

## Meaningless meetings: the best way to get nothing done

### 1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions.

1. How often do you attend meetings? Do you enjoy them?
2. Do you think most meetings are a productive use of time? Why / Why not?
3. What would make meetings more useful?

b. Skim the article and choose the main idea.

1. Why meetings are still the best way to make decisions together
2. Having fewer meetings so workers 'waste' less time
3. How to make meetings count and get workers excited about them

### 2 Key words

a. Write the words from the box next to the definitions below.

Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using them 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.

ban	bluff	enthusiastic	equate	multitask	pointless
reappraise	recurring	resolution	rigour	trigger	

1. a serious decision to do something \_\_\_\_\_

*By the end of the meeting, they had made the \_\_\_\_\_ to provide more training opportunities for their staff.*

2. very interested in something or excited by it \_\_\_\_\_

*Almost everyone in the office was \_\_\_\_\_ about the new four-day week.*

3. say officially that people must not do, sell, or use something \_\_\_\_\_

*After an incident involving a client's purse, management has \_\_\_\_\_ all pets from the office.*

4. consider something to be the same as something else \_\_\_\_\_

*It is important to understand that being busy doesn't \_\_\_\_\_ to being productive.*

5. 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 \_\_\_\_\_

*She said she would quit if she doesn't get a raise, but I think she's only*

\_\_\_\_\_.

6. lacking any purpose or use \_\_\_\_\_

*It is \_\_\_\_\_ to argue with him – he won't change his mind.*

7. happening again, especially several times \_\_\_\_\_

*I have created a \_\_\_\_\_ team meeting on my calendar.*

8. make something happen \_\_\_\_\_

*The vending machine was removed after we realised that it was full of foods that*

\_\_\_\_\_ stress.

9. do more than one thing at the same time, such as talking on the phone while you are working on a computer \_\_\_\_\_

*While many people think they are good at \_\_\_\_\_, studies show that we get more done when we focus on one thing at a time.*

10. consider something such as an attitude, a situation, or a judgement again \_\_\_\_\_

*After no women were interviewed for the position, Human Resources decided to*

\_\_\_\_\_ their hiring process.

11. the quality of being thorough and careful \_\_\_\_\_

*We didn't receive good feedback on our report; it was lacking in \_\_\_\_\_ according to our boss.*

## 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.

FT

Emma Jacobs, 04 January, 2023.

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## 3 Understanding the article

### a. Write the paragraph numbers where the following information can be found.

1. Paragraph \_\_\_\_: According to Teams, almost half of meeting participants do other things during meetings.
2. Paragraph \_\_\_\_: The writer doesn't advise getting rid of all meetings.
3. Paragraph \_\_\_\_: Nejtian believes workers now have tens of thousands more hours to use in a better way.
4. Paragraph \_\_\_\_: The four-day-week trial paid staff a full salary and expected them to complete all their work in four fifths of the usual time.
5. Paragraph \_\_\_\_: The COO prohibited all meetings on one day of the week and reduced the timeframe on another day.
6. Paragraph \_\_\_\_: Bezos proclaimed that the limit on meeting attendees is equivalent to the number of people who could eat two pizzas.
7. Paragraph \_\_\_\_: One person said they often invited people to meetings just because they were worried they'd be upset if they weren't invited.
8. Paragraph \_\_\_\_: Bezos started giving people time at the beginning of meetings to read the agenda.
9. Paragraph \_\_\_\_: Many people spend so much time in meetings that they have to do their actual work at weekends.
10. Paragraph \_\_\_\_: Without meetings, workers might not be exposed to new perspectives and younger workers won't have a chance to learn from peers.

## 4 Business language – prepositions

### a. Complete the sentences with the correct prepositions. Check your answers in the article.

1. I usually log \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ my laptop at least five minutes before my first meeting.
2. I insist \_\_\_\_\_ sending detailed minutes after each meeting.
3. I am tired \_\_\_\_\_ pointless meetings.
4. I have no time to catch \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ my actual work.
5. Zoom meetings cut \_\_\_\_\_ opportunities to socialise over coffee.
6. It's hard to focus \_\_\_\_\_ work with so many distractions.
7. I was really surprised \_\_\_\_\_ the content of the article.
8. I try to learn \_\_\_\_\_ my peers at the office.

**b. Now match the words that are used with the preposition in Activity 4a with their definitions.**

- a. do something that should have been done before
- b. gain knowledge or experience of something, for example by being taught
- c. start using a computer system, for example by typing a particular word
- d. having the feeling that you get when something unexpected happens
- e. reduce an amount of something
- f. no longer wanting something or wanting to do something because you are bored with it or annoyed by it
- g. concentrate on something and pay particular attention to it
- h. keep doing something that annoys people

**c. Change the sentences in Activity 4a so they are true for you.**

## 5 Discussion

**a. Discuss the following statements.**

- “Meetings are not the most productive use of our time.”
- “Meetings attended by fewer people are more productive. Meetings should be limited to three attendees.”
- “One day of the week should be completely free of meetings.”
- “Meetings are a space where new perspectives can be shared and should be a place for people 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. When 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?
6. How else can meetings be made more efficient?

- b. You are going to have a meeting to agree on a new meeting policy. Write in the agenda items for the meeting below.

**MEETING AGENDA**

Item	Details	Action

- c. Have a meeting to discuss your proposals. Use some of the language below. Use the agenda form to keep minutes on what you discuss and the action points.

**Useful language**

*On the agenda today ...*

*We've got several points/issues to cover ...*

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

*Can I just ask you ... ?*

*I would like to add ...*

*Any other thoughts?*

*Brendon, do you have anything to say?*

*What are your thoughts on this?*

*Actually, I think Sarah is right.*

*Speaking as a manager, ...*

*Let's get back to ...*

*Now let's move on to ...*