The Ultimate Meeting Guide:

How to Run a Meeting Like a Pro

Office

Microsoft

Introduction

Without a doubt, meetings remain an essential part of doing business. Among many other benefits, they ensure your teams stay on the same page with the information they need to get things done. Unfortunately, they get a bad rap for taking up time and resources—ultimately costing your business.

Surveys say employees historically hate meetings. So much so that almost half of respondents polled by Harris for Clarizen (46%) said they'd rather do nearly anything else than attend status meetings. Moving to Antarctica was more favorable for 6% of the respondents, 8% would endure a root canal, and 17% would prefer to watch paint dry than be stuck in a meeting.

So, why are meetings earning such a bad rap?
Mostly, it's because of the sizable gap between the increasing volume of meetings and the value derived from the time spent.

"15% of an organization's collective time is spent in meetings," according to Bain & Company via Harvard Business Review. And as everyone knows, time is money in any organization.

So, what can a business do?
The short answer is: Conduct simple, direct meetings focused on clear action items, so that the time spent feels convenient and useful for your employees.

CONSIDERED BETTER THAN MEETINGS

Watching Paint Dry
17%

Enduring a root canal
8%

Moving to Antarctica
6%

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Do You Even Need to Meet?

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When is a meeting necessary? Should a meeting be convened at all? They're valid questions, and could save you significant time and money.

Meetings without a clear agenda often lead to unproductive behaviors from attendees. A survey conducted by Bain & Company found that $60 million, 20% of the total cost of meetings, was squandered in unproductive activity in a sample 10,000 employee business.

Watch your company's bottom line and value your employees' time by first determining whether a meeting is necessary. If it is, then follow some best practices for making it a success.

Here are some simple criteria to consider before calling or attending a meeting:

- **What is the action item of the meeting?** Is it decisive or informing?

- **What is the size of the meeting?** If the number of people attending the meeting is greater than 10, it's more of a presentation than a meeting.

- **Is the meeting simply to inform a handful of people?** If the time will be spent discussing status or debriefing information, you likely only need to send a memo or email, or publish a document on your company's intranet/website.

- **Will the meeting solve a problem?** Will it help you and your peers reach an important decision, or persuade a group of people to support a proposition? Is a brainstorming session needed to gather new information for a product or service? If you answered no to any of these questions, you don't need a meeting.

- **Is there a better alternative, such as using a tool with real-time chat or team announcement features?** If so, explore the merits of such a tool before requiring people to pause whatever they're doing to attend a meeting.

- **Will suspending or canceling a meeting negatively impact your employees' abilities to complete the tasks assigned to them?** If yes, go ahead and convene the meeting.

Simple, Successful Meetings Have Many Benefits

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A productive meeting ends on time or even early, yet still covers everything you set out to do. It doesn't drone on forever, nor does it make employees wonder why they're even there. After all, the more efficiently you use your meeting time, the more time you have to get the rest of your work done. Simply put: A positive meeting experience produces positive results for you and your organization.

1. Team collaboration at its finest

According to studies done by Harvard Business Review, up to 35% of value-added collaborations come from a meager 3–5% of employees. Even productive employees, however, have finite time and energy, and every request for them to participate in decision-making processes leaves them with less to work on their own tasks. The challenge, therefore, is encouraging meaningful collaborations beyond a small group of people.

Communication is essential for team collaboration, and meetings provide a means for members to convey their points to others on the team. In cases where disagreements that hinder progress and negatively affect team morale are known to arise, following a clearly planned agenda minimizes distraction from your primary purpose and keeps the meeting on track—leaving less (or no) room for misaligned communication.

2. Clear and actionable direction

Disconcerting Gallup study results revealed that only half of surveyed employees strongly feel they know and understand what is expected of them—a sobering statistic, when considering businesses' ongoing efforts to hire top talent and develop employee objectives that align with company goals. One way to address this is to make your expectations crystal clear, and this includes meeting expectations.

Only 50% of Gallup-surveyed employees know what they're expected to do on the job.

