per month (49.6 internal or local meetings plus 12.2 audio or video conference meetings). Assuming each meeting lasted one hour, these employees spent the equivalent of almost 8 full work days every month in meetings.

When meetings are carefully planned and conducted effectively, they can be extremely worthwhile (Bloomberg, 2007). For example, Verizon's Conferencing White Paper (1998) reported that 92 percent of meeting attendees said meetings gave them an opportunity to contribute and 68 percent said meetings gave them a chance to be recognized.

In Verizon's (1998) survey of over 1,300 professionals classified as heavy meeting-goers (those attending at least six meetings per month), the majority of meetings were rated as extremely or very productive (Table 1).

It is interesting to note that senior executives were more likely to judge their meetings as either extremely productive or very productive than other categories of respondents. The study's authors recommended further research to determine if this rating discrepancy reflected differences in actual meeting productivity or the

Table 1. Percent of Meetings Rated as Productive

Productivity Rating	Percent
Extremely productive	22
Very productive	44
Somewhat productive	27
Not very productive	6
Not at all productive	1

fact that executives had more positive attitudes toward their meetings.

Many meetings, however, are unfocused and last too long, preventing employees from working on the tasks they were hired to perform. Some meetings are also called unnecessarily (Hawkins, 2006; Kaye, 2005; Time-Management-Guide.com, 2005; Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004; Chapman, n.d.; Professional Practice Curriculum, n.d.). These types of experiences cost organizations billions of dollars each year in otherwise productive employee work time and have given meetings the reputation of being a major contributor to inefficient use of time (Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004).

A survey about staff meetings, answered by over 130 professionals working in diverse settings (including education), found that over 84 percent of respondents believed their staff meetings' efficiency could be improved. Respondents most often cited irrelevant discussion, lack of closure, and unclear responsibilities as the primary obstacles to meetings' effectiveness. Respondents estimated that their average meeting could be reduced by 16 minutes if inefficiencies were eliminated (Business Wire, 2006).

Table 2. Top 10 Meeting Problem Areas

Problem Area	Percent
Disorganized, rambling meetings	27
People who interrupt peers and try to dominate meetings	17
Cell phone interruptions	16
People who fall asleep in meetings	9
Meetings with no breaks	8
Long meetings without refreshments	6
People arriving late or leaving early	5
People who check their Blackberries during meetings	5
Meetings starting late	4
No written recap of meeting outcomes	4

Opinion Research USA examined tolerance thresholds in business meetings (InfoUSA, 2007). Table 2 displays the top 10 meeting "ouch points" or problem areas identified by survey respondents.

Verizon's Conferencing White Paper (1998) confirmed that employees didn't always attend scheduled meetings and, when they did, the meetings often did not receive their full attention (Table 3).

Table 3. Meeting Behaviors

Meeting Behavior	Percent Engaging in Behavior
Skipping meetings	96
Missing parts of meetings	95
Daydreaming	91
Doing other work during meetings	73
Dozing off during meetings	39

15 Strategies for Increasing the Effectiveness of Meetings

Effective meetings save time, increase productivity, and solve problems, while poorly run meetings waste time, money, and resources (Chapman, n.d.). The following strategies for increasing the effectiveness of meetings have been compiled from the literature and accompanying research. The strategies have been divided into three sections: before, during, and after the meeting.

Before the meeting

- **Make sure the meeting is worthwhile.** Experts strongly recommend that before an executive calls a meeting, he or she makes sure the meeting is worth the time of everyone involved. Meetings are expensive when the cost of the attendees' time is factored into the calculation. Business analysts have estimated that organizations use an average of 20 percent of their payroll on meetings. Consequently, they suggest that meetings be substituted with e-mails or memos whenever

possible (Heathfield, 2007; Hawkins, 2006; Kaye, 2005; Time-Management-Guide.com, 2005; Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004; Oregon State University, 2003; McDargh, 2001).

- **Plan the meeting.** Meeting planners should clearly identify the purpose of the meeting, determine the topics that need to be covered, and decide the best way to cover them. The amount of time realistically required to attain the meeting's goals should also be estimated. Experts agree that meetings should be kept as short as possible and agendas should never be set for more than one to two hours (Heathfield, 2007; Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004; Crow, 2002; St. Lawrence University, 2002; Duncan,1996; Rhode Island Sea Grant, n.d.).

Verizon's Conferencing White Paper (1998) found that meeting preparation was a critical component of productivity. The study's authors reported a direct correlation between preparation time and meeting productivity (Table 4).

