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Days without meetings – a way to be productive

Many organizations introduce days without meetings, but finding the optimal weekly balance requires thought.

Even before the pandemic, up to 71% of managers believed that meetings were expensive and usually unproductive. And yet, since many companies have switched to remote and hybrid work models, both the frequency and length of meetings have increased. All this to compensate for the loss of direct interactions. Today's office workers typically spend more than 85% of their time in meetings, which research shows negatively affects people's mental, physical and mental well-being.

What is the effect of days without meetings?

We recently conducted a survey of 76 companies employing more than 1,000 people and operating in more than 50 countries. Over the past 12 months, these companies have decided to introduce the principle that every week there will be working days free from any meetings, even one-on-one. In some companies it was one day, and in others even five. We also spoke to the managers and HR director of each company to find out what they think of this idea. We also analyzed data comparing employees' stress levels before and after reducing the number of meetings; and assessed the subsequent impact of this solution on productivity, collaboration and engagement using pulse surveys.

Almost half (47%) of the companies we surveyed reduced the number of meetings by 40%, introducing two days without meetings each week. The remaining companies tried something even more ambitious: 35% introduced three days without meetings, and 11% - four. On the other hand, as many as 7% of organizations completely eliminated meetings.

The impact of the introduction of such days turned out to be significant (see table Percentage change in employee ratings after the introduction of non-meeting days). After the introduction of one day a week in which there were no meetings, autonomy, communication, engagement and job satisfaction improved, resulting in a reduction in micromanagement and stress, and consequently an increase in productivity.

Percentage change in employee ratings after the introduction of non-meeting days

Regardless of the number of days off from meetings, employees reported improvements in factors such as autonomy and collaboration, and a decrease in stress and micromanagement levels. However, probably the best results were achieved in companies that decided that three days off from meetings.

When meetings were reduced by 40% (the equivalent of two days), we found that productivity increased by 71% because employees felt more independent and self-reliant. They stopped feeling cornered by their schedules, they had their own to-do lists prepared, they felt responsible for their execution, and this consequently increased their satisfaction by 52%.

Our research has shown (although it may seem counterintuitive) that too many meetings hinder effective collaboration, knock you out of rhythm during the most productive hours, and disrupt your thinking. As a consequence, giving up 60% of meetings – equivalent to three days a week – improved cooperation by 55%. Employees have replaced meetings with better ways of contact, e.g. one-on-one, organizing them at the appropriate time and frequency, while supporting each other with project management tools. In this way, the risk of stress decreased by 57%, which improved the mental and physical well-being of the respondents.

In companies that introduced four days a week free from various types of meetings, we found that the propensity to micromanage decreased by 74%: people felt appreciated, trusted and 44% more engaged, and as a result, worked harder for their company. The lack of meetings four days a week resulted in the remaining communication being 65% more transparent and much more effective. There was also much less misunderstanding between colleagues, if only because people checked the Slack conversation record or project outline if necessary, if they needed to verify a task or someone's request. Phrases like "I thought you said..." appeared less and less frequently in conversations. or "I had the impression that...".

The data we have collected highlights the benefits of a policy of moving away from meetings, but there are other unintended consequences of the law of diminishing profits. Therefore, managers need to understand what will work best for their companies in order to maximize the full benefits of a non-meeting strategy. Well, the benefits of periods without meetings begin to decrease after reducing the number of meetings by 60%. After exceeding this level, they even weaken. For example, after completely eliminating meetings, satisfaction, productivity, engagement and cooperation decrease.

Hence our conclusion – the optimal is the number of three days a week free from meetings. Allocating two days a week for meetings is essential for two reasons: maintaining social ties and managing weekly schedules.

The complete elimination of meetings has its negative effects, as satisfaction, productivity, engagement and cooperation decrease.

Meetings offer the opportunity to socialize. A period without them means that it will be difficult, even if they are not the natural and obvious way in which people interact with each other. In remote work environments, the risk of isolation is extremely high, which is why managers must intentionally create opportunities for socialization. We suggest that informal, spontaneous meetings can effectively satisfy the human need for social contact.

Regardless of the proposed schedule, switching to a limited number of meeting days requires some creativity in planning. This is because such solutions, which increase work efficiency, can be treated dismissively. And as a result, meetings from one day, they will be shifted to another, leading to their accumulation. If this happens, then the side effect will be overloaded schedule and regular stress for you and your employees. Letting go of some days to cram all meetings, deliberations, and meetings into others solves nothing.

Implementing a meeting reduction plan?

We suggest how to implement a policy of banning or reducing the number of meetings, as well as modify the existing one:

Contact the team. Before making any changes, you should get feedback from your team members. This can be done by providing all interested parties with reasons for doing so. People working on projects in different departments may have some reservations, so offer a clear, compelling reason to incorporate this new policy into the weekly schedules of all employees. Perhaps a few people are working on complex projects that require more time to think through challenges, or maybe everyone's schedules have become too packed with meetings to meet strict work deadlines.

Encourage freer behavior. People are storytellers, so let your employees be who they are. Our research has shown that even sharing funny videos with colleagues, telling each other memes, match results, or gossiping about celebrities and holiday plans, but also using emojis in company

messengers brings some benefits. Employees see such informal interactions as an extension of themselves and believe that the work environment should allow them to express who they are. When informal discussions take place in your company, barriers disappear. Most work questions (87%) are answered with a virtual coffee machine (such as a bulletin board or discussion forum) or on a direct communication platform such as Slack or Teams. Formalized meetings are not needed for this. It turned out that employees always appreciate creating a place where you can vent your emotions, tell a story or breathe together.

Take care of the hygiene of meetings. The main challenge for companies in the transition period is to find a new, organized way of cooperation. It is worth establishing basic rules that will help employees adapt to the new approach so that old habits do not return.

Make sure each meeting has a clear agenda and ends with a meaningful summary. Meetings that lack these two elements were probably not carefully thought out and just as well, instead of them, you could send an e-mail to those interested. Encourage your team not to be afraid to reject invitations to those meetings that are not the best use of their time, or even to simply cancel them. A sensible approach to which are necessary and which are not will help them better control their own calendar and give them more time for other tasks.

It is a good practice to ensure that there are people responsible for taking notes or keeping an eye on time at each meeting. So that the deliberations have their own order. This applies especially to those conducted in a larger group. After each, send a clear summary, preferably in points. Writing down the most important points of the meeting, questions and relevant tasks ensures that you know who and for what is responsible in a given team and, above all, prevents endless discussions on topics that have already been discussed.

Giving up some meetings allows for effective cooperation, while preventing disruption of work in concentration and silence. We've noticed that employees appreciate these principles that allow them to act in a way that doesn't knock them out of work. After some time, most of the team sees the benefit of limiting various types of meetings and deliberations. Especially when these necessary meetings are held only two days a week. If meetings do not bring a return on investment in the time devoted to them, the cost of not giving them up is too high not to take action now.