



Anatomy of a good meeting

And how to eliminate horrible hybrids



After a seemingly endless treadmill of back-to-back video calls during the pandemic, many of us are feeling a touch of ‘video fatigue’. And while it’s easy to blame the technology, it’s not video that’s the real problem. It’s meetings.

We’ve taken analogue meetings and tried to move them into the digital world. Which means, in a frictionless, fully remote world, it’s easy to end up with a succession of ‘death by meeting’ days. Which can be both unproductive and exhausting.

This paper dissects the anatomy of a good meeting (hybrid, or otherwise) and how they can help engage employees in today’s workplace.



What's the matter with meetings?

Research has shown that about 70% of meetings keep employees from their day job.¹ They can derail us during our most productive hours and interrupt our train of thought – which is especially problematic when we're attempting to tackle complex tasks.² As a result, our fatigue gets worse because we end up working longer to compensate for the hours lost talking about work, rather than doing it.

The pandemic magnified this problem. Although the meetings themselves became 20% shorter during lockdowns,¹ the time spent in meetings more than doubled.³

Why did this happen? It might have been:

- A need for human contact.
- An attempt to encourage teamwork whilst people were physically apart.
- A need to make diaries look busy to compensate for not being visible in the office.
- A desire to increase visibility (especially for managers).¹

Some of these issues are solved with a hybrid working model, where people work both on and off site. But hybrid also introduces friction to the working day. There can be a bewildering number of conflicting schedules to cater for, and scheduling meetings can be like herding cats.

Many remote workers operate on a 'triple peak' day,⁴ where productivity peaks before and after lunch (the traditional pattern) plus another peak in the hours before bed. Onsite workers tend to stick to more conventional office hours. This means it becomes even more vital to coordinate teams and establish core hours for meetings. That doesn't mean anytime between 9am and 5pm: it should be two to three core meeting hours on certain days only.

Otherwise, after you've made the effort to get into an office, you could end up on calls all day anyway and remain effectively isolated from those around you. Which becomes one of the worst possible 'horrible hybrids'.





Should we just dump meetings?

A world without meetings sounds like a dream. But a study found that cutting meetings by more than 60% starts to harm productivity¹ – so we can't ditch them completely. Most organisations depend on them to coordinate, create consensus and collaborate. What we need to do is understand when meetings are valuable, when they're not, and how to make hybrid meetings work better.

Back-to-back meetings rarely result in improved productivity. Knowledge workers can spend more than more than 85% of their time in meetings that 92% consider to be both costly and unproductive.¹ In fact, many studies have shown that meeting overload can negatively affect people's psychological, physical, and mental wellbeing.

Microsoft Research even showed how people's brains start to show high levels of stress when there's no break between meetings.⁵ It isn't surprising that all this tends to result in significant levels of disinterest and disengagement: 73% of people admit that they use meeting time to do their email or catch up on other work.⁶

Some companies have implemented meeting-free days or 'asynchronous only' weeks (where people can only communicate outside real time, using things like messaging channels or emails instead of meetings or calls), with some degree of success. One study found that reducing meetings by 40% could increase productivity by 71%.¹ People felt more trusted and empowered when they could set their own agendas rather than being slaves to their diary, which led to a 52% increase in satisfaction and a 57% decrease in stress.¹

Senior managers are often both the cause and the victims of meeting overload. For a start, they tend to be in more of them, spending around 50% of their time in meetings versus 35% for middle managers.¹ But senior managers are also likely to get the most out of them, whereas more junior managers will often have to sit through presentations which might not be relevant or useful to them.

There may also be an element of FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) involved in invitation lists. Inviting the world and its dog is unlikely to make a meeting more productive and will probably result in higher levels of disengagement. This is especially the case for virtual meetings.

Research from Stanford suggests that the larger the online meeting, the less effective they're seen to be – especially once numbers exceed 10. At this point, people's faces are in smaller boxes, making it harder to see their expressions clearly. Plus there's a greater likelihood that participants will be on and off mute, disrupting the natural flow of conversation.⁷

If there are more spectators than participants, then there's a high chance that many will be disengaged and would be better off spending their time elsewhere. Being in pointless meetings can add up to an eye-watering number of hours of redundant time. If employees feel that meetings aren't adding value to them, they should also be able to say so without being penalised.

