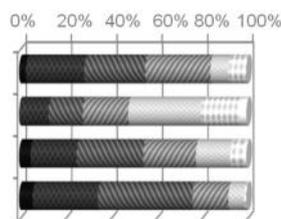# Are Meetings a Waste of Time?
Results of Meetings Survey across 50 Organisations

Meetings are wonderful! Is not a phrase that abounds in many organisations. Most people's experience of meetings leads to the use of somewhat more earthy terms, and there is extensive anecdotal evidence to illustrate just how un-wonderful most meetings are. But while there is a widely held *perception* that meetings have problems, there appears to be very little actual data available to substantiate this

With this in mind, we recently conducted two extensive surveys into people's experience of both physical and web-based meetings. The highlights *(or rather low-lights)* of the reports are covered below.

In a World where the West is no longer a competitive source for 'routine' labour, we need our people's ideas and insights to sustain our future. And yet we appear to ignore (or even eschew) the very mechanisms that are most effective in inspiring those things.

Key to charts

Pattern	Label
■	Always 100%
▓	Usually c90%
▨	Often c70-80%
▨	50/50 c40-60%
▒	Sometimes c20-30%
▦	Rarely c10%
□	Never 0%

To what extent did the meetings make effective use of the following tools:

- Accurate and well-researched data on the situation?
- Visual presentations? (e.g. PowerPoint)
- General debate & discussion within the group?
- Brainstorming? (Following the rules of brainstorming)
- Creativity tools, such as SCAMPER, reframing, or de Bono's tools?
- Using things like post-its & wall templates, where everyone contributes?
- Problem solving tools such as cause & effect, process maps, 5 whys, …?
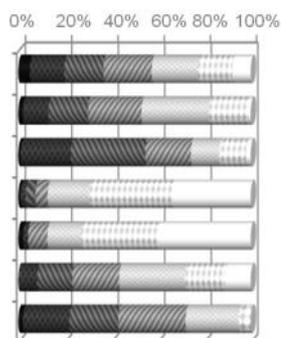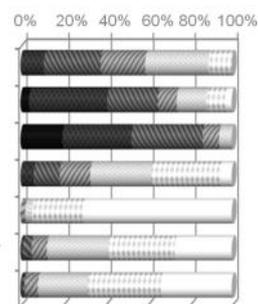
Quality of Purpose: It appears that just over one third of meetings still take place without a clear objective, and where objectives are defined, they are often not specific. As a result, it transpires that 39% of meetings take place when there is no real value that they can add at that point in time.

- Did they have clearly stated objectives for the meetings?
- Would you say the objectives were well defined in terms of specific measureable outcomes?
- Was there a clear need for the meetings to take place at this time?
- Were the invitees to the meetings the best participants for achieving the objectives?

Quality of Process: Less than half the meetings surveyed had a clear timed agenda, and only 20% of management meetings have groundrules. Despite the obvious need for innovation 70% of organisations never use creativity tools within their meetings, and over half of all respondents were unaware of the key functionality for active participation in web-based meetings.

- Were there clear timed agendas for the meetings?
- Did the agendas reflect an effective and efficient process to achieve the objectives?
- Did the meetings stick to the agendas?
- Did the meetings agree a set of behavioural ground rules; and were these followed?
- Did the meetings make use of a 'Car Park'? (flipchart used to park off-topic issues)
- Did the meetings have access to best-practice and expert inputs where relevant?
- Did the meetings make full use of attendee's experience, abilities, insight and ideas?

