



Make meetings matter

Reduce time spent in unproductive sessions

How many times have you heard someone say, “I’d really love this job if I didn’t have all of these meetings!”

The topic of time management came up during an appointment with a client who was struggling to “get it all done.” Her average workweek tops 70 hours. She reluctantly admitted that she never eats lunch and only uses two of her five weeks of vacation. A quick evaluation of her typical week revealed that 40 percent of her time was allocated to recurring scheduled meetings. With that insight, I then asked her to:

1. List all of her regularly scheduled meetings along with the required time commitment and purpose.
2. List all of the recurring projects that she is required to complete each quarter (there is some seasonality to her business) and the required time she must block out each week for these projects.
3. Determine the amount of time that she needs on a weekly basis for the unexpected call, request, meeting etc.

After completing this analysis, she discovered that it took 83 hours a week to meet expectations. That’s a whopping 11.8 hours a day, seven days a week! She realized her “exhaustion” was justified but also felt saddened by the reality of the situation. Work had become her life.

Something had to give. So, we focused in on her recurring meetings.

I explained that meetings typically fall into five categories:

1. **A Team Meeting** – is when you provide an update to your supervisor and/or team members.
2. **An “Advance the Project” Meeting**

– is when approval or guidance to advance a project or new initiative is needed and usually involves executives, supervisors and/or colleagues.

3. **An “I want something” Meeting**

– is more personal in nature. It involves meeting with supervisors or top level manager(s) to gain support for something such as a new project or initiative, budget increase,

promotion, or raise.

4. **A Presentation Meeting** – is an opportunity to showcase strategic thinking and ability to persuade a group.

5. **A Subject Matter Expert Meeting** – is when you are asked to share your expertise to help others advance a project or make informed decisions.

We then evaluated the return-on-her-time investment by working through the following questions:

1. How productive were each of these meetings? Were they agenda driven? Who created the agenda? Did these meetings take an hour because that’s how much time was needed or because that’s what had been allocated?
2. How did she benefit from participating in each of these meetings?

3. How did her participation at each meeting benefit the team/company?
4. Who else from the department, or her team, could benefit from attending these meetings (as her replacement)?
5. Aside from making some people

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jealous, what was the risk of her not attending?

Five of her weekly “Advance the Project” meetings turned out not to be critical to her current role. These carry-over responsibilities followed from her previous position because there wasn’t anyone to hand them off to at the time. Times have changed, and she now has a small team. She was able to identify two people on her team who would professionally grow by taking her place in these meetings.

Next, we examined her weekly team meetings. It became obvious during our discussion that most had become routine, not agenda driven. I suggested that she block out time at an upcoming meeting to debrief the group on her time analysis and propose suggestions that would make the meetings more productive. To her surprise, her

Reprinted from May 13 - 26, 2011

colleagues responded with great enthusiasm and stated that they appreciated her honesty and initiative.

After assessing her meeting schedule, we then shifted our focus to special projects which consumed an additional 30 to 40 percent of her time. It was a bit more challenging to find projects that she could hand off to others or step away from, but we found ways to reduce her travel time which netted her an additional five hours per week.

In total, we immediately reduced 16 hours from her weekly workload. Not ideal, but certainly measurable progress.

This very talented and capable woman possessed an innate desire to help others succeed, which put her at the top of everyone's "I want her on my team" list. For her to achieve some life balance it became evident that she needed to learn how to say "no" graciously. In the short-term, she needed to say "yes" to only those projects/meetings where she could justify the added time investment. A quote from

the movie "Jurassic Park" became her centerpiece reminder, "Just because you can doesn't mean you should."

It's been eight months since we completed her return-on-time analysis and her workweek now averages 50-55 hours a week. She also has three weeks of vacation planned along with several long weekends so she can putter in the garden. While this is not a perfect outcome, her health (from the stress) and the quality of her personal life have dramatically improved.

When you think about your slate of weekly meetings, how could you benefit by asking, "What one simple, doable thing can I do to reduce the amount of time that I spend in unnecessary or unproductive meetings?" My guess is that you will find valuable time that can be redirected toward important strategic initiatives or personal renewal time. ■

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