The Forgotten Process
Why business' most critical process is neither measured nor improved?

If I were to ask you what you thought an organisation's most critical process was, would you respond: "It depends"? Would you ask me to which industry I was referring, or ask me about the nature of the organisation's work?

And if I said it was the most critical process for all organisations; that it could make the difference between organisational success or failure; that the way it works can have an order of magnitude influence on business efficiency; that its outcomes dramatically impact ever other process in the organisation. But that it is seldom mapped, virtually never measured, seen virtually no improvement in the last 2000 years, and that its success is more a function of the dedication and time poured into it by your most important operatives, would you be totally confused?

Or would you realise that I am talking about the process of meetings?

Maybe not. Many people do not actually think of meetings as a process, but they are. A well designed meeting can be the difference between an inspired cross-functional team committed to deliver a powerful conclusion, and confused conflict around a corpulent compromise. But can you show me data on what exact proportion of your overall organisation's meetings fall into which camp?

Most management teams are largely unaware of the performance of their average meeting in terms of effectiveness or efficiency, and have little understanding of the rate by which they are improving (or getting worse) or of the key factors within that. Most do not even know what proportion of their senior people's time is spent in attending or preparing for meetings (an average of 67%); or that (on average) 40% of their meetings occur because of weaknesses in how an earlier meeting was conducted;

or that (on average) 40% of their meetings exist solely because people cannot be relied on to do what they say they are going to do.

Let's face it, if they did, they might do something about it, and in many organisations there is very little evidence of effective progress on this front.

The issue is that our way of meeting has been with us so long we take for granted, it has become part of the landscape of being human, a tradition that has been continuing unquestioned (almost un-noticed) for centuries. It is a paradigm, a mindset of assumptions, practices, and patterns that function almost without us noticing them. What we talk about may change; the time we devote to it may be challenged; but how we do it remains a constant.

We say that we spend too much time in meetings, we believe that many of them could be more efficient, we would like more time to think instead of simply rushing from one to the next – but nothing seems to change. And yet, nearly every other business and technological process we can name can demonstrate clear measureable performance improvement over the last three decades – except meetings.

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But meetings are a process - a business critical process - and contrary to appearances there is a wealth of creativity and decision making tools that exist to support that process, each with its own balance of influence over the key things you are seeking to achieve. Each of which can bring a different blend of participation, speed, clarity and commitment. Each of which takes care of different aspects from definition, objectives setting, analysis, idea generation, planning. Each of which can be brought together in the right amounts and the right combinations to

efficiently deliver the outcomes you need. There are literally hundreds of them. And yet most meetings tend to use only two: presentation and debate/Q&A. Why?

Well partly it is because we don't think about it; partly it is because the person who leads the meeting has a more optimistic view of its effectiveness than those who attend it; partly it is because we don't have the data to reflect on the magnitude of the problem *(which can be seen in the diagram in the middle of the page)*; and partly it is because the facilities we use to hold meetings are rarely well designed for the participative nature of most of the meeting tools.

And this last item, the existence of good facilities to support the range of meeting tools which exist has perhaps been the pivotal obstacle - the keystone to the barrier. After all, many might argue that there is little point in investigating new effective and efficient meeting processes if your meeting facilities could not support them.

But the advent of the internet and web-based meetings has shifted the balance and the limitations on the shape and size of facilities can be taken out of the equation. Furthermore, easy-to-access web-based solutions mean that all of the creativity and decision support tools are much easier to use by everyone, and that meetings can be designed to achieve the potential that was previously only feasible in a facilitated off-site workshop.

It is somewhat of an irony then, that most of the tools and functionality available in web-based meetings remains largely unknown and that the most prevalent tools are …

Current performance of meetings
Based on a survey of managers across 50 organisations

"presentation and debate/Q&A" as they are in physical meetings. As a result, far from being the solution that would enable meetings to be transformed in manner and effectiveness, they are actually LESS successful that their physical counterparts. Like a spring compressed too long in its box, the opening of new opportunities has not been met with an exuberant and excited bound, but more of a creak.

Meetings are our most critical process, they consume most of the time of our most skilled and valuable resource (management), they are they key factor in the creativity and motivation of our staff, and in the resulting effectiveness of everything we do. And the web-based environment has finally opened up the opportunity for us to see them as the process they are; to adopt the most appropriate tools within them; to easily measure their effectiveness; and to design and manage them accordingly.

That is the truth.

But if we are to realise the truth we need to move beyond the accidental 'falling into' web-based meetings that has transpired to date, and develop a positive strategy to engage with these truths.

But as Winston Churchill once said: "Man will often stumble over the truth, but most times he will pick himself up and continue on his way!".

So, where does that leave you?
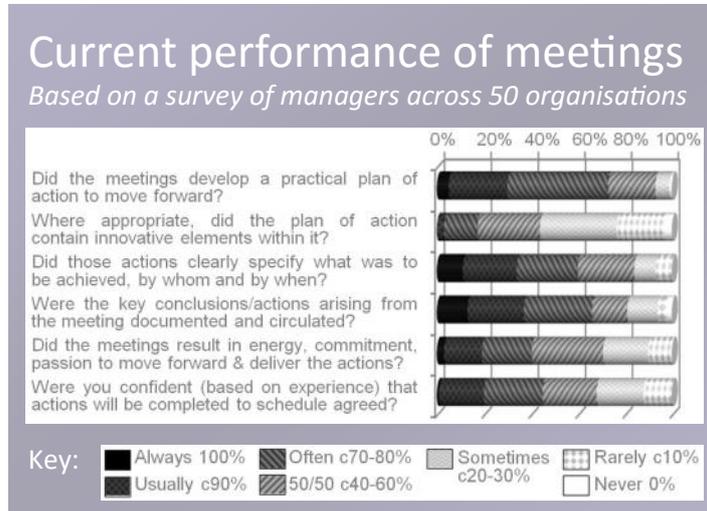
So what do you think?

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