Quality of Preparation: Almost half of all presentations to meetings have not been designed to make best use of people's time at the meeting. Pre-reading is frequently not available before the meeting and, where it is available, two-thirds of the time it is not efficiently utilised. Barely half (55%) of actions required for the meeting are completed, and many of these are done hurriedly at the last minute. And in respect of accessing information on innovations and best practice in the meeting, over 60% of organisations do this only rarely or not at all.
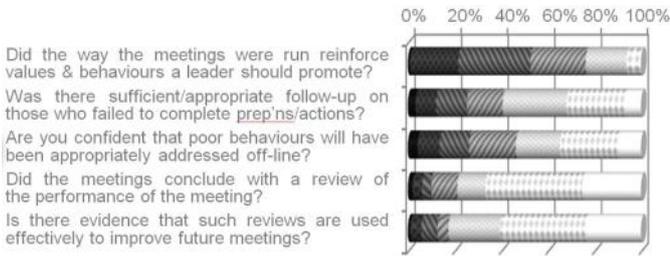
- Were info/explanations well thought through; designed to convey key messages efficiently?
- Where pre-reading would have been useful, was that pre-reading available beforehand?
- … and had people made use of pre-reading
- … and did the meetings avoid repeating it?
- Where actions were required to be completed for the meetings, had these been done?
- Did the meetings make use of external work on current innovations and best practice?
- Were all scheduled items completed as intended with the info at hand in the meeting?
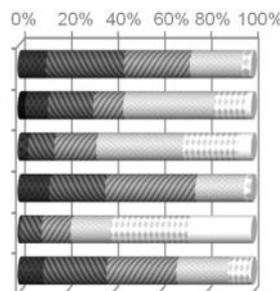
Furthermore, 64% of those people who lead web-based meetings have received no formal training in how set-up and lead those meetings, and even where training has taken place it has been sparse and often missed out key element of functionality.
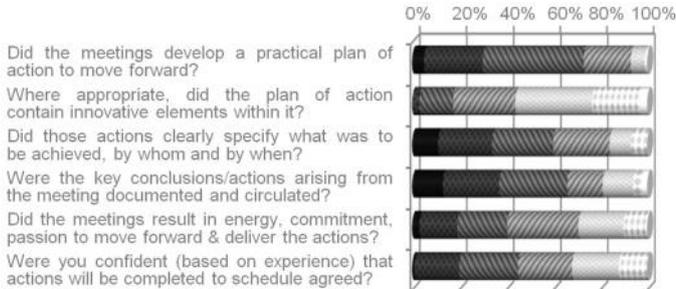
Cultural & Leadership Effects: The majority (57%) of management meetings do not have a balanced involvement from those attending them. In a majority of instances,

counter-productive *(at least in terms of the organisation as a whole)* behaviours are seen to be unrecognised and unchecked, and so continue as part of most people's every-day experience. Two thirds of organisations rarely or never review their meetings.

Did the way the meetings were run reinforce values & behaviours a leader should promote?

Was there sufficient/appropriate follow-up on those who failed to complete prep'ns/actions?

Are you confident that poor behaviours will have been appropriately addressed off-line?

Did the meetings conclude with a review of the performance of the meeting?

Is there evidence that such reviews are used effectively to improve future meetings?

Quality of Outcomes: Two thirds of all meetings do result in some sort of plan of action with defined owners and timescales. However, confidence in the commitment of people to do these actions is barely more than 50%. Perhaps as a result of this, 40% of our meetings arise as a result of a failure in a previous meeting and 39% of our meetings arise simply to chase progress on actions. Furthermore almost half of all meetings were felt not to use people's time efficiently.

> ... for how many other key processes are you dependent on a generic report to gain some insight into their current performance?

Did the meetings develop a practical plan of action to move forward?

Where appropriate, did the plan of action contain innovative elements within it?

Did those actions clearly specify what was to be achieved, by whom and by when?

Were the key conclusions/actions arising from the meeting documented and circulated?

Did the meetings result in energy, commitment, passion to move forward & deliver the actions?

Were you confident (based on experience) that actions will be completed to schedule agreed?

Overall you may not feel that the picture painted here is too bad - it may be pretty much as you thought it would be. But ... how many other key processes within your organisation perform so badly? And for how many other key processes are you dependent on a generic report to gain some insight into their current performance?

Perhaps our biggest problem in terms of meeting performance is that we do not have these data for our own organisation - even in a simplified form! We do not have any current measures of their performance and the issues therein. And unless we measure meeting performance, we are not actually in control of it, and whatever our performance may be today - who is to say whether that will improve or decline *if we are not in control*?

This, however, is a generic report. It is true for a cross section of organisations, but it is not true for your organisation. Your organisation could be much better than this, or it could indeed be worse. But, whichever view you hold for your own organisation, unless you have the evidence to support your view, you may either lack the confidence to maintain things just as they are, or lack the commitment to change them.

And as our organisations come under increasing pressure from Global opportunities and risks, our competitive edge must lie in our people, and we will need to be confident that our meetings are fully effective in inspiring and harnessing the ideas and experience of those people if we are to have a realistic hope of remaining competitive on an expanding World stage.

So what do you think?

Feedback in one click: 😠 😞 😐 😐 😊 ⭐

For background on the research quoted in this article, or to understand more about the opportunities of web-based meetings and further develop your thinking in this area we would recommend the book: Meeting by Design ISBN: 978 0954 302146.   www.MeetingByDesign.org

Tools to measure and manage meeting effectiveness can be found at Inspirometer.com

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