

# Towards healthier meetings

Sick of meetings? Jon Sutton and Abi Millar look to psychology for a cure

For many employees, meetings are an important part of their work diary. They can provide leaders with a way to communicate their vision, serve as a cornerstone of democracy and help organisations respond to the challenges they face. Yet as valuable and inspirational as a good meeting can be, even those who love their jobs often say that meetings send them spiralling into frustration and torpor. The Dutch even have a word for this: *vergaderziekte*, or meeting sickness.

Despite meetings being a source of grumbles around water-coolers the world over, psychology has perhaps been late to the table. 'Psychology has been silent on this key aspect of worklife up until the last decade,' says Joseph Allen (Creighton University). 'Meetings are a "taken-for-granted" work activity. We simply keep having them and therefore it rarely dawned on employees and researchers

that we should figure out how to make them better.'

Psychologist Robert Perkins (Mercer University, Atlanta) tells us that he believes meetings have real positive potential, 'if only because they are so universally wasteful of time and talent and usually badly led. But in an actual situation there is so much happening it's hard for psychology to get a net over it.' So can we manage to find a cure for meeting sickness? Is the popular view of meetings justified, and can psychology provide the science behind making them better?

## Terrible and toxic?

Anyone who has sat in a meeting doodling on a pad or turning purple with rage will find considerable support for their animosity across the internet. Take software entrepreneur Jason Fried's TED talk, 'Why work doesn't happen at work' (see [tinyurl.com/friedmeet](http://tinyurl.com/friedmeet)). 'Meetings are just terrible, toxic, poisonous things... We all know this to be true,' Fried says. 'Don't go to meetings,' a senior manager at the Crown Prosecution Service told *The Guardian* last year. 'No successful decision has ever been made in a meeting.' An American blogger known as the Jackal maintains that 'A person with the power to call a meeting often does so to display that power. Generally speaking, these meetings are a complete and utter waste of time,

with bad leadership, badly defined goals, no real agenda and lots of people speaking out of turn for self-validation. In my humble opinion, 90 per cent of the time in today's corporate world calling a meeting is an abuse of power.'

What's worse, the amount of time in meetings seems to be on the up. In a survey of business leaders (see [tinyurl.com/6kldp5c](http://tinyurl.com/6kldp5c)), 72 per cent of business leaders reported spending more time in meetings than they did five years ago, and almost half expected time in meetings to increase in the future. 'To a large extent, the increases can be explained by changes in organisations,' Steven Rogelberg says. 'Today's organisations are flatter and less hierarchical; they make use of self-directed teams; they rely on empowerment; and they pursue improvement initiatives. The assumption is that employees have information and other resources that the organisation needs to tap – that important ideas and innovation can emerge through employee interaction. The meeting is often the vehicle of choice.'

## Enter psychology

If this vehicle is on the right course, then surely meetings are a necessary evil, no matter how much people may begrudge their time in meetings. But do they work, in terms of increased productivity, better decision making and job satisfaction?

There is a range of relevant research in psychology that should be applied to the study of meetings. Psychologists continue to study issues of attention (e.g. multitasking and attending to multiple stimuli), leadership, persuasion, group dynamics, negotiation, creativity (i.e. brainstorming in the meeting context), and a host of occupational topics (strategy, personnel selection, etc.). According to Joseph Allen, 'All of these literatures and so many more could inform the study of meetings'.

Some of this research has implications for meetings that are not entirely



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favourable. Consider a study led by Nicholas Kohn and published last year, looking at group brainstorming sessions. From the point of view of most managers, these are a good way to get the creative juices flowing; a testament to the much-touted 'wisdom of crowds'. Kohn's team, however, came to a surprising conclusion. They found that group brainstorming may actually impede creativity, forcing ideas down an artificially narrowed channel. 'Fixation to other people's ideas can occur unconsciously', said Kohn, 'and lead to you suggesting ideas that mimic your brainstorming partners.' If you want to foster true imaginative diversity, it may be better to set people out on working alone. However, a 2011 follow-up by Kohn and colleagues suggested that collaborative group work has a role to play when you get to the stage of combining ideas to form new creative concepts. Groups of three participants who worked collaboratively came up with combined ideas (for how to improve their university) that were judged more useful, feasible and high-impact than did participants who worked on the same problem alone.

