

# Beyond the agenda. How to reform meetings and stop wasting time.



We have to stop meeting like this. Unproductive meetings have long been a reality of the business world. With technology like instant messenger, text, and email one might expect to see fewer meetings, however, the problem has worsened. Data shows that people spend about 10% more time each week in meetings compared to twenty years ago. However, just 50% of time spent in meetings is considered worthwhile by attendees.

Those numbers aren't a ringing endorsement of meetings and their value, so what can you do about it? You may not be able to decline all the pointless meetings on your calendar. However, you can ensure that those you and your team hold don't waste anyone's time.

You're likely familiar with some of the basic recommendations. Set an agenda, don't make meetings longer than needed, ask if you need a meeting or if an email will do. Yes, unproductive meetings still happen. That's because meetings can't be fixed just with a simple checklist, it takes ownership and a new perspective.

## **Don't rely on an agenda to be productive**

Preparing and distributing formal meeting agendas to keep conversations on track is a proven tactic thought to ensure productive meetings. So why are so many meetings still a waste of time?

According to Dr. Steven Rogelberg, author of *The Surprising Science of Meetings*, it's because the true

determinant of meeting productivity starts with the mindset of the organizer. If that person is willing to see themselves as ultimately responsible for everyone's time during the meeting, there's a massive perspective shift.

When the organizer takes on the vantage point of "time steward," they must consider important questions like:

- Who really needs to attend a meeting?
- What needs to be discussed and resolved in the particular meeting to move to the next productive step?
- How much time is required to make progress?

During the meeting, the organizer should be focused on the overall meeting experience from the perspective of attendees. This involves repeatedly asking themselves the following questions.

- Who needs to be talking?
- Who needs to provide feedback and answers?
- How much progress is being made based on the amount of time left in the meeting?
- What still needs to happen to reach the end goal of the meeting, before time runs out?

With this real-time view, the meeting leader can then ask the right questions and facilitate conversation to guide the team accordingly.

## **Know that remote meetings require a different approach**

Fifteen people physically sharing space in a conference room aren't guaranteed to be more productive than 15 employees on a call. However, in-person meetings demand a level of presence that sitting behind a screen does not.

To ensure that every participant in a remote meeting is actively engaged, leaders must structure the meeting differently.

Instead of a few people doing the bulk of the speaking, assign topics to each person on the call to cover. You can also designate different facilitators for each meeting, giving everyone a chance to be more involved.

If there is no logical, active role an attendee could play in the meeting, reconsider if they need to be at the meeting at all.

## **Stop scheduling recurring meetings**

Meeting tools used by most companies include features that allow automatic scheduling for recurring blocks of time. Typically you can choose the same group of attendees in set increments, like 30 minutes or one hour, for many months out.

This is convenient for the meeting organizer. However, it also guarantees some people who do not need to attend in a given week will waste their time and add no value. Plus, recurring meetings with the same group of people almost ensure attendees won't be as committed to resolving issues once and for all by the meeting's end. Why should they, when the problems could be solved just as easily next week?

Rogelberg suggests keeping meeting sizes as small as possible, and adjusting the attendee list based on what is to be discussed or decided at each meeting. People become more mentally and physically present when there is less time allotted for a meeting. That's why he suggests scheduling odd blocks of time, like 32 minutes instead of a half-hour. This can create a sense of a "ticking clock" that reminds attendees there is a finite amount of time to achieve the meeting's purpose.

**Additional resource:** [No tricks, just tips: 5 ways to make your team meetings more impactful.](#)