Table 4. Meeting Productivity Ratings, by Average Preparation Time

Meeting Productivity Rating	Average Time Spent Preparing
High Productivity	53.5 minutes
Medium Productivity	28.7 minutes
Low Productivity	26.0 minutes

- **Decide on attendees.** The number of meeting attendees should be kept as small as possible. Only staff directly involved in the issues being discussed should be invited to the meeting. If a meeting is too large, it can take twice as long to make decisions. When attendees are affected by the topics covered in the meeting, they tend to be more task-oriented and less distracted by irrelevant issues (International Rice Research Institute, 2004; Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004; Rhode Island Sea Grant, n.d.).

Staff who have the necessary information and can make final decisions must be present. If key staff members are not available, the

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Five Reasons People Like Bad Meetings

♦ Bad meetings allow staff to avoid working on difficult tasks. Sitting in a conference room is easier than completing challenging assignments.

♦ Bad meetings don't hold employees accountable for making decisions. Without responsibility, no actions are taken and all employees appear to be performing well.

♦ Bad meetings provide all of the features of a good drama, including conflict and tension. Employees listen to self-aggrandizing reports, political squabbles, and coworkers being disparaged in front of their colleagues.

♦ Bad meetings are seen as an enviable perk when they serve food. Staff eat to offset their boredom and are saved the expense of buying their own food.

♦ Bad meetings entertain employees. Staff tell stories, trade jokes, and argue over trivia. Some meetings feature comedy performances by the office fool, while others include belittling remarks from the office bully.

Source: Kaye, 2005.

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meeting should be postponed. When subordinates attend meetings in place of critical staff members, they should have the authority to make decisions, not attend meetings simply to report back to their supervisors. (Minutes of the meeting can provide a similar recap for the missing staff member without wasting subordinates' time.) (Heathfield, 2007; Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004; Manktelow, 2003; Crow, 2002; InfoSource Learning, n.d.).

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- **Distribute the agenda prior to the meeting.** Agendas should be circulated at least one day prior to the meeting. Advance agenda distribution allows participants to prepare for upcoming discussions and any decisions that will be required. Relevant background

materials and lengthy documents or articles should also be distributed ahead of time so attendees arrive at the meeting well-informed (Lieberman & Morrison, 2007; Saskatchewan Regional Economic and Co-operative Development, 2007; Oregon State University, 2003; Crow, 2002).

During the meeting

- **Follow the agenda.** All meetings, even short, informal ones, should have an agenda that outlines specific items to be discussed. The agenda should assign a priority to each item, specify the person responsible, and allocate the amount of time required to cover the item. The agenda communicates important information to participants and is the method by which the meeting is controlled. It provides an outline for the meeting, can be used as a checklist to ensure that all information is covered, and helps the meeting stay on schedule (Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004; Crow, 2002; Chapman, n.d.; InfoSource Learning, n.d.; Wilkie, n.d.).

  Meeting analysts disagree on the order in which to place items on the agenda. Some experts insist that meetings start with the most important items. They claim that when meetings begin with routine topics, there is usually not enough time later in the meeting to cover more important issues (Hawkins, 2006; Manktelow, 2003; Wilkie, n.d.). Others recommend starting with routine items so staff can "warm up" with issues that take less time to resolve before moving on to more complex topics (Smart Technology, Inc., 2004; Sandelin, 1996; Chapman, n.d.).

- **Keep the meeting focused.** At the beginning of the meeting, the meeting leader should review the tasks to be accomplished and set priorities for the meeting. This helps participants understand exactly what is expected of them during the meeting and encourages them to focus on the tasks at hand (Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004). The scheduling of issues, presentations, and discussions should be limited only to those that can realistically be covered in the amount of time allotted. The urge to try to fit as much

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as possible into a meeting "as long as we're all together already" should be resisted (Bloomberg, 2007; Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004; Codence, 2001; InfoSource Learning, n.d.).

According to the Performance Management Company (2007), a quarter of meeting participants complained they wasted between 11 and 25 percent of the time discussing irrelevant issues. Meeting discussions must be guided back to the relevant issue when conversations go off-topic (Bloomberg, 2007; International Rice Research Institute, 2004; Crow, 2002; Codence, 2001; GovLeaders.org, n.d.). Matson (1996) cautioned that the challenge for meeting leaders is to keep the meeting focused without discouraging employees' valuable input.