But what about research specifically on meetings? Psychology has been surprisingly quiet (see box, 'Putting meetings on the agenda'), but again the conclusions should worry those who make heavy use of meetings in their organisation. For example, a 2005 study by Alexandra Luong and Steven Rogelberg, from the Universities of Minnesota Duluth and North Carolina at Charlotte respectively, proposed that

## Putting meetings on the agenda

**According to Peter Warr (University of Sheffield), 'Meetings vary so widely that different writers are commonly discussing different topics with the same overall label. Literature in the area is thus extremely diverse and often non-cumulative.'**

**There may be another reason meetings have slipped down psychology's agenda. 'There's a whole body of research on group dynamics that covers all types of group interactions,' says Joseph Allen (Creighton University). 'It could be assumed by some that these researchers have already discovered and studied all that is related to meetings. However, though meetings are groups, not all those who attend a meeting would claim to be members of a group beyond that interaction, so much of the groups research does not easily apply to the meetings context.'**



**Why is there not more research? 'Excellent question,' replies Robert Perkins (Mercer University). 'There are at least three types of meetings. Information sharing meetings are a bore and could in most cases be replaced with memos via e-mail. Problem solving and decision making is the tough work of executives. Get it right and your company thrives – get it wrong and you're road-kill. A third type is the rally. It's an emotional activity to whip up enthusiasm – like a national or global sales meeting. My view is that the important ones are the problem and decision ones and that those meetings are a giant, buzzing confusion – even the good ones. Picture eight super-bright executives in heated debate about issues that the researcher knows little about, their dialogue filled with jargon and abbreviations. A simulation study could simplify the problems and structure lines of analysis, and I believe that's a logical next step.'**

**Warr certainly sees the potential for diverse research, focusing on different types of meeting (scheduled vs. unscheduled, action-oriented vs. discussion only, etc.), with different research outcomes (e.g. emphasis on process or outcomes), and with different styles of research (quantitative vs. ethnographic, participant report vs. researcher observation, etc.). Perkins suggests 'using videos to preserve meetings and analyse behaviours more carefully and accurately, and MBA students as stand-ins for executive teams'. He concludes: 'I see the future as bright.'**

'despite the fact that meetings may help to achieve work-related goals, having too many meetings and spending too much time in meetings per day may have negative effects on the individual'. This conclusion was based on a survey of 37 volunteers, who filled in a diary throughout a working week. They answered questions after each meeting and at the end of each working day. It turned out that meetings were largely perceived as a 'hassle or interruption', and that there was a strong correlation

between levels of tiredness, perceived workload and the number of meetings attended.

However, Rogelberg does suggest that the relationship between the demands of attending meetings and job satisfaction depends on an individual's level of 'accomplishment striving'. 'People with a strong desire to accomplish work goals tend to report poorer job satisfaction as the number of meetings they attend increases; those who are less goal-oriented indicate that attending more meetings was actually desirable (perhaps for social reasons or to provide structure to an unstructured day).' Interestingly, Rogelberg has also found that most people who complain publicly about meetings actually offer private accounts that are quite favourable.

### Fewer meetings?

According to Jason Fried: 'If you do have a meeting coming up, if you have the power, just cancel it... you'll find out that everything will be just fine.' Fried votes for

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## feature

trying out 'No Talk Thursday', in a bid to show the boss how productive you can be when nobody is breathing down your neck. 'A tremendous amount of work actually gets done when nobody talks to each other. Giving somebody four hours of uninterrupted time is the best gift you can give at work.'

However, psychologists don't necessarily agree. 'Some people need to conduct more meetings, not fewer,' says management trainer and chartered psychologist Beverley Stone. 'If they let their team carry on regardless, everybody ignores the real issues.' Meetings can gel the team, clear up any obstacles, and provide a useful forum for airing gripes. From Stone's experience, when meetings fail it is most likely down to an unhealthy group dynamic. 'It's not teamwork that people dislike,' she says. 'It's the fact that the wrong people get their way whereas other people don't have their voice. People become half a person because of their fears of saying what they actually mean.'

Joseph Allen doubts whether the number of meetings that occur in organisations will decrease in the long-term. 'Meetings are such useful tools that can be applied to so many issues in organisations. Some even argue that meetings are synonymous with the process of organising. Given the complexity of the work environment and the ever-growing complexity of the world market, I imagine that meetings will always be an essential part of organisational life. They key is to make the meetings we have better, eliminate the poorly run meetings, and hopefully bring about positive changes in organisational functioning more generally.'