But the right use of a meeting can clear that confusion. Just remember the old cliché: "Less is more." Concisely run meetings stay on point and convey a direct message. When meetings are easy to follow, participants leave the room with clear answers to their important questions. Even if they come to the meeting with only a vague sense of the agenda, efficiently run meetings provide actionable direction that employees can immediately implement in their daily tasks.
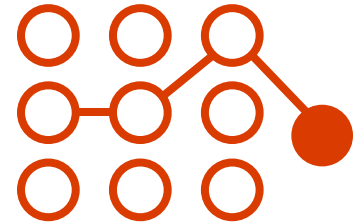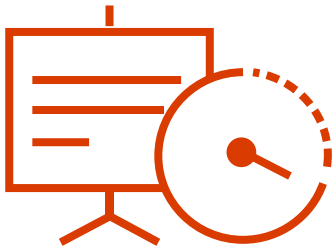
3. Increased willingness to attend

Short meetings with clear agendas can improve how employees do their jobs and help moderators expertly steer tangential discussions back on track. Often, employees leave such meetings more willing to attend again because they feel it was worth their time and attention.

Follow the TED Talk lead
Maximum length: 18 minutes

With talks translated into 90 languages held across 145 countries, TED Talks keep listeners coming back for more. Speakers give short, 18 minute talks on a variety of subjects, from big ideas to product demonstrations. Carmine Gallo, author of the book *Talk Like TED: 9 Public-Speaking Secrets of the World's Best Minds*, quotes TED curator Chris Anderson's explanation for the brief time limit:

"It's long enough to be serious and short enough to hold people's attention. [...] It has a clarifying effect. It brings discipline."

—Chris Anderson | TED curator
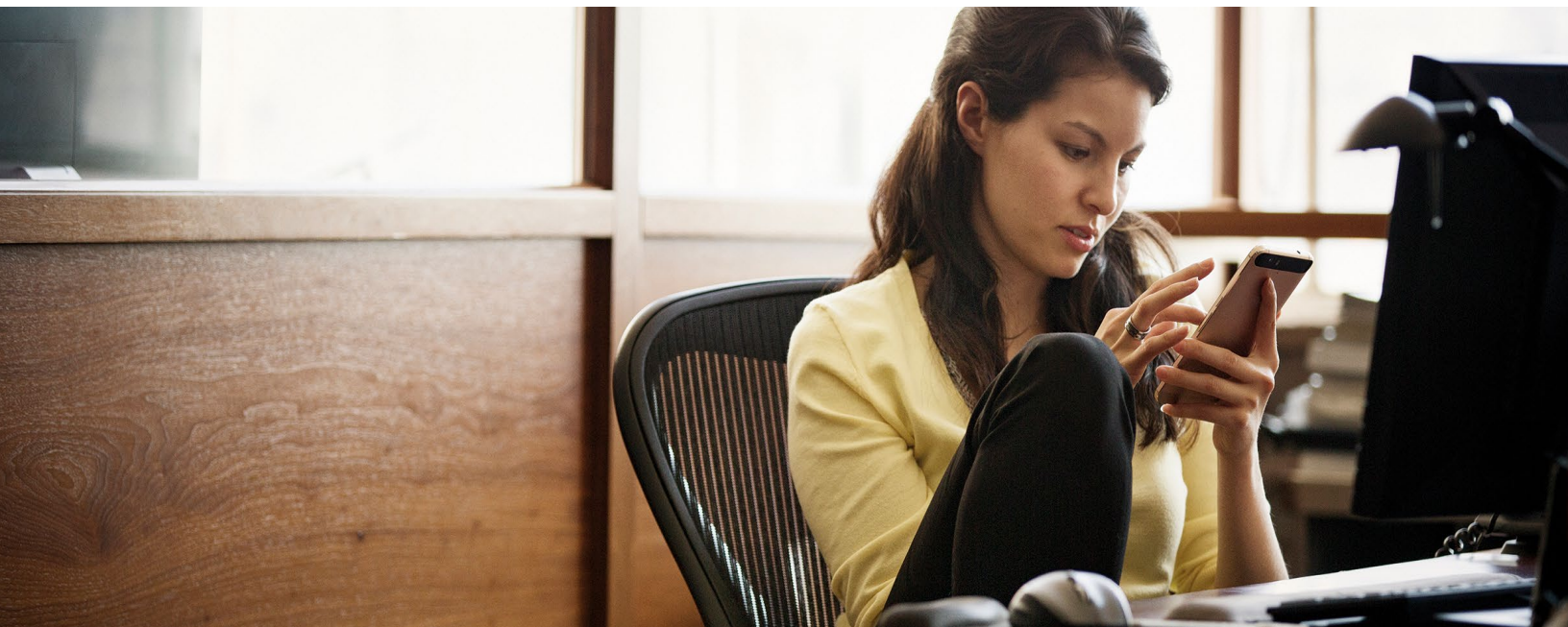
4. Stronger accountability

