

# Improving Meeting Efficiency



## Abstract

Online meetings are commonplace in businesses of all sizes today. While meetings have been a large part of enterprise daily life for well over two decades, it is only in the last few years that the basic underlying technology that connects people with voice and video is becoming commoditized.

This paper considers the next steps in meeting technology evolution, beyond simply connecting participants to making those connections meaningful and efficient. Enhancements range from understanding how to make participants themselves more effective to analysis of meetings at the organisation level.

# Overview

It is impossible to ignore the significance of meetings. Research shows us that US business holds 220 million meetings a month, a number that has been growing every year<sup>1</sup>.

With the ever increasing rate of meetings and the rise of remote working<sup>2</sup>, it is clear that online meetings should be a focus for business efficiency.

Implementing online meetings has been getting easier, at least connecting people using HD voice and video. However, as the solutions for conferencing get more refined, businesses are now looking for more from meetings environments than simple collaboration – the focus has turned to how to make these sessions more productive and efficient.

The following sections describe key factors that impact meeting efficiency. These challenges stem from the participants themselves, simple logistics issues and the list of repetitive tasks that waste organisers' time. The final section describes methods to address these issues and improve meeting efficiency.



# Meeting Participants



An important factor impacting the efficiency of meetings is the participants themselves. Influences driven by participants can be separated into three categories. Each of these directly changes how productive the meetings they take part in will be.

The perception of the meeting, or meetings in general, directly changes how effective the collaboration will be. 71% of managers believe that meetings are “unproductive and inefficient”<sup>3</sup>. 65% also believe that meetings prevent them from doing their “own work”<sup>3</sup>. These statistics highlight the preconception of poor productivity that many participants associate with meetings.

This assumption of meeting ineffectiveness is likely driven by a lack of engagement during past meetings. 63% of meetings (in the US) don't have a defined agenda<sup>4</sup>, which leads to a lack of structure or goals. 92% of workers admit to multitasking during meetings<sup>4</sup> because of lack of engagement. The result is longer meetings due to context switching and the impression of time being wasted.

Lack of engagement leads to the greatest impact on meeting efficiency – lack of attendance. However, since agendas and notes are not regularly taken, catching up on the results of the meeting proves difficult<sup>4</sup>. This in itself drives a lack of attendance through users not feeling engaged in the process<sup>3</sup>. Not being supplied meeting materials before and after the meeting is one of the most common complaints from meeting invitees<sup>3</sup>.

How participants behave in the meeting is also a key factor. One common complaint from users is that certain individuals dominate conversations<sup>1</sup>. While this is the one behaviour that most users notice, any participant being too verbose, too dominating, too quiet or too focused on a single topic drives the meeting efficiency down.

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# Meeting Logistics and Outcomes



While technology for online meetings has become ubiquitous, there are still many issues reported with simply connecting. 41% of users claim technology issues cause failed engagement<sup>5</sup>. Technology, including WebRTC, is bringing all of these issues into a single place and solving them. However, bad connections, poor dial in/out support, and latency are still rife in many solutions.

Once participants have voice and video established, collaboration begins and is often centered around documents. Screen share allow users to view this content, but it is unavailable to those who join using audio only. Sending content using email is error prone and introduces access and permissions issues across various cloud document repositories.

In fact, executives consider 67% of all meetings failures<sup>4</sup>, with the average meeting lasting between 30 and 60 minutes<sup>6</sup>. Even 10 minutes spent trying to get everyone seeing the same document is extremely inefficient.

Meetings should always have a goal. Unfortunately, meetings today often begin with getting agreement on this goal from all participants. This is in part due to 63% of meetings (in the US) not having a defined agenda<sup>4</sup> but is also linked to a lack of preparation in general. Providing content and a way to collaborate before the meeting is key to an efficient meeting.

The outcome of a meeting is a set of tasks or actions that have been agreed upon as desirable to achieve. Two of the most common complaints from participants are “No Published Results” and “No Decisions Made”<sup>1</sup>. Even with the most engaged participants and well planned meeting, if no outcome is recorded the meeting is still often considered unsuccessful.

Organiser tasks like scheduling, action tracking and contacting the group after the meeting are also time consuming today. Meeting organisers also have to find ways to keep meetings on track with time checks, agendas and schedules.

While the technology to actually connect with others has come a long way, many meeting organisers and chairpersons still report that they record actions and outcomes on pen and paper<sup>7</sup>. This in turn takes time to transcribe, or in the worst case, makes distribution after the fact near impossible.

## Common Complaints



# Understanding and Improving Meetings



There are a number of issues that impact the productivity of the meeting, especially when online sessions are considered. The following three approaches are presented as a guide to start focusing on efficiency gains.

**Foster Engagement** – It is clear that participant attitude before, after and during the meeting is key to efficiency. Consider ways to improve engagement from participants by introducing visual queues and checks that ensure participants are focused on the meeting. Video has been shown to reduce multitasking by 75%<sup>8</sup>. Gamification can also help, making the meeting more entertaining and consuming. Finally, a proven strategy is making all relevant content directly available for review during the meeting, increasing the likelihood of multitasking being focused on the right topic.

**Automate Everything** – In terms of reducing wasted time, automating repetitive simple tasks is always important. With regard to meetings, steps like scheduling and action tracking can be drastically improved by using the best tools. Action-taking, transcribing, and time-tracking can be optimized through voice recognition and natural language processing.

Introducing automation of the meeting organisation, such as reminders for time tracking, automatic agendas and follow ups, can further increase effectiveness. With increased availability of cloud services, consider whether the default should be transcribing all meetings to reduce misunderstandings and ensure accountability. Automatically bringing all content related to the meeting together in one place, through tooling or process, will increase engagement and reduce wasted time when reaching agreement on goals.

**Analyse More** – Efficiency analysis is driven by statistics, and meetings are no exception. Today, tools provide useful statistics like the average number of participants or the length of meetings<sup>1</sup>. To further increase the usefulness of meetings, more insights are needed. Participant statistics, including who dominated the meeting, what topics were focused on, and who said little can be pulled out to help with training and workflow evaluation.

This analysis can also drive notifications to participants who missed the meeting but need to know about key factors discussed. Voice and video analysis can also shed light on success factors for engagement and help evaluators gauge emotional responses to meeting content. This same analysis can also drive interesting gamification of meetings that further improves morale and engagement.

# Conclusion

There are many factors that contribute to meeting efficiency, as this paper has explored. Future meetings tools need to focus on more than just high quality voice and video connectivity. Care needs to be taken to understand the logistics of meetings and bring forward tooling that not only allows people to communicate, but enables them to collaborate more effectively before, after and during the meeting.

Attitudes of users and participants are also key to meeting success. Improving the expectations of a meeting's effectiveness is a self-fulfilling prophecy, resulting in a better outcome.

As the focus continues towards ever higher quality levels for voice and video conferencing, the industry needs to recognise that this is only part of the story. While it is true that higher fidelity media improves meeting efficiency, the law of diminishing returns applies. Going forward, meeting tools need to place more emphasis on the broader business context and psychological drivers that improve collaboration efficiency.

## References

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