Allen's colleague, Steven Rogelberg, agrees. 'Successful organisations do not treat meetings as a necessary evil. Instead, they view them as a strategic resource and seek out ways to get the most from them... they use them to solve problems and build more competitive organisations. Major improvements do not occur overnight, but gradually – one meeting at a time. Improving just one meeting per week can lead to significant benefits for the organisation while also contributing to the health and motivation of employees.'

### Ten tonics

So what is psychology's prescription for healthier meetings? Here we present 10 tonics, based on the psychological literature.

### Know when a meeting is necessary

'The first principle of management of meetings', according to Steven Rogelberg, 'is knowing when other approaches will work just as well or better. Organisations should have some general guidelines – you call a meeting when unresolved issues are inhibiting the progress of interdependent projects, or when a compelling agenda exists that requires full group input. Organisations need to determine who actually needs to be there, who does not, and how they will keep interested parties who do not attend apprised of what is happening.'

### Consider the scheduling carefully

Meetings take you away from the work you are doing. 'Meetings aren't work,' says Jason Fried. 'Meetings are places to go and talk about work that you're supposed to be doing later.' He draws an analogy between work and sleep, in the sense that both happen in phases. To get to the really deep phases of either one, you have to work your way through all the early ones. And should something interrupt you – an alarm clock, say, or a meeting – it is really hard to pick up where you left off.

If you're after a specific time, apparently Tuesday at 3pm is good (see [tinyurl.com/5sjgb8n](http://tinyurl.com/5sjgb8n)).

### Don't be ruled by time slots

The essayist and programmer Paul Graham thinks that managers live their lives by the sort of schedule that is carved by Outlook, or in archaic terms the appointments diary, into discrete hour-long blocks. 'When you use time that way,' he writes, 'it's merely a practical problem to meet with someone. Find an open slot in your schedule, book them, and you're done.' For 'makers', by contrast – anyone who is being paid to be

productive – an hour block is barely long enough to get their teeth into a problem, let alone to ruminate, digest it, and cough up a creative solution. Graham claims that one hour-long meeting, by virtue of a 'cascading effect', 'can sometimes affect a whole day'.

In general, then, keep them short. Take minutes, waste hours, goes the saying. A one-hour meeting is only a one-hour meeting if there is one person at it: productivity guru Merlin Mann tells of a company CTO who insisted on holding a four-hour conference call with a 30-strong engineering department, equating to 120 working hours (see [tinyurl.com/38n8zyk](http://tinyurl.com/38n8zyk)). You can even buy a special office clock, Bring TIM!, that tallies the money spent in long meetings. Simply enter the number of people in the room, input an average hourly wage, and press the illuminated start button.

### The agenda is vital

In a 1992 study, the first on meetings published in a psychology journal, Carol Nixon and Glenn Littlepage sent out questionnaires in a bid to find out what enabled 'meeting effectiveness'. Through an analysis of their subjects' 'goal attainment' and 'decision satisfaction', Nixon and Littlepage concluded that a good meeting will have – amongst other characteristics – clear, well-defined goals, and 'agenda integrity'. Theoretical opinion, Nixon and Littlepage conceded, was divided with regard to some of the specifics. 'Agenda integrity' was particularly contentious. Might strict adherence to a predefined plan simply make a meeting seem wooden? Another Littlepage study found that decision-making groups, left to their own devices, 'do not allocate time in a purely rational manner'. It appears that people tend to assign weight to various items based not on how important they are, but on where they are in the agenda. Perhaps as a result of this, Angela Carter (University of Sheffield) recommends that agendas should be discussed at the beginning, and areas of importance dealt with first.

### Find a role model

'Chairing meetings takes practice and skill,' says Angela Carter. 'I would suggest finding a role model and watch how they work.' A 2009 study by Robert Perkins did just this, using an observation and executive coaching approach to discover the



Do managers live their lives in discrete hour-long blocks?

importance of 'a spirit of rough fun' amongst expert leaders, alongside diligent preparation. 'Expert leaders conducted lively meetings, filled with spirited debate in which a wide diversity of opinions was assertively voiced and defended.'