Micromanagement is less effective than you might think. Forbes reported a Robert Half study revealing that more than half of 450 surveyed employees have worked under micromanagers—with dismal results.

What then should a manager do? Increasing employee accountability keeps employees on task without constant oversight, and productive meetings can help. Well-structured, efficient meetings ensure all members understand their role in whatever's being discussed—enabling facilitators to better hold team members accountable throughout the duration of a project. With prior planning and streamlined discussion, meetings can be a great project management tool rather than a time-management nightmare.

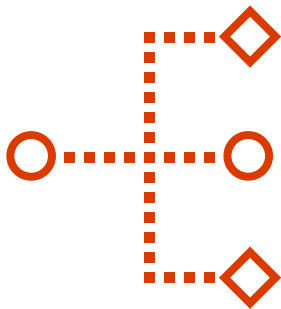## 60% of surveyed employees have worked with a micromanager

68% of them felt the experience was demoralizing.

55% said it diminished their productivity.

5. Quality decision-making

Effective meetings also enable better decision-making outcomes, providing a designated space and time to take relevant parties' input into consideration. It's a workflow technique in high demand, when you consider statistics across industries that highlight gaps in collaboration and communication.

For instance, nearly all (91%) of creative marketing industry workers in a 2016 Digital Trends report conducted by Adobe and Econsultancy say their main business goals include "improving collaboration between creative and marketing teams." Teams across today's modern business landscape need the ability to retain close alignment, especially in crucial decision-making functions. And effective collaboration techniques help ensure everyone stays on the same page.

Meet Like a Pro

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Traditional boardroom meetings' heyday has come and gone, leaving a trail of ineffective and directionless leadership behind. But when applied to current meetings that feature more modern technology capabilities for broader inclusion (like phone and video conferencing), yesterday's lessons can help improve today's business for greater success.

With the advent of online meetings, new issues arise on top of traditional meetings' associated challenges. But there's hope for the business world among team leaders who approach their meetings with thoughtfulness and strategy.

Here are some suggestions for tackling these frustrations head on.

1. Provide a clear agenda.

Meetings with no set agenda can feel pointless and like a collective waste of time. When they lack a sense of direction, meeting participants can talk for hours without accomplishing anything of value. Stay on task with an agenda that guides your discussion and distinctly outlines each party's responsibilities. Distribute the agenda before the meeting begins to communicate the topics and desired outcomes you expect ahead of time; this sets the group's incoming level of knowledge and helps make the meeting time more actionable, rather than purely informative. Then send your team members away knowing precisely what needs to be done and how, and watch them return ready and able to take on more.

2. Keep time in mind.

Time remains our scarcest resource and, unfortunately, is the easiest to squander. Harvard Business Review reported that a weekly executive meeting in an unnamed top company took 300,000 work hours a year to support, not including prep time. If time indeed is gold, that sure was a lot of gold invested in one weekly meeting.

Meetings that start and end off schedule can send signals that you don't care about efficiently using the time, and ending late has a domino effect on productivity for the rest of your day's tasks, as well as the other participants'. Rushed meetings can easily lose focus and end in a hurry without clear directives. Specify attendance expectations for present and alert participation during the allotted times, then lead by example.

3. Ease the burden of note-taking.

Individual note taking can lead to miscommunication and ineffective multi-tasking, as participants juggle messaging comprehension with meaningful discussion. Consider enabling others to better engage throughout the meeting by determining the role of the organizer at the outset and deciding who will send out follow-up notes for the group at the end.

