How to Make Meetings Less Tedious and More Engaging



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How many people actually look forward to another meeting invitation in their inbox? They cut into your time to work on deliverables and increase the likelihood that you'll have to extend your workday into the evening. Yet meetings are up 13%, and managers are especially bogged down by them. A 2020 Harvard Business Review study found that managers at large firms spend 22 minutes more per day in meetings today than in 2019.

Like them or not, work-related meetings, including all-hands meetings, departments, projects, teams and one-on-ones, are vital for communication and team building.

The problem? They're not always efficient, structured,

properly interactive or inclusive. Over time, meetings have more tedious to the point that attendees simply disengage. This happens in in-person meetings, but it is even easier for virtual attendees when off camera. And, while meeting in person might be more engaging in some ways, today's hybrid work environments mean at least some attendees won't be in the same room. Either way, the challenge remains.

Let's look at why this is happening, and what we can do to turn this trend around.

Virtual meetings diminish human connections

We already perform most of our work in front of the computer, but humans are naturally wired for in-person interactions. With the rise of remote work and virtual meetings, these interactions are dwindling. Whereas in-person meetings give you a chance to move away from your desk and give your eyes a rest, virtual meetings only extend the time you spend looking at the screen.

Virtual meetings also diminish our ability to pick up on non-verbal cues like eye contact and posture. And it's impossible to make small talk or have quick social interactions with your colleagues. These seemingly minor things can significantly impact how well you understand your colleagues and your ability to build camaraderie with them.

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Meetings are often compulsory and unstructured

The lack of face-to-face interaction isn't the only problem. How many weekly or daily meetings do we hold, regardless of

whether anyone has any updates to share? That's not to say standing meetings are a bad thing. For instance, agile processes rely on short daily huddles, where contributors share status updates and critical information team members need to know. But many standing meetings are scheduled "just because" — and organizers expect invitees to attend regardless of whether they're needed.

Not inviting the *right* people is also a problem. Say you're planning to roll out a new tool to the sales team. Do you need the whole department present just to announce the new system is coming? On the flip side, excluding sales trainers from such a meeting would be a mistake, as they'll be introducing and training the team on the new tool.

Perhaps the worst meeting mistake is lack of structure. With no set agenda or expected outcome, it's easy for attendees to "check out" or focus on tasks they feel are more pressing. In a recent survey, we found that almost 75% of meeting multitaskers are doing other work-related tasks instead of engaging in the meeting, which is even more likely when meetings are virtual.

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Techniques for making meetings less tedious and more interactive

Here are a few tips to help combat poor engagement and lack of productivity caused by unfocused and unnecessary meetings:

1. **Publish goals and an agenda ahead of time.** An agenda allows you to lay out how the meeting should unfold and what you plan to accomplish (and even ask yourself whether the meeting is necessary in the first place). Agendas also give attendees the chance to self-select. In the earlier example, a sales trainer that's

transferring to another department can opt-out of the meeting beforehand. There's nothing worse than showing up to find the topic doesn't apply to you.

2. **Follow up on meeting outcomes.** After the meeting, send participants a follow-up email outlining what was discussed. If you have actions for any participant, include these (with due dates) in the recap. For example, if the sales trainers need to schedule train-the-trainer sessions before the new tool rollout, let them know when you expect them to complete this task.
3. **Encourage sharing notes among participants.** While it's impossible to capture every detail of a meeting by taking notes, the very act can make an attendee miss essential points. However, if participants share their notes, everyone walks away with a fuller understanding of what was covered. Consider using collaborative tools like Microsoft Teams and Google Docs to centralize notes for everyone's consumption.
4. **Engage attendees with polls, trivia and quizzes.** Sometimes long meetings with many participants are unavoidable. One way to break up the monotony is with polls, trivia or quizzes – a tactic often used during webinars. The sponsor might periodically insert a poll or quiz to assess engagement and understanding of the current topic, then voice-over the results. A little friendly competition can be just the trick to break up the monotony. You can apply the same tactic to improve participation in your meetings.
5. **Record and share freely.** One perk of virtual meetings is that you can record the meeting and share it with attendees and non-attendees alike. Sharing the recording and transcript makes the information accessible to those who had scheduling conflicts or simply were not required in person. In addition, non-attendees can quickly skim the transcript or play back the recording (at higher speed if they choose) for efficient, offline absorption of the information in their preferred manner.

The common thread through these tips is intentionality. In an increasingly virtual world, it’s essential to consider how you spend your own time and your colleagues’ time. Be intentional about what you will cover in meetings and why, who you should invite and what you expect of them during and after the meeting. Being intentional builds momentum and engagement. The more productive, efficient meetings you host, the more attendees will stay engaged and provide meaningful contributions.

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