One technique to slim down your commitments is described by work futurist, Dominic Price, as 'sticks versus boomerangs'⁸. Here, you reject the majority of meetings you're invited to – especially if you're a senior manager. The ones that really matter will boomerang back, and the 'sticks' (the meetings that can be thrown out and won't return) will simply fall out of the diary.

Of course, if you do feel that you're missing out, remember that any conversations on a digital platform can be recorded and transcribed. Meaning you'll be free to catch up at a time that suits you.

Using your head: could this meeting be a message?

We tend to call a meeting the minute that we need to share something, or get advice from other people, without questioning whether it's really the best approach. If the meeting is just one or two people talking at everyone else with no interactivity, or people going through their to-do lists, this might be better shared over messaging or email. Ultimately, it's the task in hand that should determine whether things deserve a dedicated calendar slot, or whether they could be done more easily another way.

Things that may well have been discussed in daily 'stand-ups' could just as easily be translated into a chat session – with one study suggesting that 83% of employees preferred using chat over traditional meetings because they thought it saved them time.¹ Meetings should be reserved for discussion, questioning, dissection, creating connection and reaching consensus, not passive consumption of information.

Asynchrony (where communication happens over a period of time) is a good way to share information and decide on the issues that need to be debated. Then synchrony (where communication happens in the moment) can be used to discuss these issues and make decisions.

The virtues of this are that:

1. The asynchronous conversation is open and visible to all, wherever and whenever they are.
2. It isn't dependent on any specific time, or time zone (it's always 5 o'clock somewhere).
3. There's room to think – which is especially valuable to introverts, who typically like to mull ideas over and write thoughts down, rather than the more extroverted thinking-out-loud style that often happens in meetings.
4. Writing things down often forces people to think things through and articulate them clearly. This leaves room for people to ask questions, get clarification, and start a discussion even before everyone gets together for a meeting. In fact, you might find that some things get resolved before the meeting takes place.
5. Meeting time is used more sparingly and valuably as people will have already been exposed to the ideas and information that inform the conversation.

Interestingly, research found that holding fewer face-to-face meetings didn't result in higher levels of messaging and emails being sent instead.¹ It seems that the more carefully we think about communication efficiency, the better that communication is.

Although online tools have improved immeasurably (many duplicating post-it notes digitally), some people prefer the instant collaboration of a brainstorming session. There is some evidence that in-person meetings generate more creative ideas than virtual get-togethers because video interactions result in a narrow focus on the screen, which also seems to narrow cognitive focus.⁸

However, research from Stanford has suggested that the traditional brainstorming approach might also need a rethink. Although people enjoy the buzz of being together in a room, it can sometimes oppress creative thinking due to time and social pressures.⁹ This suggests that brainstorming could be done more efficiently if people submitted ideas in advance and the meeting was used to explore and develop these ideas, which is something that can be done effectively on video.⁸ This can potentially cut the meeting time in half.



Digital at heart

Hybrid meetings, with some participants in a room together and others dialling in, have many advantages. They remove the barriers of geography, cost, carbon footprint and accessibility. An analysis of conference attendance during the pandemic¹⁰ reported a dramatic increase in participation from under-represented groups and from developing countries when remote options for participation were included. Live captioning and recording/playback are also a massive boon for those with accessibility challenges.

Age and demographics can also play a part. Online meetings are rated as being more effective by younger age groups (30-49), who are also the groups where satisfaction with home working is highest. Women, more highly educated employees, and (unsurprisingly) those who spend more than four days a week working from home also reported higher levels of satisfaction with online meetings.⁷

Even with the best intentions, physical meetings may become hybrid. If a participant is ill, their plane or train is cancelled, or their children need to be picked up from school, they may need to dial in instead – and sometimes at very short notice. This means that meetings need to be digital by default.