4. Provide visuals to follow along.

Like grade school show and tell taught us years ago, we remember better with a visual. Presentation guides better retain attendees' collective attention when discussing intricate details or moving from one topic to the next—so your team members don't mentally drift and miss important information. Not to mention, many people better comprehend a subject when they also see what's being discussed; taking the conversation from theory to reality.

A University of Iowa study of 100+ undergraduate students found the human brain retains visual and tactile information better than auditory stimuli. While time delays caused retention to decline across the board, results revealed that students were least likely to remember what they heard—with accuracy rates at 78.3%, 78.8%, and 61.8% for visual, tactile, and auditory messaging, respectively.

Learning Aids for Retention

Visual   Tactile   Auditory

5. Send a post-meeting recap.

It's far too easy to forget everything discussed in a meeting once you move on to your next task. A classic concept illustrating the decline in memory retention, German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus' forgetting curve shows the brain's difficulty in retaining information without any memory aids. Within a month's time, the brain only retains about 2–4 minutes' worth of information from an hour-long lecture. How much are your attendees retaining after your latest meeting?

CURVE OF FORGETTING

The Curve of Forgetting describes how we retain or get rid of information that we take in, based on a one-hour lecture.

100%   10 minutes   5 minutes   2-4 minutes

Day 1   Day 2   Day 7   Day 30
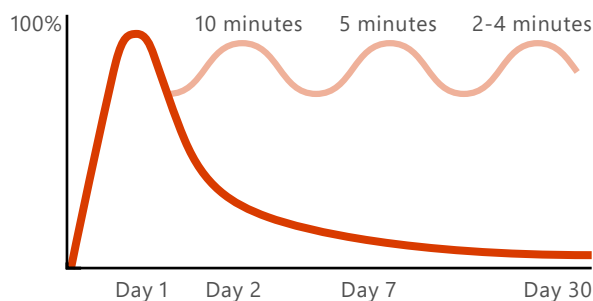
Post-meeting recaps can help, maintaining a record of all your main points of discussion for future reference. Best sent as a follow-up email as soon as possible after the meeting, post-meeting recaps help employees better retain information discussed, provide an opportunity to highlight key takeaways, and ensure everyone leaves on the same page.
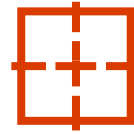
6. Define clear action items or outcomes.

Without established action items, don't expect favorable meeting outcomes. All attendees need to feel a sense of inclusion and direction to perceive that it was time well spent. And if post-meeting expectations are unclear, you're likely to be disappointed in the meeting's results.

Chapter 5

Manage Your Online Meetings With Ease
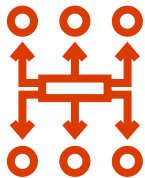
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As outlined above, traditional in-person meetings face plenty of challenges to productivity success. Taking meetings online presents many new possibilities, such as involving people off-site, recording the discussions for future reference, and many more opportunities that the traditional meeting lacks. Yet, despite the many benefits of online meetings, they also present an additional set of challenges, but a little planning will go a long way toward ensuring a productive end result.

PREPARATION. Don't let setup issues cut into your meeting time. In order to avoid technical delays, make sure everyone involved has the right technology, invites, and call-in info.

Check your tech and hardware: Don't wait to the last minute; verify all your URL links, dial-in lines, microphones, and video work before sitting down to meet.

- One person joining? Use a headset for best quality.
- Two or more people? Find a device certified for your meeting software.

EFFICIENCY. Efficiency is especially important when managing online meetings with off-site attendees, but you can improve efficiency with proper meeting management. The size of the meeting can dictate the overall atmosphere and the flow from topic to topic. Have a strategy in place that lays out how people will interact, who speaks when, and how the meeting will be organized. While smaller meetings may benefit from free-for-all collaboration, larger meetings may need management oversight to keep the conversations on track.

Avoid Distractions: To limit distractions and keep your meeting on track, ensure all remote participants' lines remain on mute when not talking.

PRIVACY. Collaboration is an essential part of any meeting, whether in person or online. Your meeting solution should enable you to easily share content with meeting participants.

Don't Forget About Security: Make sure your solution provides security and privacy features to better protect sensitive information.

REFERENCE. Reduce the uncertainty that can plague meeting participants by keeping records of the meeting. An online meeting solution should be able to record your session so that you and meeting participants can reference it at a later time. Make sure to announce it to the participants at the start of the meeting so that there are no surprises.

