Meetings at work: Perceived effectiveness and recommended improvements ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates why a large proportion of meetings continue to be regarded as a poor use of time, despite a substantial body of literature on how to make improvements. Employees from 41 countries provide comments on the effectiveness of their typical meetings and how to improve effectiveness. Less than half the respondents describe meetings as an effective use of time. The results suggest that employees are often invited to meetings of little personal relevance and many meeting organizers fail to apply fundamental meeting design practices. The findings show differences in response patterns for country of origin, job status (part- or full-time), and organizational type, but not for gender, supervisory status, and organizational tenure. The study provides illustrative comments about forms of effectiveness/ineffectiveness and forms of improvement, and discusses the implications with respect to theory development, future research, and practice.

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1. Introduction

Meetings are a common activity in most organizations, seeking to provide a means for decision-making and goal-setting, scheduling work, solving problems, and disseminating information (e.g., McComas, Tuit, Waks, & Sherman, 2007; Volkema & Niederman, 1995). Research indicates that the amount of organizational time spent in meetings is steadily increasing (e.g., Elsayed-Elkhouly, Lazarus, & Forsythe, 1997; Mosvick & Nelson, 1987; Rogelberg, Leach, Warr, & Burnfield, 2006; Tobia & Becker, 1990), and the growing popularity of teamwork is likely to accelerate the trend.

While some meetings are highly productive and valued by attendees, a substantial number are not, with estimates as high as 41.9% (Schell, 2010, as cited in Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012). Indeed, meetings are widely regarded as a source of inefficiency and a poor use of time (e.g., McManus, 2006; Mosvick & Nelson, 1987; Sisco, 1993). Inefficiencies can cost the organization in terms of staff wages

for time spent in unproductive/unnecessary meetings, opportunity costs or efficiency costs (i.e., inability of staff to engage instead in more productive activities), and potential organizational costs such as lowered morale (McManus, 2006; Rogelberg, Shanock, & Scott, 2012).

Much of the existing trade and research literature focuses on meeting procedures, also referred to as design characteristics (e.g., Leach, Rogelberg, Warr, & Burnfield, 2009; Litsikas, 1995). These characteristics – potential antecedents of meeting effectiveness – include using an agenda, keeping minutes, starting and ending on time, and having a chairperson (e.g., Carlozzi, 1999; Leach et al., 2009; Nixon & Littlepage, 1992; Spencer & Pruss, 1992; Tropman, 1996; Volkema & Niederman, 1995). In more detail, Cohen, Rogelberg, Allen, and Luong (2011) categorize 18 meeting design characteristics as relating to temporal (e.g., promptness), attendee (e.g., presence of facilitator), physical (meeting setting), and procedural (e.g., formal agenda, meeting minutes) characteristics. Design characteristics are generally under the control of the meeting organizer and can be planned before, or initiated during, the meeting. Research, however, is often limited to only some of the potentially important features, for instance either more structural characteristics (e.g., use of an agenda, facility characteristics; Cohen et al., 2011) or particular communication processes (e.g., member participation or exploring options in decision making; Nixon & Littlepage, 1992). Leach et al. (2009) examine both structural and communication process characteristics and treat attendee involvement as a mediator variable that links structural characteristics to meeting effectiveness.

Further, in a study of executive meeting leaders, Perkins (2009) distinguishes the process of leading a meeting from the content of the meeting itself. According to Perkins, meeting process behaviors include

"proposing how the meeting should be conducted, reducing tension, asking clarifying questions, summarizing, and testing for consensus" (p. 300), and content behaviors include "giving information, seeking information, supporting, and disagreeing/attacking" (p. 300). These conceptualizations build on elements of the broader leadership behavior literature, such as elements of initiating structure (e.g., Fleishman, 1995). Interestingly, Perkins reports that, on average, meeting leaders focus 80% of their time performing content-related behaviors and 20% of their time on process behaviors, while expert leaders spend 50% on each. The study highlights the importance of how communication is delivered or exchanged and how objectives are achieved as much as what is conveyed. A subsequent investigation of top-management group meetings similarly reports that goal clarity (an example of initiating structure) and focused communication relate positively and significantly with team effectiveness (Bang, Fuglesang, Ovesen, & Eilertsen, 2010).

However, these studies of executive/management meeting groups have limitations. Perkins' study involves only 21 participants (20 of whom were male); all of whom are high-potential senior executives, none are poor meeting leaders, and only three are experts. Bang et al.'s (2010) sample comprises only eight top management teams in Norway, all in the public sector. Patterns may of course be different outside the public sector or in other countries. These studies, while informative, do not include a large segment of meeting attendees and they may be missing key elements of meeting-leader behaviors. Building on these studies of leader actions taken during meetings, an examination of the behaviors of leaders (and attendees) pre- and post-meetings is warranted.