The issue is that hybrid meetings are vastly more complex than meeting in-person or entirely virtually. They are easy to do poorly and hard to do well because the people in the room often dominate the conversation (which is also known as proximity bias).

The focus for hybrid meetings shouldn't be about duplicating the face-to-face experience, but acknowledging that hybrid requires a different discipline for meetings to work.

Using your eyes and your ears: getting the basics right.

The first step to success for hybrid is to get the basics right. Attempting to have a meeting where people can't see or hear each other is a recipe for disaster.

Sound is the highest priority to get right. In experiments we did many years ago, we could degrade the visuals of a video conference with only minor disruption but degrading sound quality brought everything to a halt.

Remote participants are at a huge disadvantage if they can't hear the people in the room – either because they're talking too quietly, they're too far from the microphone, they're hampered by background noise, or have bad network quality. This puts the onus on the room having high grade, spatial, noise-cancelling microphones picking up all participants.

Similarly, remote participants need good quality, noise-cancelling microphones, especially if they're travelling. Good connectivity is also essential because latency issues with their connection can cause a delay that might mean that they miss out on natural turn-taking. If all else fails, make sure that people can at least dial into a meeting using voice only.

Video can increase feelings of presence, so meetings tend to be more successful if people switch their cameras on. But whether or not this happens will depend on a number of cultural and social norms.

If teams know each other well, they can develop a shorthand for interaction, and need fewer visual cues. If teams are less well acquainted it can be difficult to pick up turn-taking cues and differentiate voices when you can't see who is speaking.

There are also always going to be people who don't want to share video. This may be because of bandwidth issues, neurodiversity, introversion, or simply having a bad hair day.

Genuine video fatigue can also be a massive factor switching people off.^{11,12,13,14}

Things that drive this include:

- The 'mirror' effect, where people can see themselves on screen. This is something that can make people very self-conscious¹⁵ and particularly affects women and ethnic minorities.⁶ It can be reduced by turning off self-view: something that most video platforms now let you do.
- Long periods of unnatural direct eye contact.
- The need to exaggerate non-verbal cues like smiling or head nodding to explicitly signal feelings.
- The inability to take breaks and move around.
- Increased cognitive load, caused by all the things listed above.





Being able to see people in the physical space can be a big issue for remote participants in a hybrid meeting – especially if the room view is shrunk to a single postage stamp size frame in the corner.

Some companies in hybrid meetings have a ‘one square per face’ rule – in other words, whether you’re in the room, or remote, your face has a square. This might mean that office-based people separate out into individual spaces, rather than being together in one room, which ensures that everyone has equal access to the meeting.

The alternative are cameras in the room which use facial recognition to pick out individual faces and put them into a square automatically. Some also highlight who is speaking at any one time – although this can be a bit of a problem if anyone happens to be eating noisy food.

Similarly, remote participants need to be visible to everyone in the room, even if this is just by picture and name label if they’ve turned off their camera. This may mean positioning multiple screens so they’re visible to everyone, or using mixed reality to project all participants onto meeting room walls. Past experience with technologies such as telepresence suggests that one of the most effective ways to position people is to have all in-room participants facing their remote counterparts (although this might not work for larger meetings).

It isn’t just about faces, though – both remote and in-person participants need equal access to whiteboards, brainstorming tools, presentations, objects, chat, and documents. Even subtle cues for someone wanting to speak, such as a remote participant unmuting themselves (the virtual equivalent of someone in the room taking a deep breath) or using a ‘hand raise’ feature, need to be spotted by people in the room.

Chat has emerged during the pandemic as a major bonus feature for meetings. In an in-person meeting, only one person can speak at a time and side conversations can be seen to be rude. This isn’t the case for online meetings and these side chats can be extremely valuable for in depth discussions, link sharing etc. These conversations can also be archived and shared, so they have a visibility and life beyond the meeting.

The danger is that in-room participants can be unaware of these conversations, unless they too are in the digital world (and vice-versa if the side conversations take place in the real world).