Share the recording: Send out the recording link to meeting participants along with the meeting notes, so that they can refer back to it later.

Chapter 6

# The Right Meeting Technology Solution for You

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Your meeting attendees will follow your lead, so make sure it's a strong one. By continuously honing your meeting strategies, monitoring what does and doesn't work, and actively pushing to convert decisions into action, your meetings will become more effective over time.

Adopting technology to simplify the way you conduct meetings is a step in the right direction, especially for sessions with participants scattered across the globe. Think about the solutions you use today. Do they enhance the effectiveness of your meetings? Can they keep up with your demands? Are they worth every penny you spend?

If you answered "no" to any of these questions, it may be time to look into meeting productivity tools specifically built to address your growing needs. Having the right solution scaled to your needs and able to handle your business' bandwidth is crucial for using technology to your meeting's benefit.
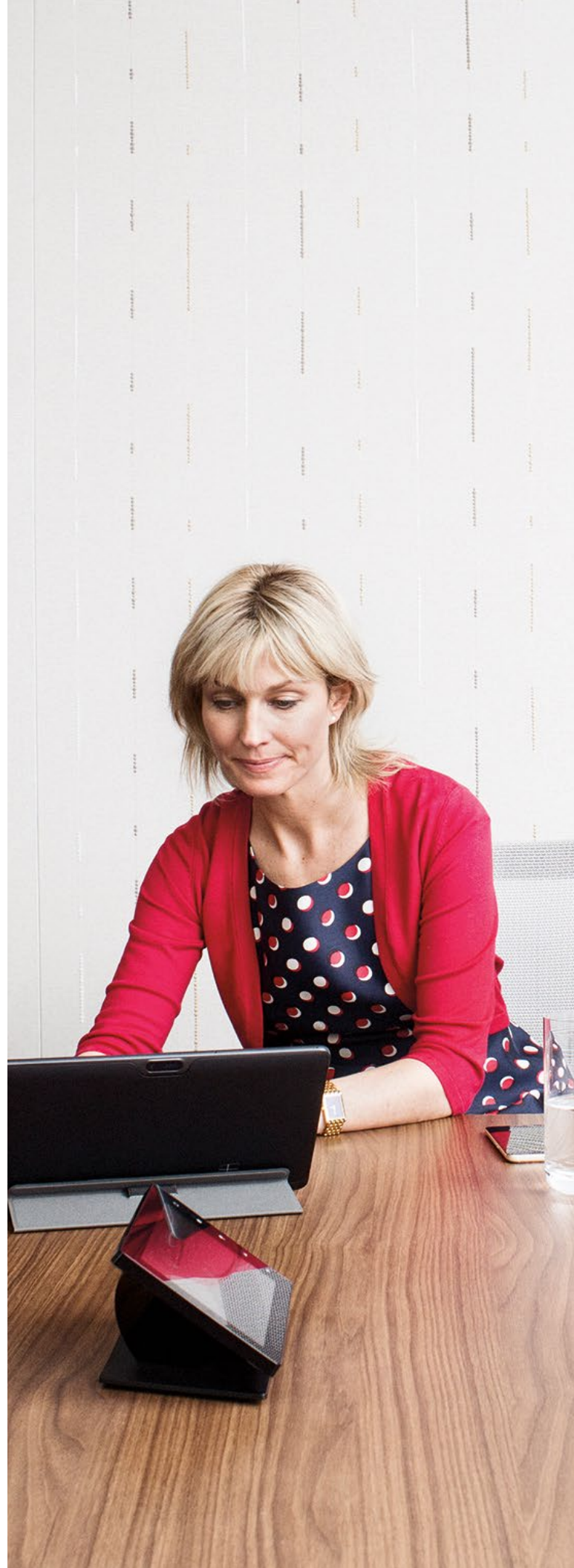
There's a better way to conduct your meetings, and it's directly tied to your business' success.

What if you could eliminate your meeting-related frustrations and run them efficiently like a pro? It's not a far-fetched businessperson's dream. **Check out Skype for Business at www.skype.com/en/business.**

Sources

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