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TIPS & TECHNIQUES

# Meeting Efficiently Can Save You a Month Every Year

*By Hannon Brett*

How many meetings did you attend or hold in 2006? Tens? Hundreds? Now, take a minute to consider how many of those meetings were actually turned into positive, productive action that made your business better.

These are important questions to ask in a world of 'fast-food communication', where on-demand, real-time, dynamic collaboration technologies have quickly turned global business into a single, connected cube farm. Everyone has meetings; it's up to you to determine whether the information and responsibilities shared in those meetings drives your success, or simply leads to deeper inefficiency. The topic has been heavily researched and reported over the years, but one of the more poignant pieces that I've come across comes from Wharton:

> "The Wharton Center for Applied Research found that, "if managers use meetings appropriately they can reduce the time spent in meetings by 25%. Effective management of remaining meetings can reduce time spent in meetings by an additional 20%. This indicates that using meetings effectively results in a reduction of time spent in meetings from an average of 17 hours per week to 10 hours per week."

Those are some pretty amazing numbers to think over. If you can become better at using and managing your meetings, you can save about 5 hours of time a week. That's 260 hours a year, which translates into an astonishing 32.5, eight-hour working days each year. Think about what you would accomplish with an extra month every year. Think about what your organization would gain if *every* employee took back that extra month. So you begin to see that meetings have an enormous impact on business. But again, it's how you manage meetings and the information shared therein that can dramatically influence your success, and potentially the collective success of your organization.

## Make Your Meetings Work for You

We like to say that meeting information is always the true currency of business. In most organizations, much of the information and action items exchanged in meetings are the very things that keep the daily gears grinding, that steer the course of the company, and that keep employees united in the singular goal of stimulating growth. The true test of a company's meeting and communication strategy is how that organization utilizes this information. Making a few simple, yet important changes to your meeting habits, while maintaining some basic best practices, can dramatically impact your meeting effectiveness. In the coming paragraphs, we'll discuss:

- The importance of meetings and how they can drive your success
- How to run meetings more efficiently – how to get back that free month every year
- The lost art of meeting preparation

- How to leverage meeting information distribution and management strategies

**Take Back Your Extra Month**

It's great that Wharton can come up with the numbers, but how do you actually bring these projections to bear where you work? Good news: it's relatively simple. There are things that you can start doing today that will begin saving you that coveted 5-7 hours per week. And, following some basic guidelines will ensure that your meetings instantly become more productive and successful.

***1. Meeting Preparation and Scheduling***

Influencing optimized meeting productivity throughout your entire meeting lifecycle starts with proper meeting preparation. Before you even open your scheduling application ask yourself, "is a meeting the most efficient way to accomplish this goal (i.e., is a meeting the right medium)?", and then, "who are the right people to directly drive productive action?"

Once you've established that a meeting is the right way to go, you need to involve the right people. This includes:

- A meeting organizer (that's probably usually you)
- Subject matter expert(s)
- Any/all cross-functional project stakeholders
- The necessary decision maker(s)

Your next focus should be the utilization of proper meeting invitation protocol. Experts agree that this is where meeting organizers tend to waste 10-15 minutes and begin meetings in a very unproductive manner. While applications like Microsoft Outlook make scheduling meetings easy, it's up to you to make your meeting invites work for you, not against you. A concise agenda will let invitees know what's expected of them and what will be covered. A meeting goal will help to keep you on track and working towards the expected meeting outcome. Finally, as we incorporate more technology into our meeting habits, people need to know how to join a web or audio conference before the meeting actually starts.

Following these simple suggestions will help your meeting participants arrive completely prepared and ready to be productive. Start your meetings in the most optimized manner and you'll never waste that first critical 10-15 minutes again.

***2. Meeting Information and Action Item Capture***

Now that you've used the proper methods to get the right participants into the right meeting with the right information, you should turn to correctly capturing meeting information. If possible, every meeting you hold should include at least a small structured group of people to help facilitate effective information sharing, capture, and decision making. These roles are:

*Desired in-meeting participant roles:*

- Meeting Facilitator - guides and leads the meeting to its desired end
- Note Taker – focused on capturing (and recording) all of the information shared

- Contributing Participants – provide the necessary discussion points and arguments
- Decision Maker – The boss, or a group to make 'final' decisions

In today's meeting world, having all of these roles filled by different individuals is rarely possible, practical, or even necessary. The meeting organizer often wants or needs to fill many or all of these roles. Figuring out a system that works for your environment to manage these roles will be another key to maintaining meeting success.

Once you know who will be doing what, the importance should shift to the information capture methodology itself. Most people I talk to use 'blunt tools' that usually come in the form of Microsoft Word, a text pad instance, or even the body of an email. While these applications are easy and familiar, they don't provide any true meeting productivity capabilities. Their use can actually lead to loss of productivity, loss of information, and a loss of meeting momentum.

Whatever you use, the most important factor is that you capture the necessary information in a manner that ensures proper consumption and utilization. One best practices method dictates that your captured information should be separated into sections or 'buckets' that are easily readable. These sections should be grouped in your notes and should at least cover the following:

- Meeting minutes (notes)
- Action items
- Key points and/or decisions
- Meeting details - i.e., Goal, meeting time, day, duration, participants (roll call), etc…
- Documents used, discussed, or presented

Recording all of the right information in an easy to consume format will make it much more likely that your hard work while in meetings will be used to create successful outcomes after meetings.

***3. Meeting Information Distribution***

Once you've captured your meeting information properly, distributing it in an effective and timely manner will have a dramatic impact on whether this information is actually utilized, or simply filed, forgotten or even deleted. Your main goal should be to ensure that the right people receive and can easily consume the right information. Timing is everything, so distribute your meeting summary as quickly after the meeting as possible, and do so in a format that's generally accepted, like ASCII text or HTML. This will further guarantee that your meeting notes will lead to productive action, hopefully followed by project success.

***4. Archive, Track, and Manage Critical Meeting Information***

The final step to securing long-term meeting success centers on the availability of historic meeting information. Distributed meeting summaries and action items should be archived in a way that provides for immediate, any-time access. This information should also be contextually linked so that all of the information from each meeting is kept together as a single 'record'. This should include: notes, documents, action items, meeting details and all other items used in the meeting.

How you actually archive and access this information is another entire discussion, but whichever method you choose (web portal, 3rd party collaboration platform, network drive, shared spreadsheets, etc.), make sure that it fits well within your current environment and process. Assigned action items usually end up becoming the drivers of a project's success (or failure), so these must be managed with extra diligence. Tracking and managing action items through completion will make your team much more productive and will ensure that your meeting's outcomes are working to drive success.

Establishing easy access to all past meeting information and action items will empower you to gain much more control over necessary long-term decisions and meeting outcomes.

**Pulling it All Together**

Contrary to popular experience, meetings don't have to be a nuisance or a place to catch up on sleep; they can be the information and communication drivers behind your organization's success. Making small but important changes to your meeting habits and adhering to your own customized meeting productivity lifecycle can have dramatic effects on your overall business productivity. Empower yourself to much more effectively capture, distribute, archive, and manage the critical information and action items shared in meetings and your projects will always be completed on time and under budget. You'll optimize efficiency while saving you and your organization precious time and money…. and, maybe you can even find something productive to do with that extra month that you'll be saving.

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