In fully-remote situations, chat channels tend to pick up a lot of the close social interaction – but informal office conversations are lost here, unless people involved in them intentionally put them online. This means that future employees need to get more adept at both formal and informal networking, whether it’s in the real world or the digital one.

Technical setup can also lead to a lot of frustration. Meeting rooms, even in the same company, can vary greatly, and faffing around with technical issues can waste precious time. Incompatibility of platforms or software and challenges in connecting to the network can add up to hugely unproductive meetings.

This is likely to become even more of an issue as hardware such as virtual and augmented reality headsets are introduced into the mix. One headset is unlikely to function on a rival’s metaverse platform. So having any solution work ‘out of the box’ is a must.

The heart of it: facilitation is critical

At the very heart of meeting success is facilitation. But very few chairs of meetings have had any training in this, which is a problem that existed way before the pandemic. 75% of those surveyed in one piece of research had received no formal training in how to run a meeting.⁶ Few even believe that they need training as they tend to consistently rate their own meetings more favourably than attendees do.⁷

Good facilitation isn't too dissimilar to being a perfect party host. Good parties need to be planned: they need a purpose, the right mix of guests, and networking encouraged with no wallflowers sitting lonely on the sidelines. And just as importantly, there needs to be an energy, focus and dynamism that keeps the meeting on track.

This is even more important when meetings are hybrid. Meetings can rapidly become tribal, with one group struggling to be heard over another. If the facilitator is in the room, proximity bias can cause them to inadvertently ignore the people who are not. A good facilitator needs to make sure that all participants are fully engaged and involved – making sure that remote people get heard, aren't interrupted, or talked over by people in the room.

The dynamics of face-to-face and virtual turn-taking is also different. Getting attention in a hybrid meeting – particularly for remote participants – can be especially challenging. Turn-taking when all participants are virtual is much more formalised and there are fewer interruptions, whereas the physical environment is often characterised by people talking over each other, side conversations and interruptions.

Remote participants may find it more difficult to interject because they simply don't have the presence for people to pick up normal visual cues for interruption. They might have to resort to putting a hand up (either a real hand or a virtual one) or asking a question on chat, which the facilitator may or may not see.⁸ If this is a problem in hybrid meetings, consider pairing virtual participants with an in-room proxy who can act on their behalf.





Engaging brains: active vs. passive participation.

There's something very energising about standing in a room, surrounded by post-it notes and being active. It's a whole different experience to sitting passively in front of a screen. Active participation can help learning and creative processes and, although being on video doesn't prevent people from standing up or moving around, it can feel strange to do it.⁶

It's all too easy for people in the digital world to disengage – especially if they're muted and have their cameras off. The temptation is to multi-task, or just to give continuous partial attention, both of which can distract from the task at hand.² Making it compulsory for all participants to keep their cameras on might not help with this if people still feel that they're not part of the meeting.

Good facilitators will encourage participation and help everyone see the value of their input, rather than wondering why they are there.

For larger events, things get even more complex. The 'broadcast' nature of these events often reduces the amount of networking, increases the amount of screen fatigue and often comes with the temptation to do something else.

As a remote audience member, live events shouldn't be a passive experience, like watching television. A more two-way interactive and immersive approach is required. The ability to take live questions, appear on screen, choose viewing angles, and engage with other audience members can add to a sense of participation. Chat, polls, and speaker Q&As are vital to make this experience more engaging.

A meeting concierge might also be desirable for these larger hybrid meetings. They can help troubleshoot any technical issues, help the facilitator make sure that people contribute, manage breakout rooms and orchestrate screen sharing, polling, chat questions and more.

An open mind: experimentation is key.