The present qualitative study examines comments from a broad, multi-national sample of employees on the factors that influence perceptions of meeting quality. This approach – the use of open-ended questions to allow participants to comment on whatever they feel is relevant to meeting effectiveness – is particularly appropriate in appraising the importance of previously-identified design characteristics (cf., Cohen et al., 2011) and in identifying new design characteristics. More specifically, this study aims to build upon Perkins (2009) to reveal both content and process factors in effectiveness perceptions, and uses a sample of leaders and attendees which is broader than in most previous research. Furthermore, the study goes beyond an examination of meeting effectiveness alone to also obtain attendees' practical recommendations for improvement.

Recommendations to improve meetings are often based on managerial perceptions of what happens in meetings they attend (e.g., Bang et al., 2010; Myrsiades, 2000) or on observations of manager/executive meetings (e.g., Perkins, 2009). This approach is valuable because meetings are a mechanism through which supervisors (or meeting leaders) may influence relationships with others and shape their perceptions of the organization. However, an exclusive focus on leader/supervisor perceptions is problematic because research suggests that meeting facilitators have more positive perceptions of meeting quality than those who are not in positions of power (Cohen et al., 2011). Therefore gathering perceptions from all meeting attendees and not just from the leaders is important (e.g., Baran, Shanock, Rogelberg, & Scott, 2012). The present study thus obtains a diverse range of recommendations from attendees at all levels of the organization with varied meeting experiences and backgrounds.

This qualitative investigation considers three additional topics: meeting dissatisfaction, culture, and theory development. First, what are the drivers of meeting dissatisfaction? Although a number of studies examine participants' satisfaction with meetings (e.g., Cohen et al., 2011; Leach et al., 2009; Streibel, 2003; Tobia & Becker, 1990; Tropman, 1996), relatively little research explores the origins of meeting dissatisfaction. Better understanding of what does not work well can inform the development of action plans for improving meeting activities. Rogelberg, Allen, Shanock, Scott, and Shuffler (2010) note eight variables as potential predictors of dissatisfaction, including too many meetings with no substantive agenda, unfocused discussion,

meetings starting and ending late, and lack of follow-through on what is discussed. Vivacqua, Marques, Ferreira, and de Souza (2011) point to additional meeting problems, such as avoidance, contradicting opinions, difficult personal attitude, repetition, and lack of information. Given the two studies' disparate findings for what contributes to meeting dissatisfaction or problems during meetings, the present research examines reasons that underpin perceptions of ineffective meetings, as well as those that relate to effective meetings.

The second topic concerns cultural differences in work meeting practices. Despite increasing globalization, cross-cultural research is scant. In a recent study of differences in meeting norms, Köhler, Cramton, and Hinds (2012) report differences in German and American expectations for the purpose, content, participant roles, and timing of meetings. For instance, their results suggest that Americans generally begin meetings with small talk and follow more of an impromptu and linear style while Germans tend to focus on task definition and use recurrent cycles of refinement. While groundbreaking in understanding cultural differences, Köhler et al.'s study examines only a restricted number of teams in limited populations (i.e., one manufacturing team, six student teams, and three software teams), assesses only two cultures, and focuses primarily on interaction patterns. The present broader investigation extends across several countries, and examines additional elements, such as meeting outcomes and design, and attendee characteristics.

The third topic relates to the use of theoretical frameworks to explain why various meeting design characteristics or other meeting process variables might contribute to meeting quality or perceptions of effectiveness. Using a needs-based model, Malouff, Calic, McGrory, Murrell, and Schutte (2012) report that several meeting-leader behaviors (e.g., encouraging participation, arriving before the start of the meeting, moving the meeting along, summarizing decisions made, smiling) relate to perceived meeting productivity or meeting satisfaction. In contrast, Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2012) apply an input–process–output model of team performance (e.g., Hackman & Morris, 1975) to examine communication in real time using behavioral observational methods. They view meeting processes as "activities that mediate the relationship between input factors (e.g., team members' personalities, group size, or financial incentives) and team outputs or outcomes (e.g., productivity, team member satisfaction, or meeting effectiveness)" (p. 131). Although Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock's study and coding scheme advance understanding of interpersonal communication processes during meetings, findings are limited to a German-speaking background and only address verbal behaviors. Generally, though, relatively few studies of work meetings are theoretically grounded. Through analysis of perceptions of meeting effectiveness, the present study seeks to inform theory development with respect to why meetings are often negatively perceived.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedure

In order to obtain a wide range of views and to address gaps in previous meetings research (e.g., focusing on a single country, single organization, or a set of organizations in a single field), the primary sampling strategy draws participants from across the world and in multiple industries. This strategy involves contacting respondents through online interest groups, commercially purchased email addresses, advertisements, and articles in newspapers and magazines. Participants then provide, through an online platform, comments about meeting effectiveness and ways to improve effectiveness by responding to the following questions: (1) In regard to the effectiveness of your typical meetings, please provide the main reason why you feel as you do about the meetings you attend and (2) What suggestions do you have for improving the effectiveness of meetings? To ensure comparable individual responses, the survey provides a standard definition of work