

It's time to face it: some meetings can be a waste of your time

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Many of us spend much of our time in meetings and at conferences. But too often these waste time and fail to make the most of those present. The meeting formats we use today are very old. Board meetings, assembly meetings and conferences have not changed for many hundreds of years. Newer methods include boards surrounded by screens with data, companies (like Yahoo) setting 10 or 15 minutes as the default for meetings and meetings held standing up.

Amazon prefers six-page memos prepared before any meeting to be read in 30 minutes of silence before discussion. Other examples include webinars, hangouts and meeting tools like [Slack](#) which allow teams to meet and work in a single online location. There are a host of more recent innovations like [Unconferences](#), [Open Space](#), [World Cafes](#), [Flipped Conferences](#) and other tools for democratising larger gatherings. In my recently published [paper](#), I suggest a number of ways to improve meetings that draw on research and experience. Here are some of the most important findings – many of which challenge standard practice in institutions like universities, parliaments and businesses.

1. Meetings need active facilitation and orchestration

Even the most motivated groups struggle with self-organisation, so having a skilled facilitator is key. Facilitators should keep a meeting focussed on its goals, encourage equal contribution from members and avoid the effects of [anchoring](#). Allowing the most junior to speak first and leaving [periods of silence](#) to reflect can be a useful way of improving the quality of discussion.

2. The best meetings are often multi-platform, and use visualisations as well as talk and paper

Research shows that people learn and think better when supported by more than one type of communication. Reports, presentations, images and verbal discussion will have differing effects but add up to a better understanding of the issues. Tools such as [Futurescaper](#), [Popplet](#) and [Parmenides Eidos](#) can help groups visualise complex ideas and increase collective understanding.

3. Good meetings make the most of their participants

Most meetings are dominated by extroverts and this can have a number of negative effects on the quality of meetings. Making it easy for all members of the group to contribute and reining in the most vocal fosters a greater sharing of knowledge and emergent properties. A [recent psychology study](#) found that three factors are significantly correlated with the collective intelligence of a group: the average social perceptiveness of the group members, equal turn taking in conversation and the percentage of women in a group (which reflects their greater social perceptiveness).

4. Good meetings take advantage of a division of labour

Assigning distinct roles allows meetings to make the best use of their attendees. De Bono's [Six Thinking Hats](#) is one of many simple and effective tools for group discussion, encouraging participants to adopt different perspectives such as caution, critical thinking, feelings, creativity and optimism. The idea is that the interaction of these viewpoints should lead to better outcomes, particularly if participants try out multiple roles.

5. Good meetings apply 'Meeting Maths'

The most common reason why meetings fail is because they don't follow meeting maths: there are too many people

or too little time; too little relevant knowledge and experience, too sprawling a topic, or insufficient common grounding. As a rough rule, the quality of a meeting tends to reflect the available time multiplied by the degree of common grounding of participants and the presence of relevant knowledge, divided by the numbers taking part and the breadth of the topic under discussion.

6. Good meetings are cumulative – part of a longer process

Meetings rarely happen in isolation. Traditional methods such as minutes and more modern ones such as data dashboards and lessons learned exercises link meetings together over time and create cumulative learning. Evidence suggests that the quality of workplace relationships can also have a big impact on the effectiveness of meetings so regular social events such as [randomised coffee trials](#) should be encouraged.

7. Some of the best meetings don't happen (or why you shouldn't hold unnecessary meetings)

One of the main sources of frustration and boredom in the workplace is unnecessary meetings. People can be uncomfortable cancelling meetings because of the perception that no work is being done. Instead, canceled or shortened meetings should be seen as a sign of effective day to day communication and coordination between members.

The biggest surprise that comes from studying meetings is how little systematic study there has been – there are no world-renowned centres studying what works best for what purposes. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that so little of what is known is made use of, but a little more systematic research might save us all a lot of time.

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Notes:

- *The post gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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