The pandemic brought collaboration tools to the fore. They demonstrate their value in bringing teams together from multiple locations, and enabled them to innovate more than ever.¹⁹

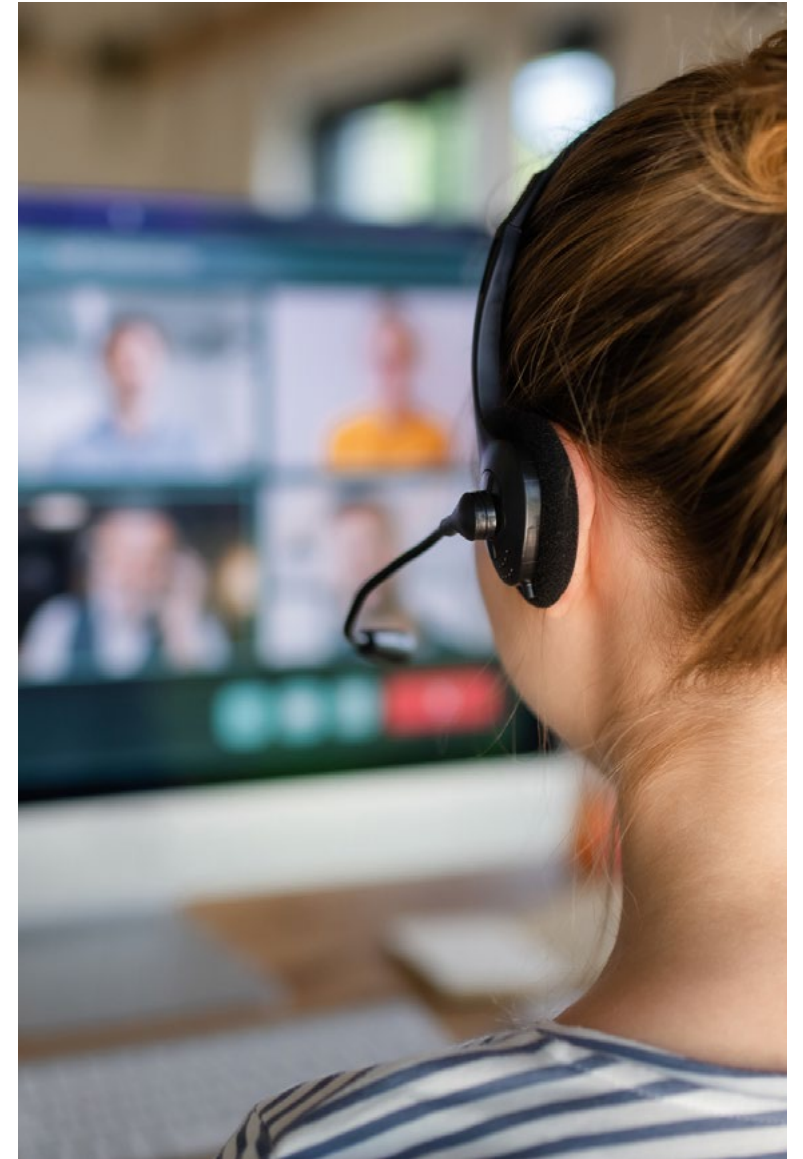
When everyone was remote, they were very effective at replicating the conference room, even if they didn't quite replicate the function of the wider physical office space, especially non-team/purpose related conversations.²⁰

As we move forward, it's clear that there are still a number of challenges to solve and, of course, new technologies coming down the line that might help.

The much-hyped metaverse may become the new digital default for meetings as we use virtual, augmented, or mixed reality to engage with colleagues. Being able to establish a tangible presence for everyone in meetings could play to the strengths of mixed reality technologies. Just as appearing side-by-side in video squares was a great leveller, the ability to project a full-size video image, expressive avatar, or real-time generated 3-D hologram into a physical or virtual meeting room, and into the home, would allow both remote and co-located participants to participate on an equal footing.

These solutions are likely to throw up their own hybrid headaches (perhaps literally, as VR can also give people a touch of motion sickness). It won't work if participants don't have the right VR/ AR headset, or good connectivity, or if they're on a train or walking down the street.

The key is experimentation. Hybrid work must not mean people are out of sight, out of sync, and out of touch. The journey from horrible hybrid to happy hybrid may be paved with potholes but a will to experiment and learn will help make work work better – for people, productivity, and the planet.



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