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MEETING PLANNING

Adding up the Cost of Meetings

Most people will have heard the story of the American corporate president who had the hourly salaries of his board members entered into an electronic display, which updated the cost of each meeting as it progressed. He would periodically turn to the display and ask the meeting participants if they had justified the accumulated cost. No doubt this was an effective way of keeping minds focused.

However, simple salary based calculations take no account of the other costs associated with a meeting. Here are some examples:

Cost of Overruns

Every meeting has associated with it a time and a cost – but how many half hour meetings actually last 30 minutes? Far more overrun than finish early, so even quantifying the time of the meeting isn't that easy.

Preparation & Follow Up

You would normally expect to spend some time ahead of a meeting - preparing for it. You would also spend some time following the meeting in pursuing tasks that have arisen from it. Typically, a meeting could occupy three to five times the scheduled duration of the meeting.

Travel costs

People often travel quite long distances in order to attend meetings and not only must this cost be factored in, but also an appropriate allowance for any non-productive time.

Overhead and Administration costs

This category includes the fixed costs of the meeting venue, whether it is in-house or external, as well as the cost of hiring any presentation equipment that may be required. It will include all of the communication and production costs associated with the meeting - items such as stationery, printing, telecommunications and postage. If the meeting uses videoconferencing, then this can be quite a significant cost.

Opportunity costs

Whilst people are in meetings they are not able to carry out their normal duties. For example, a sales meeting may take a number of key sales staff off the road for a day. Sales opportunities will inevitably be missed and this needs to be considered when estimating the true cost of the meeting?

Reducing the Number of Meetings You Attend

How often have you agreed to attend a meeting, only to find out that there was nothing to it that couldn't have been dealt with via email or the telephone?

How many meetings have you attended where your presence was entirely superfluous?

What about those meetings where the other party's agenda meant that you were put on the spot, and you wished you hadn't attended?

Learning to say no to unnecessary meetings will be an important part of your meetings strategy. It is only by declining inappropriate, or poorly planned, meetings that you will find the time to prepare for and attend those that are of real value.

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If you start to take responsibility for every meeting, whether you are chairing it or just attending, you will soon find that you are going to fewer and better meetings. You will become more specific about what it is that you want to accomplish and you'll be more focused on achieving a positive outcome.

If you decide that there are some meetings that you would either like to avoid or would like to see restructured, then there are a variety of approaches that you can adopt. For example:

Question the need for your attendance

This is easier to do if the meeting leader is your subordinate or a peer, rather than your boss. Where you wish to extricate yourself from a meeting called by your boss a good approach can be to couch your request in terms of an opportunity cost. For example, "Two other people from my section are already attending, so I think it would be a better use of my time to complete the plan for the new project, rather than attend this meeting". This couches your request in terms of an opportunity to complete another urgent task. Always make these requests from the team player perspective and stress the benefits, which should be in the best interests of your boss.

Ask for clarification of the objective

If you ask the leader of a forthcoming meeting to clarify the meeting objective, this will encourage them to re-evaluate the best way that this might be achieved. You could also ask about other aspects of the proposed meeting: are the planned attendees the best group, is the timing right and is all relevant information available?

Identify the deficiencies

If your main objection to a forthcoming meeting is that one or more aspects of it are missing or poorly planned, you should communicate this to the meeting leader. This is best done in a constructive working environment, where these comments are unlikely to cause insult or confusion. This strategy works well because it not only affects the meeting in question, but should result in better planned meetings in the future.

Try making your contribution on the telephone

Calling the meeting leader to make your contribution ahead of the meeting may preclude the need for you to attend it. You may wish to follow this up with a written contribution that the leader can table on the day. This approach can prove very useful if your involvement is superficial, for example if you are needed for your technical opinion in a fairly narrow area.

Simply be unavailable

In some cases you will have other commitments that mean you cannot attend a meeting. You may choose to use this as a valid excuse for skipping a meeting. You may even distance yourself from the message by asking a secretary or colleague to communicate this on your behalf.

Deciding which meetings to attend, or influence in some way, is best done in a considered and direct way. It is in everyone's best interest to attend effective and well-structured meetings. Remember, your time is your responsibility, if you decide that you should not attend a meeting, then take action to avoid it.