### Don't just sit there

What if you don't feel able to hold your own in this kind of environment, if you struggle to get involved? Involvement is particularly important, given research by Desmond Leach (University of Leeds) and colleagues (2009) which found that attendee involvement had a direct effect on perceptions of effectiveness, but also accounted for much of the relationship between design characteristics (punctuality, facilities, etc.) and effectiveness.

Beverly Stone thinks that, if you are feeling disengaged within a meeting, the onus is on you to change those feelings. 'Quite honestly,' she says, 'when I see people looking glazed and bored, my feeling is to help them understand that their colleagues feel insulted; that this is disrespectful. In a team, it's your responsibility to look at the whole organisation. It's your responsibility to be engaged.'

Denise Taylor, a chartered psychologist and careers coach, agrees: 'If you're feeling disengaged in the meeting, it may be that you don't understand the subject, which is the fault of the manager, or it could be because of stuff in your personal or work life, in which case you should probably never have gone. People blame others because that's the easy option. I tell people to go back tomorrow, and actually try to like something. Sometimes it is somebody else, but sometimes it is you.'

### Meet by design

Don't just meet anywhere and anytime: design the meeting effectively. Temporal, physical, procedural and attendee design characteristics all significantly predict perceptions of meeting quality (Cohen et al., 2011): food, noise level, lighting, etc. are all important. But there's always scope to try something new; for example, in a



### Stand up for shorter meetings

study by Bluedorn et al. (1999), sit-down meetings were 34 per cent longer than stand-up meetings, but they produced no better decisions than stand-up meetings.

The use of new technology could be considered here. For example, have you thought of using a digital 'Social Mirror' to provide visual feedback on social behaviour?

A recent study doing just this (Brandon et al., 2011) suggested that the Social Mirror led to

changes in the social behaviour of the participant, particularly in terms of reaching agreement.

### Use humour wisely

According to a study by Rogerson-Revell (2007), humour is one of several interactive strategies that mark a shift in meetings from formality to informality. 'These style shifts and the humour within them can be used strategically to show solidarity and power, particularly by the dominant "in-group" of Western, male participants... humour acts as a "double-edged sword" being used to both positive and negative effect: facilitating, on the one hand, collaboration and inclusion and, on the other, collusion and exclusion.'

There are also other issues with humour if you are a woman. Judith Baxter (2011) undertook an 18-month study into the speaking patterns of men and women at meetings in seven major well-known companies, including two in the FTSE-100. The research found that women, often heavily outnumbered on these boards, were four times more likely than men to be self-deprecating, use humour and speak indirectly or apologetically when broaching difficult subjects with board members in order to avoid conflict. When employed effectively, this 'double voice discourse' could be a useful tool to manipulate those around them, Baxter claims, but self-deprecation and an apologetic style were risky because striking a wrong note could lead to appearing defensive and weak.

### Make an event of it

Perhaps safer than humour is making the

meeting a social occasion. According to Angela Carter, 'my experience of working across Europe tells me that time taken to meet, socialise and catch up with the other delegates before they have the meeting will pay benefits in productivity. I suggest a dinner the night before the meeting, or lunch.'

### Assess your meetings

To increase the effectiveness of a meeting, attendees should periodically critique it for what can be improved – if not for the remainder of the current meeting, then for the next one. 'Among other things,' Rogelberg says, 'they should examine the pace and flow, and revisit the ground rules and their effectiveness.'

### Any other business?

Meetings are bound to become possible in a variety of forms. Even back in 2005, Arkesteijn et al. were using an online 'Group Support System' in a distributed meeting with hundreds of bank managers, finding that this contributed to reducing the lead-time of a decision of hundreds of managers from an estimated six months to four weeks, while at the same time increasing the involvement of the managers. Technology continues to develop, but meetings are probably here to stay.

With that in mind, those working in the field are keen to get plenty of psychologists round the table to research them. 'Meetings can and should be studied from many different psychological perspectives including social, cognitive, occupational, health, and so on,' says Joseph Allen. 'In meetings, all sorts of social psychological phenomena occur – social loafing, bystander effect, diffusion of responsibility, etc. – and these things are likely to impact meeting attendees' attitudes and behaviours both inside and outside the meeting context. There are a host of legitimate reasons why a specific psychology of meetings should be developed, but this should only be done from multiple perspectives and potentially across disciplines – psychology, communication, sociology, and business working together to make meetings healthier.'

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