The surprising impact of meeting-free days

Article

Accepted Version

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

The Surprising Impact of Meeting-Free Days

Many organizations are implementing no-meeting days, but 6nding the optimal weekly balance requires deliberation.

Even before the pandemic, [71% of managers](#) thought meetings were costly and unproductive. Since many companies have shifted to remote and hybrid workplace models, meetings have steadily increased in frequency and length to compensate for the loss of in-person interactions. Today's knowledge workers typically [spend more than 85% of their time in meetings](#), which studies show [negatively aKects people's psychological, physical, and mental wellbeing](#).

Though building trust and achieving team cohesion rely on frequent, quality interactions, meetings are no longer the best way to accomplish this. As a result, many organizations, including Facebook and Atlassian, are taking a stand by adopting no-meeting days, during which people operate at their own rhythms and collaborate with others at a pace and on a schedule that is convenient, not forced.

Assessing the EKects of No-Meeting Days

We recently surveyed 76 companies, with more than 1,000 employees each and operations in more than 50 countries, that had introduced from one to 6ve nomeeting days per week (prohibiting even one-on-one meetings) during the past 12 months. In addition, we spoke with managers and each company's HR director to obtain executive perspectives on the approaches taken; examined data comparing employee stress levels before and after a reduction in meetings; and assessed the subsequent impact on productivity, collaboration, and engagement, using pulse surveys. Nearly half (47%) of the companies we studied reduced meetings by 40% by introducing two nomeeting

days per week. The remaining companies attempted something even more ambitious: 35% instituted three no-meeting days, and 11% implemented four. The remaining 7% eradicated meetings entirely.

The subsequent impact of introducing meeting-free days was profound, as outlined in the table below. When one no-meeting day per week was introduced, autonomy, communication, engagement, and satisfaction all improved, resulting in decreased micromanagement and stress, which caused productivity to rise.

Percentage Change in Employee Ratings After Introduction of Meeting-Free Days

Regardless of the number of meeting-free days instituted, employees subsequently reported improvements in factors like autonomy and cooperation and decreases in stress and micromanagement. But arguably, the best results were achieved at companies that had three meeting-free days per week.

VARIABLE	MEETING-FREE DAYS PER WEEK				
	1	2	3	4	5
Autonomy	62%	78%	83%	86%	88%
Communication	45%	57%	61%	65%	68%
Cooperation	15%	43%	55%	58%	52%
Engagement	28%	32%	41%	44%	27%
Micromanaging	-33%	-52%	-68%	-74%	-63%

Productivity	35%	71%	73%	74%	64%
Satisfaction	48%	52%	65%	62%	42%
Stress	-26%	-43%	-57%	-63%	-75%

When meetings were reduced by 40% (the equivalent of two days per week), we found productivity to be 71% higher because employees felt more empowered and autonomous. Rather than being pinned down by a schedule, they owned their to-do lists and held themselves accountable, which consequently increased satisfaction by 52%.

While it may seem counterintuitive, our research concluded that having too many meetings detracts from eKective collaboration, derails workers during their most productive hours, and interrupts people's train of thought. Consequently, removing 60% of meetings — the equivalent of three days per week — increased cooperation by 55%. Workers replaced meetings with better ways of connecting one-on-one, at a pace suitable for them, often using project management tools to aid communication. In doing so, the risk of stress decreased by 57%, which improved employees' psychological, physical, and mental wellbeing.

For companies that instituted four meeting-free days a week, we found that the potential for micromanaging lessened by 74%: People felt valued, trusted, and 44% more engaged and, consequently, worked harder for their company. With zero meetings occurring four days per week, communication was 65% clearer and substantially more eKective. There were far fewer misunderstandings between colleagues; people would quickly check a previous Slack conversation or a project outline to review an assignment or request. Phrases like "I thought you told me …" or "I was under the impression …" were rarely used.

While our data highlights the importance of moving toward a no-meetings policy because of the bene6ts, there are also some unintended consequences caused by the law of diminishing returns. Therefore, managers need an understanding of what works for their unique contexts to maximize the full bene6ts of a no-meeting strategy. The advantages of no-meeting periods begin to plateau after meetings are reduced by 60% and actually wane beyond that. For example, satisfaction, productivity, engagement, and cooperation all decline when meetings are eliminated entirely.

Thus, we conclude that the optimum number of meeting-free days is three, leaving two days per week available for meetings, for two reasons: maintaining social connections and managing weekly schedules.

Meetings oKer an opportunity to socialize. A nomeetings period is an implicit removal of opportunities to connect — even though meetings are not the organic way in which humans interact with one another. In remote working environments, the [risk of isolation](#) is exceptionally high, and therefore managers must [deliberately create opportunities for socialization](#). Informal, no-agenda meetings can eKectively ful6ll humans' need for social contact.

No matter the schedule proposed, the transition to a limited number of meeting days will require some scheduling creativity. This is because these sorts of work productivity hacks, if not taken seriously, can simply lead people to push meetings to a diKerent day. If not dealt with, this spillover eKect can result in scheduling overload and become a regular stressor for you and your employees. Not meeting on some days and packing all meetings into another day does not solve anything.

Implementing a NoMeetings Practice

If you're looking to deploy a no-meetings policy or adjust your existing one, here's how.

Connect with your team. The 6rst step is soliciting feedback before launching changes to current meeting practices. You can do this by circulating the premise behind and reasoning for no-meeting periods. Those working cross-functionally on projects may give you some pushback, so oKer a clear, compelling reason for introducing this new policy to everyone's weekly schedules. Maybe several team members are working on complex projects that require more time to think challenges through — or perhaps everyone's schedules have become too packed with meetings to meet rigorous work deadlines.

Encourage informality. Humans are storytellers, so allow your staK members to be who they are. Our research found it bene6cial for memes, current aKairs, sports, celebrity news, holiday plans, and emojis to be shared and discussed on internal communications platforms. Employees see such informal interactions as extensions of themselves and believe the work environment should allow them to express the totality of who they are. When informal conversations dow in your company, barriers of formality are removed; most questions (87%) get answered at the virtual watercooler — such as a message board — or on a direct-messaging platform such as Slack or Teams, and meetings become a thing of the past. Providing a forum for social venting, storytelling, or unwinding together is always appreciated, we found.

Practice better meeting hygiene. Companies' main challenge when making this transition is 6nding a new, organized way to collaborate. It can be easy to fall back into old patterns, so provide ground rules to help employees adapt to the new approach.

Ensure that every meeting has a clear agenda and expected outcome. Meetings that lack these two elements probably weren't thoroughly thought through and, as the saying goes, could probably have just been an email. Encourage your team to cancel meetings that aren't the best use of their time; being judicious about which meetings add value and which aren't can help free up their calendars even more.

Assigning roles, such as a notetaker or a timekeeper, to help people stick to the agenda is also an advantageous practice, especially for meetings involving larger groups. Send clear bullet point recaps after each meeting: Documenting meeting highlights, questions, and essential tasks can keep your team accountable and prevent repeated discussions of issues that were already covered.

Ultimately, no-meetings policies allow for efficient collaboration while preventing focused, heads-down work from being disrupted. We observed that employees do appreciate these policies, which allow them to excel without breaking their momentum. After an adjustment period, most teams see the value in making meetings an infrequent occurrence, particularly if they occur only two days per week. With meetings yielding so little return on time investment, the opportunity cost is too high not to act now.