



The Wonder of Web-Based Meetings

Meetings are the cerebral cortex of the organisation. They are the key channel for determining the needs of the organisation, and for translating it into action; and for interpreting signals from all of the corporate organs and appendages back into strategy. Meetings are the means by which your staff can:

- Feel an integral part of the strategy development and decision making in your organisation
- Develop understanding of how the organisation works and how problems within it and the challenges it faces can be solved
- Be part of a creative and energised team, bouncing off each other's ideas and wisdom
- Learn first-hand new approaches and tools for problem solving and for generating creative solutions
- Identify new opportunities to add value to others, and gain insight from others into their own problems

Basically, meetings are a tremendous opportunity to learn, grow, build relationships and make real progress that inspires and sustains what you do outside of meetings.

Is that your view of them? Is that how your people experience them?

Statistically, the answer to that question is almost certainly no. Although the purpose of meetings is to add value to what people do individually outside of meetings (otherwise why have them?) the reality is sadly somewhat different. We might like our meetings to be as they are described above, but the truth is that they aren't, and the consequences of this cost us dearly in terms of time, potential, progress and performance. But why?

This is the question explored in a new book, 'Meeting by Design', and the answers boil down to a number of fairly obvious truths – at least they are obvious when you think about them, but sadly we very rarely do.

The first is that while you believe that there is a reasonable probability that your meetings should be better than

they are, you almost certainly have very little data to prove it. You do not actually know, statistically, what percentage of meetings within your organisation achieve what proportion of the bullet points listed above. Viewed from the perspective of meetings as custom and practice, that fact may seem quite normal to you, but viewed from the perspective of meetings as a key organisational and business process it is a surprising omission. For how many of your other core processes do you have so little performance data?

The second is that we do not give meetings the importance in our minds that they deserve. Over half of the people who saw the title of this paper thought (perhaps subconsciously) 'Urghh meetings ... boring!' and skipped quickly on. The mere fact that you have even read this far makes you part of a select group. People don't like to think about meetings because they spend too much time in them anyway, and they feel like a drain on time – bureaucratic and ubiquitous. True, but that is precisely why we should be thinking about them. They currently take up

2/3 of management time (our most crucial resource) and waste half of it – that is a problem that needs fixing, and we cannot fix it by trying to avoid meetings or thinking about them.

There are a number of other factors, but to be frank if you can simply grasp and hold on to these two then you have already got a big chunk of the value of the book, and you are a large step toward working out the rest. Developing an accurate metric for the performance (and the consequence) of meetings, one that keeps the issue in the forefront of senior people's minds, is something that will

ensure the problem is ultimately solved. Conversely, the absence of such metrics will inevitably result in the issue being lost under a mass of other, better-documented and better-quantified business issues (albeit less important ones in an absolute sense).



However, the problem of changing patterns of behaviour that have existed for centuries should not be underestimated (*literally 'centuries' – our process of meeting today is almost indistinguishable to meetings in mediaeval times, except in terms of the language used*). What would give us a flying start is something that breaks long held group paradigms and habitual patterns of stimulus and response; we need something that places meetings temporarily in an unusual environment and acts as a nursery for establishing better practices, until such time as they are sufficiently robust to be transplanted back into the traditional environment.

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Finding such an opportunity would normally be a challenge fraught with flaws, especially if it was artificial. But we currently find ourselves with a situation where the environment we need already exists as a necessary part of most organisation's experience. One of the fastest growing tools at this point in time is web-based meetings. The current irony is that:

- even though web-based meetings take place in a different environment;
- and even though the new environment contains a wealth of new possibilities and warrants re-thinking how we conduct meetings within it;
- and even though we know there are issues with how we meet currently,

... most organisations have simply, unthinkingly transplanted current meeting practice directly into the new environment with the consequence that web-based meetings are even inferior to physical meetings. But this too is an opportunity, and ideally timed for us to take advantage in transforming the way that all meetings take place.

The consequence of poor performance in web-based meetings results in the average manager spending twice as much time and money travelling to meetings than they would choose to if web-based meetings could better achieve what they need, that amounts to an average of an extra £9,700 and 440 hours in travel time and expenditure, per manager, per year. Getting web-based meetings running differently (and properly) is something with obvious and immediate pay-back and interest.

And improving web-based meetings is actually a lot easier than it might first appear. Part of the problem is that the majority of managers who take part in web-based

meetings are oblivious to over half of the functionality within them – and 64% of those people who run web-based meetings have received no formal training in them whatsoever. Furthermore, the functionality that most people are oblivious to is predominantly the participative elements, the very elements that would transform meeting performance and better engage people within the creativity and commitment building that is possible. And such participation is even more important in a virtual environment where body language is so much harder to read.

The web-based environment has other advantages as well.

Apart from:

- Providing a clear short-term business case (in money and time) for improvement
- Creating a different environment to encourage people to consider different practices

... the nature of the web makes it significantly easier to:

- Argue the case for more participative elements as an integral part of the meeting
- Set up and document participative activities within a meeting
- Review the source of any difficulties (meetings can be recorded) and address them
- Implement performance metrics as an integral part of meetings (via linked survey tools)

In other words, web-based meetings are the perfect nursery for beginning to transform the performance of meetings in general, and now is a really important time to review how you use web-based meetings, and whether you can't take advantage of this coincidence of opportunity before it is too late.

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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