

# Hidden cost of pointless meetings

While meetings play a valuable role as a forum to communicate, collaborate and innovate, most meetings today no longer serve a strategic purpose. They have, instead, become reflexive diary entries that contribute little and can, indeed, hurt more than help, a leadership expert says.



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“Companies would do well to consider the impact and the cost of meetings, and in particular recurring meetings, on various areas of the business,” says Advaita Naidoo, Africa MD at Jack Hammer, Africa’s largest executive search firm.

“Meetings have become so ingrained in the daily operations of most businesses, that we have stopped thinking about whether any particular meeting actually adds value. A meeting that doesn’t add value can’t merely be dismissed as an hour or two of wasted time, as there are additional hidden costs that need to be taken into consideration,” she says.

A [2022 survey done by Microsoft](#), which polled 31,000 people in 31 countries, showed that more than two-thirds of them felt they didn’t have enough time to focus at work.

The number one disruptor cited was inefficient meetings. It also showed that there had been a 190% rise in the number of meetings people were required to attend since 2020 - likely a direct result of increased remote working and managers seeking to keep tabs on the team.

But the time has come to take stock of the value of meetings and ensure that each meeting serves a purpose for all attendees, Naidoo says.



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Steven Pieterse 1 Dec 2021



### She says meaningless meetings amount to:

- A waste of time and resources, which could have been used for other productive activities. Consider that it is not only the time spent in the meeting that is wasted, but also the time ahead of the meeting, which is spent on planning, as well as the interruption of flow to switch over from productive work to the meeting headspace, and back again thereafter.
- Costly exercises in the case of in-person meetings, where funds are allocated to travel expenses, venue rental, catering and equipment.
- A reduction in employee engagement and satisfaction, particularly for non-essential attendees. Meetings can be boring, frustrating and demotivating for employees if they are not relevant, interactive and meaningful. An extreme frustration for many, is sitting in an endless meeting from which nothing of value arises, all the while knowing how much real work awaits at the end.
- A block on creativity and innovation, if they are too structured, rigid or formal. In large meetings, where only a handful of people make the bulk of contributions, divergent thinking, risk-taking and experimentation may be discouraged.
- A delay in action and results, for two reasons: Firstly, if a decision needs to be made and can be made quickly and efficiently between the relevant parties via immediate communication, but is delayed until a meeting date in the future; and secondly, if decisions are not followed by effective execution. This can happen because meetings create a false sense of progress if they are not linked to concrete actions, responsibilities and deadlines.

“Superfluous meetings don’t only damage productivity and morale, but also have an impact on a company’s bottom line by way of wasted hours which could’ve been spent more productively, as well as direct expenses related to the meeting itself,” Naidoo says.

“Couple that with data that shows that most people have about four optimally productive hours a day, and it makes little sense to spend some of that time in meetings unless they are absolutely essential.”



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### Defining the purpose

Of course not all meetings are pointless and a waste of time and resources, but determining whether one is necessary or not, is key. For a meeting to be purposeful, it should ideally seek to decide something, be used as an opportunity for a

group to learn something, be an opportunity for a team to bond, or a chance to work collaboratively.

Naidoo says to eliminate the hidden cost and impact of meetings, companies should do an audit of all recurring meetings within teams, and eliminate unnecessary ones. Then, they should adopt clear policies for future meetings, which will incorporate best practices of meaningful meetings and effective meeting management. These include setting clear objectives and agendas for each meeting, inviting only relevant participants, facilitating active participation and feedback, documenting key points and action items, and following up on deliverables.

“Some meetings are without question time well spent for a company and employees, and support growth and innovation. By all means, keep these meetings and fine-tune them so that they are a good return on investment. But for all the other meetings, which contribute little except annoyance for employees and hidden cost to the company, consider letting them go, and freeing up time and other valuable resources.”

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