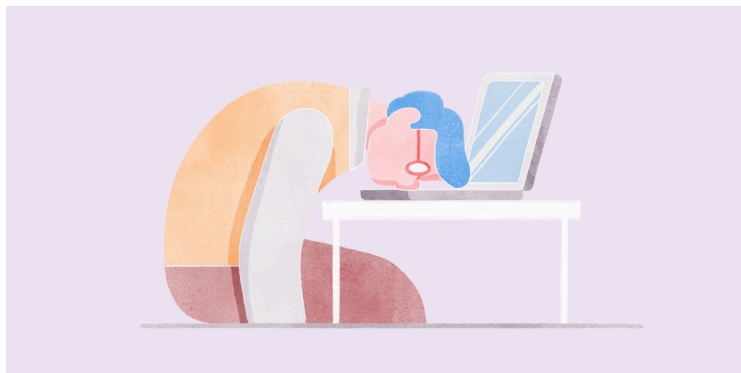


How to take control of work-meetings madness - WorkLife

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Overwhelmed by your over-clogged work calendar? Can barely take a bathroom break because of those back-to-back-to-back meetings?

Most of us have been there, wondering how we'll get our work done if we spend our days in physical and virtual meeting rooms. Adding to the frustration, many of those gatherings are unproductive or outright useless.

Nearly half of employees agreed with this statement: "I have too many unnecessary meetings on my calendar," [in a recent survey](#) from transcription and collaboration app Otter.ai. The survey also found that workers attended about 18 hours of meetings per week.

"Teams need a way to communicate ideas and update projects collectively," said Jim Emanuel, an HR knowledge advisor and senior certified professional with the Society for Human Resource Management. Yet "anything is better than sitting for an hour or more listening to people drone on about what they have been doing."

A wide range of companies, including Asana, Dropbox, and Clorox, have strived to minimize the meeting bloat. Initiatives include [outright banning meetings](#), forming no-meeting days and weeks, and distributing tips to workers on how to host productive gatherings.

In early January, Shopify deployed a massive reset, deleting nearly 10,000 events, which equates to about 76,500 hours of meetings, from employee calendars, to give them more time to build and create.

"Not one person has ever thought, 'you know what will make a big impact on entrepreneurship? Day after day of back to back meetings,'" said Shopify's vp of product and COO Kaz Nejatian in a Jan. 3 staff memo announcing the purge of recurring meetings with three or more people and a renewed commitment to "meeting-free Wednesdays."

"Please do not re-add any of these meetings for at least two weeks," he said. "And be really, really critical about what you're adding back."

A balancing act

In this time of increased remote work, with Zoom fatigue raging, managers need to be especially mindful of keeping meetings in check.

At the same time, "as a virtual employee, the only way you connect with your teammates is through email, chats, and meetings," said Dana LaRieal Morales, founder of The Happiness Bucket, a firm that helps entrepreneurs, individuals, and businesses stay organized. "So, some balance has to go on there."

Erring on the side of too many meetings can lead to increased employee stress and less productivity, adds Carla Patton, vp of human resources at the marketing agency RAPP. Those gatherings also suck up a non-renewable resource — time — which "is something we can't get back," Patton said.

Take control of meeting madness

The good news is that you don't need a corporate mandate to better control the meetings on your schedule.

WorkLife reached out to a range of productivity and human resource experts, including Patton, Morales, Emanuel, and Rebecca Hinds, head of The Work Innovation Lab by Asana, to get their insights.

Here's what to do:

Think: Does this topic warrant a meeting? Before sending that invite, consider if you can get what you need through email, a chat message, or a phone call.

Consider individual schedules when setting recurring meetings. If there's flexibility with meeting times, ask participants what's good for them. (For instance, 8am may be tough for those dropping kids off at school.) You won't please everyone, but you can determine what works best for most.

Give colleagues some breathing room: If you can see the internal calendars of others, don't shoehorn your meeting between others. Give a five to 10 minutes buffer.

Specify the meeting purpose and share an agenda. Outline what will be covered and who will be responsible for what topic. This helps attendees to prepare. And if someone can't attend, they'll know what information to send to the organizer before the meeting.

Don't default to 30- and 60-minute slots. Pick a time that suits what needs to be discussed. Fifteen minutes is fine for a quick conversation, while 25- or 50-minute meetings allow attendees to catch up on email — or take a bathroom break — before the next meeting begins.

Be punctual. If hosting, start the meeting when scheduled. If attending, show up on time.

Cancel recurring meetings if there are no updates. Don't feel obligated to have a meeting just because it's on the calendar. Most participants will welcome the time back.

Share your preferred meeting days: You may not always get your way, but it's helpful to proactively let your colleagues know what works best for you. (No, you can't say "never.")

Stick to the meeting topic: Rein in or redirect those who pontificate or go off course. Don't be the person who goes astray.

Communicate meeting insights, results, and next steps. "What meeting hosts and attendees do after the meeting is even more important than what they do before," says Asana's Hinds.

Say "no" politely

So, with all that being said, is it okay to decline a meeting you don't need to attend?

Thankfully, yes.

There's no need to elaborate on the reason for declining. Simply saying you have another commitment is fine, said Emanuel. Yet, he added that it's important to feel confident about your decision as the host might ask why you're not attending.

"The goal in politely declining a meeting invitation is to remain respectful and professional to the meeting organizer as you decline," Emanuel said. "After all, there might be a future occasion when you will want or need to meet with this same person."

