

Meaningless meetings: the best way to get nothing done

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions.

1. What are some characteristics of your most productive meetings?
2. How can meetings be made more efficient and worthwhile?
3. What are the best alternatives to meetings?

b. Skim the article and choose the main idea.

1. Why meetings remain the best way to reach consensus in large enterprises
2. Your ultimate guide to making meetings more productive for all attendees
3. The attempts of several companies to reduce the 'wasted' time spent in meetings

2 Key words

a. Read the definitions and find key words in the article that match them.

Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using the same word to complete the example sentences. You may have to change the form of the word. Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

bloat bluff cull epiphany equate equivalent ingrained
peer purge reappraise recurring ruthlessness stagger veer

1. an action to remove something unpleasant _____

The organisation's main mission is to _____ the planet of plastic pollutants.

2. be the same as something _____

Investing in a health campaign does not _____ to a change in behaviour.

3. deliberately give a false idea to someone about what you intend to do or about the facts of a situation, especially in order to gain an advantage _____

They say that they're going to pull out of the deal, but I think they're just _____ to negotiate better terms.

4. the action of getting rid of something _____

As the virus spread, the government considered a squirrel _____.

5. walk in an uncontrolled way, as if you are going to fall over _____
The paramedics were called after he _____ out of his seat and collapsed on the floor.
6. suddenly move in a different direction _____
The chairperson will interrupt anyone whose comments _____ off topic.
7. happening again, especially several times _____
We are considering cancelling our _____ Monday meeting.
8. with the same size, value, importance, or meaning as something else _____
We project _____ returns for both initiatives, so we haven't made a final decision.
9. the action of becoming larger _____
60% of the board voted to streamline internal processes and cut admin _____
10. a moment when you suddenly realise or understand something important _____
She had an _____ when visiting a client: her own company should also introduce office sleep pods!
11. describing an attitude, belief, or habit that has existed for a long time and cannot easily be changed _____
The idea of longer working hours reflecting your professional commitment is an _____ idea that workers have been fed for decades.
12. consider something such as an attitude, a situation, or a judgement again _____
A focus group has revealed that consumers are _____ what's important to them when making a purchase.

13. the willingness to make other people suffer so that you can achieve your aims

She was unpopular because of her _____, but she did not care; she was determined to succeed no matter what.

14. someone who belongs to the same social or professional group as another person

Many people choose to go to conferences so they can network and learn from their _____ who have faced similar challenges.