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- **Encourage participation.** Participation in meetings has been found to result in better quality decisions, more highly motivated staff, and higher levels of employee commitment to the organization (Codence, 2001). The Performance Management Company (2007), however, reported that one-third of attendees felt they had minimal or no influence on meeting discussions. Meeting leaders should encourage active participation by each attendee so all ideas and points of view are considered in the decision-making process (Heathfield, 2007; Manktelow, 2003; Oregon State University, 2003).

- **Start and end the meeting on time.** All meetings should start on time so that those who arrived promptly are not punished. Starting on time communicates that the meeting is being taken seriously. When participants know the meeting will start on time, they are more likely to be punctual. If an employee arrives late, the meeting leader should not review what

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has been covered up to that point, but instead offer the opportunity for the latecomer to catch up on what he or she missed at the end of the meeting (Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004; Manktelow, 2003; Oregon State University, 2003; Codence, 2001; Antleader Leadership Series, n.d.; GovLeaders.org, n.d.; Teaching Expertise, n.d.).

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Meetings should never run over their allotted time (Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004; Manktelow, 2003; Oregon State University, 2003; Codence, 2001; Antleader Leadership Series, n.d.). If necessary, a timekeeper can be assigned to signal the group when each agenda item's time limit is running out (Bloomberg, 2007; Hawkins, 2006; Crow, 2002; InfoSource Learning, n.d.). Sandelin (1996), however, cautioned that the commitment to ending the meeting on time should not encourage a "let's just make a decision and get out of here" mentality that often results in poor decisions. Instead, unresolved issues should be scheduled for a future meeting.

- **Consider participants' physical needs.** Scheduling breaks is essential to keeping participants focused and productive. Building breaks into the agenda will

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result in more attentive, less fatigued attendees. Studies have found that the average person pays attention in a meeting for approximately 20 minutes before becoming restless, daydreaming, or working on other projects (Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004). Chapman (n.d.) stated that, unless staff are participating and fully involved, their concentration will begin to drop after just 45 minutes. After 90 minutes, there is a sharp deterioration in attendees' attention and participation. Additionally, it is distracting for everyone when people are continually walking into and out of the meeting room because there are no scheduled breaks (Smart Technologies,

Inc., 2004). Another benefit to scheduling breaks is that they provide attendees a chance to discuss their questions or comments informally in smaller groups without interrupting the meeting with whispers or note writing (Saskatchewan Regional Economic and Co-operative Development, 2007; Sandelin, 1996).

Other physical needs of the group should also be considered. Experts have offered the following suggestions (Codence, 2001; Duncan, 1996; Sandelin, 1996; Chapman, n.d.):

- Light refreshments should be available to help sustain energy levels and keep participants from getting irritable when their blood sugar is low.
- Because people often have lower energy levels after lunch, make sure attendees are actively involved in meeting activities at this time.
- Participants should have easy visual and spatial access to the meeting leader and presenters or the area of the room where most of the attention is focused.
- Small, overcrowded rooms get stuffy and create tension. Larger rooms are more comfortable and encourage individual expression.

- **Use visual aids.** Experts recommend using visual aids, such as posters, diagrams, and videos, to maintain participants' interest. Flip charts and white boards are especially useful. They create a record of the work product, organize thinking, and help keep the meeting on track (Saskatchewan Regional Economic and Co-operative Development, 2007; Duncan,1996; Teaching Expertise, n.d.). It has also been suggested that a large agenda be posted at the front of the room so participants can refer to it throughout the meeting (Codence, 2001; Sandelin, 1996). Smart Technologies, Inc. (2004) recommended that meeting leaders use a variety of audiovisual media to appeal to different learning and communication styles.

- **Create an issue bin.** An issue bin, also called a parking lot, is a place to put ideas and

problems that arise, but are either tangential or too complex to deal with during the meeting. The issues are written down with the understanding that they will be discussed later when they fit in better with the subject matter, there is more time to discuss them, or key decision makers are present. The issue bin is a tool for maintaining control and focus during a meeting without losing important ideas. Its use acknowledges attendees' concerns and assures them their issues will not be ignored. To use the issue bin effectively, time should be scheduled near the end of the meeting to review the issues in the bin and determine if they still merit discussion, perhaps in a future meeting, or if they were resolved during the course of the current meeting (Eikenberry, 2006; Duncan, 1996; InfoSource Learning, n.d.).

- **For large meetings, select a meeting facilitator.** Many organizations use a facilitator to conduct large meetings. The facilitator is not the meeting leader or a meeting participant, but a coordinator who objectively runs the meeting process by keeping the group focused and productive, directing discussions, resolving conflicts, and summarizing key points. Some organizations train employees in facilitation skills and rotate the assignment, while other organizations use the same small group of trained employees (Heathfield, 2007; Hawkins, 2006; International Rice Research Institute, 2004; St. Lawrence University, 2002; Duncan, 1996; Sandelin, 1996; Rhode Island Sea Grant, n.d.).