Clarify Your Objectives

A lot of meetings are called and run on the basis that everybody knows what the goal of the meeting is. But how often do you enter a meeting with a clear idea of what you hope to

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achieve, what decision should be made or what problem will be solved? Without a clear consensus about the goal of a meeting, the chance of success is minimal.

Generally speaking, the fewer tasks that are undertaken, the more successful the meeting is likely to be. It is important to set measurable objectives prior to each meeting that you attend, especially if your role is that of chairperson. This gives you something to strive for during the meeting, and you will know when the meeting ends whether or not it has been successful. Some meetings will lend themselves to readily identifiable success criteria whereas others will not. Here are some examples:

Sales Meeting

In a final sales meeting where success is measured by getting the written order the criteria for success would be to secure an order. Failure to do so would normally indicate a failed meeting.

Negotiation

You would usually enter a negotiation with a checklist of things you would like to secure from the other side, together with a list of points you would be willing to concede. These represent objective criteria against which the meeting can be assessed.

Presentation Meeting

At a meeting designed to inform, the success criteria could be the amount of information imparted. However, this takes no account of the information that is actually received and understood by the attendees. In reality, this makes objective success criteria very difficult to establish.

If you are able to set measurable objectives, then share them with the meeting group. Set out a route for the meeting with clear milestones and then assess its success in achieving the objectives you set for it. Adopting this approach may convince you that a meeting is not always the right course of action, and you may find yourself calling fewer meetings.

Think Ahead for Effectiveness

Over the past decade meetings have started to consume an increasing proportion of the working day. This trend seems set to continue, with more and longer meetings occupying the time of senior staff. Despite predictions that the impact of high technology in the workplace would reduce the need for meetings, the reverse is proving to be the case.

Organizations need staff that possess total meetings skills, including the ability to limit and shape the increasing demand for meetings. Meetings that last too long or that are held too often will be seen for what they are, an expensive liability, wasting the organizations resources and money.

This course will help you to develop effective meeting skills, whether you are attending as the chairperson or as a participant. All aspects of meetings are covered in detail, including preparation, communicating effectively and maintaining control throughout the meeting process.

Meetings often represent the most dramatic and powerful events in the workplace. When a meeting works well the added value can be enormous. However, meetings that give rise to poorly considered decisions and inappropriate follow-up actions will leverage this failure throughout the organization.

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Each type of meeting should be carefully planned to achieve its specific objective. For example:

If the main objective of the meeting is to inform people, then the meeting will usually involve some form of presentation followed by a question and answer session. This type of meeting should focus on the person presenting the information and the opportunity for discussion will often be limited.

If the meeting is held to solve a problem or brainstorm new ideas then everyone should be encouraged to participate from the outset. This kind of meeting should be relatively unstructured, and free flowing discussion should be encouraged. This will be helped by selecting the most appropriate venue and seating arrangement.

When meetings are successful they achieve a dynamic interchange between the participants in which they can achieve more than they could by working alone - or by communicating by some other means. However, when the outcome is evaluated objectively, many meetings are not successful and often leave the participants feeling that the meeting was a waste of time.

Preparing Your Case

If you are presenting, or supporting, one case against another then you must give careful consideration to the preparation and management of your case.

Firstly, carry out some background research before a meeting, to help you to make an informed contribution. Sources of information may well include: colleagues who have worked in similar fields, research material and other relevant publications and notes or minutes from previous group meetings. Your research should include finding out whatever you can about the other attendees, for example their views and interests in the areas being discussed.

Secondly, if your views are likely to meet strong resistance, try to identify your opponents and negotiate a compromise, or at least an understanding, in advance. This way neither party will be undermined in public and the atmosphere at the meeting can be kept far more positive and constructive.

Finally, plan the content of any case you will present at a meeting around the message or messages you want to convey, in order to achieve your objective. It is important to keep the focus of your presentation on the message and not on the information and facts that underpin that message. This can be very difficult, especially when the message is supported by a multitude of facts that you think the audience should know.

If your presentation does consist of a series of facts and supporting evidence, then the audience is likely to assimilate these and draw their own conclusions. If this happens you will lose the opportunity to influence and shape the audiences interpretation. It is far more effective to communicate your messages and then support them with an adequate level of facts and information - so that your meeting partners can line them up behind the message you wish to convey.

This tutorial is an excerpt from the GetAhead in Business Meetings course.

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