The great meeting bloat deserves this Shopify purge

OUR PANDEMIC WORKING PATTERNS HAVE RAISED THE NUMBER OF GATHERINGS IN WHICH NOTHING IS ACHIEVED

BY EMMA JACOBS

- 1 One of the problems with New Year's resolutions is that bosses have them too. How many workers, still adjusting to a mince-pieless breakfast, warily log on to their laptops at the start of the year? Yet one announcement this week by Shopify, the Canadian ecommerce platform, seemed to stir an enthusiastic response: namely, a meeting purge.
- 2 Kaz Nejatian, its chief operating officer, tweeted the new rule, "Meetings are a bug. Today, we shipped a fix to this bug at @Shopify. To start 2023, we're cancelling all Shopify meetings with more than two people. Let's give people back their maker time. Companies are for builders. Not managers." He also banned meetings on Wednesdays and ruled that those for 50 or more people could only be held between 11 and 5 on Thursdays. In a memo to staff, Nejatian explained: "Shopify is planning to delete nearly 10,000 events, which equates to approximately 76,500+ hours of meetings."
- 3 People love productivity hacks and never more so than those applied to meetings. A few years ago, Jeff Bezos made waves with his two-pizza rule, which meant that meetings should only be attended by the number of people who could eat two pizzas. The Amazon founder also banned PowerPoint and insisted on starting all meetings in silence so attendees could read a preparatory memo providing the agenda because he was tired of ill-prepared executives bluffing.
- 4 Meeting culls are also popular. No one leaves school hoping to make a career staggering from the 10am gathering to the 11am gathering, after all. But for many white-collar workers, too many days are lost to such pointless events, veering off agenda (if there even is one) with the result that they spend nights or weekends catching up with their actual work. One business consultant undertook an inventory at a global consumer products company and found that directors and above across the enterprise (a population of about 500) "collectively spent more than 57,000 hours per year in recurring meetings. That's the equivalent of six and a half years."
- 5 That was before the pandemic. Remote working has triggered further bloat. Last year, Microsoft said that for the average Teams user, the number of meetings per week had risen 153 per cent globally since lockdowns were imposed. "The strain is clear," the tech company said. "In an average week, 42 per cent of participants multitask during meetings by actively sending an email or ping – and that doesn't include practices like reading incoming emails and pings, working in non-meeting files, or web activity."
- 6 Last year, I spoke to employees at companies participating in the four-day week trial, which offered staff 100 per cent of pay for 80 per cent of working week with no reduction in output. For many, the obvious efficiency saving was meetings. One art director at a games company in London reduced the time he spent in meetings by half, and would later listen to recordings of them while doing other tasks such as admin. Another told me, "Quite often I'd invite people because I feel like they'd get upset if they were not at the meeting." It was an epiphany. He was "inviting that person for the wrong reason". The disruption to their ingrained work practices helped them reappraise their routines and become more productive.
- 7 But others voiced concerns about the effects of too much meeting ruthlessness, such as the loss of sociability and exposure to new ideas. One worried that it cut down the opportunities for younger workers to learn from their older peers, or indeed give fresh perspectives.
- 8 So, yes, cut the meetings. Apply rigour. Create opportunities to focus on work. But don't be surprised by unintended consequences.

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Emma Jacobs, 04 January, 2023.
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3 Understanding the article

a. Write the main idea of the paragraphs in the table below.

Paragraph	Main idea
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	

4 Business language – collocations

a. Complete the collocations with verbs from the article.

- _____ an enthusiastic response
- _____ a bug
- _____ off agenda
- _____ an inventory
- _____ a lockdown
- _____ more productive
- _____ concerns
- _____ fresh perspective

b. Paraphrase the sentences using phrases from Activity 4a.

1. They wanted to have a monthly meeting where all employees could express their worries.
2. Most customers reacted positively to the new design.
3. We first took stock of the ways in which time was wasted.
4. The government mandated that everyone remain in isolation.
5. You can get more done if you stop multitasking.
6. As usual, Bill went off on a tangent and had to be interrupted.
7. There was a glitch in the system, but it was solved quickly.
8. They wanted to hire someone young to provide a new point of view on customer wants.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss the following statements.

- “Meetings are a nuisance. Give people back their time for more important things!”
- “Meetings attended by fewer people are more productive. Meetings should be limited to three attendees.”
- “At least one day a week should be utterly meeting-free.”
- “Meetings are a space where fresh perspectives can be shared and people should be encouraged to socialise.”

6 Wider business theme – participating in a meeting

a. Develop new policies for meetings in your team, department, or company. Consider the following ideas.

1. In what circumstances is a meeting justified?
2. Which days are meetings allowed?
3. How short/long should a meeting be?
4. How many people should attend a meeting?
5. How should a meeting be run/chaired?
6. When should a meeting be cancelled?
7. When should an email (or alternative) replace a meeting?
8. What other rules should be followed?

- b. **Have a meeting to discuss your proposals. Keep minutes that summarise your partners' ideas. Follow the proposed policies as much as possible.**

Useful language

On the agenda today ...

First of all, ... Secondly, ... Finally, ...

Do you mind if I ask you ... ?

If I may, I would like to add ...

Any other thoughts?

Evie, do you have anything to say about ... ?

What are your thoughts on this?

Actually, I think Zander is right.

Speaking as a manager, ...

Let's return to ...

Continuing where we left off, ...

Now let's move on to ...

Let's wrap up with ...