- **Conclude with a summary of the meeting.** Time should be allotted at the end of each meeting to review and summarize the main points that were covered and any decisions that were made. Attendees sometimes leave meetings with different ideas about the agreements reached and the required follow-up. A brief summary of the meeting's proceedings assures that participants agree on meeting results and assignments (International Rice Research Institute, 2004; Manktelow, 2003; Oregon State University, 2003; St. Lawrence University, 2002; Codence, 2001; Verizon, 1998; Duncan,

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A Note on Groups that Meet Regularly

Verizon's Conferencing White Paper (1998) reported that more one-time meetings were rated as extremely or very productive (68 percent) than recurring meetings (60 percent). The study's authors stated that these results were expected since one-time meetings are likely to address new material that may be of more interest to participants, whereas recurring meetings (such as staff meetings) usually address more familiar issues. Experts have offered the following suggestions to groups that meet on a regular basis:

♦ Set meeting dates in advance. If possible, try to schedule a year's worth of meetings, then distribute the dates to all group members in order to maximize attendance.

♦ Agree on a set of ground rules or guidelines to govern meeting behavior, such as:
  ‣ be punctual;
  ‣ no backtracking for latecomers;
  ‣ no beepers or cell phones;
  ‣ conversations will be limited to the topic being discussed;
  ‣ everyone will be included in discussions; and
  ‣ feedback will be given directly and openly.
Ground rules should be developed and agreed upon by the whole team at the initial meeting and reviewed regularly to determine if revisions are needed.

Sources: The Ball Foundation, 2002; Bacal, 2000; Chapman, n.d.; InfoSource Learning, n.d.; Teaching Expertise, n.d.).

1996; Matson, 1996; GovLeaders.org, n.d.; Rhode Island Sea Grant, n.d.).

- **Evaluate the meeting.** Meeting effectiveness should be reviewed at the end of each meeting and suggested improvements applied to the next meeting. Anonymous meeting evaluations encourage groups to take responsibility for improving the quality of their meetings. At the conclusion of the meeting, attendees can be asked the

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following questions (Heathfield, 2007; Performance Management Company, 2007; Hawkins, 2006; Smart Technologies, Inc., 2004; Oregon State University, 2003; The Ball

Foundation, 2002; Codence, 2001; Duncan, 1996; Sandelin, 1996):

- Did we achieve the meeting's stated goals?
- What processes worked well in this meeting?
- Is anything preventing us from achieving our meeting goals?
- What suggestions do you have for overcoming any obstacles encountered during the meeting?
- What aspects of the meeting did you like and dislike?
- What would help us make better use of our time?
- What can we do to improve our next meeting?

After the meeting

- **Distribute minutes of the meeting.** Minutes of the meeting should be distributed to all participants within three or four days. Minutes serve as a future reference in case questions or problems arise. Their timely distribution reinforces the importance of the meeting and reduces errors of memory. If minutes were not taken during the meeting, attendees can be sent a brief record of what was discussed, what was agreed, actions assigned to specific individuals, and applicable deadlines. Staff who could not attend the meeting should also receive a copy of the minutes (Manktelow, 2003; Oregon State University, 2003; Crow, 2002; Codence, 2001; Rhode Island Sea

Grant, n.d.; Teaching Expertise, n.d.; Wilkie, n.d.). Chapman (n.d.) noted that when the meeting leader is seen taking notes, it reinforces the importance of the issues being discussed.

Summary

Meetings are essential tools for accomplishing goals in any organization. They provide opportunities for people to come together to resolve problems, make decisions, and exchange information. Professionals spend 25 to 75 percent of their time attending meetings. One study reported that professionals spent the equivalent of almost 8 full work days every month in meetings. When meetings are carefully planned and conducted effectively, they can be extremely worthwhile; however, many meetings are unfocused, last too long, and are called unnecessarily. These types of experiences cost organizations billions of dollars every year. Research suggests that the majority of employees believe their meetings' efficiency could be improved. This Information Capsule summarized 15 research-based strategies for increasing the effectiveness of meetings. Strategies included making sure meetings are worth the time of everyone involved; keeping meetings as short as possible, with agendas never set for more than one to two hours; limiting attendees to only those staff directly involved in the issues being discussed; and starting and ending meetings on time.

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