

Are Your People Stuck in Meeting Gridlock?

By Dr. Jan Ferri-Reed

If it feels like you're spending too much time in meetings without getting much done you aren't alone. According to research reported by Atlassian, a software development company, the average employee spends approximately 31 hours per month attending as many as 62 meetings.

With all that face time you'd think a lot of important information is being shared or that many critical decisions are being made. But you might be wrong. Atlassian's survey also took a close look at whether the people attending those meetings found any value in them:

- 90% of the people surveyed admitted to daydreaming during meetings.
- 47%, said meetings were their number one time waster.

But all was not lost. Fully 73% of the survey respondents secretly did other work while attending those meetings. Yet, for many organizations meetings are the chief cause of employee frustrations and complaints.

Meetings Makers Make It

However much we'd like to minimize or avoid them altogether we can't escape the fact that meetings are a necessity for most organizations, small to large. Remote personnel and work from-home employees aren't exempt since they it is important for them to attend meetings via services like Go-To-Meeting or teleconferencing technologies. Meetings won't be going away any time soon.

No matter how much our technologies evolve it seems we will always need a certain amount of face time to get things done. Some information simply can't be conveyed - nor can all problems be solved - remotely. But if we must have meetings why do we then find them so frustrating?

Perhaps its because, in the words of Milton Berle, "a meeting is a group that keeps minutes but loses hours!" Still, there are *many* factors undercutting the productivity of meetings than just watching time slip away. How then do we make meetings more effective and less frustrating?

Non-Productive Meetings by The Numbers

When we begin to add up all of the potential costs and lost productivity surrounding meetings the numbers become staggering. According to an infographic created and published by Visual.ly meetings represent immense levels of waste and lost time.

By one estimate the 5 Million meetings that are held each day in the United States account for: q

- \$37 billion per year spent on lost productivity q 15% of an organization's collective

time q 35% of middle managers' time

- 50% of upper manager's time

- 4 hours per week, per employee
preparing for status updates

(Source: <https://visual.ly/community/infographic/business/ugly-truthabout-meetings>)

But what are those employees doing as they endure all of these unproductive meetings? When meetings take an unproductive turn disengaged employees begin to turn to less productive chores:

- 92% are multitasking
- 69% are checking emails
- 49% are doing unrelated work

Before scheduling your next meeting ask yourself three questions. Is a meeting necessary? Who really needs to be there? How can we keep the meeting on-track and productive?

In order to get meetings started on the right foot (and encourage productive discussions) meeting leaders should send an agenda to participants in advance of the date, along with any necessary materials for review. Ideally this should encourage attendees to come prepared and to participate productively.

Meetings and the "Seven Deadly Sinners"

But no matter how well planned your meeting might be, or how well you control distractions, there's another factor that can affect how well your meetings function and whether they get the results you're looking for. Any given meeting probably includes participants with competing agendas, mixed skills, and varying styles.

Very often these people don't realize that there is something in their personality, background, or motivation that actually affects how they participate in meetings and impacts the efforts of others.

These individuals may not recognize that they exercise undue influence upon the meeting process. However, it's critical for those leading meetings to recognize the potential impact these seven "deadly sinners" may have on reducing the success of a meeting. If left alone these behaviors could infest an organization, leading to meeting gridlock," which is the inability to get very much done due to dysfunctional communications. Following are descriptions of "The Seven Deadly Sinners of meetings.

The "Dominator" - It's not uncommon to find one or two individuals in each meeting who want to dominate the discussion or control the agenda. Their outgoing personality and sense of importance can lead them to take charge and run the meeting themselves (whether or not they actually have that responsibility). If this "ego trip" begins to dominate the discussion the other members of the group will tend to both become quiet and let the dominator control the discussion.

The "Latecomer" - whether or not this meeting member actually has a justified excuse for coming late to the meeting that doesn't give them carte blanche to take control of the meeting or change the course of the discussion just so they can catch up. Their efforts to catch up with the discussion can become a serious distraction for the other team members who are naturally up to speed.

The "Blocker" - there are those who have a naturally negative predisposition and a "gift" for finding the flaws in every plan. They pick apart any ideas or proposal without offering any alternatives or better suggestions. The "blocker" drains the energy from any group and "sucks" the oxygen from any room.

The "Saboteur" - some individuals find it very hard to support ideas that they themselves haven't brought to the meeting. Their negativity may prove to be a continuing drain on the other members' energy, focus, and determination to reach a consensus. Ironically, the saboteur may not even be aware that he or she is undermining the efforts of other group members.

The "Juggler" - If you want to get something done, many people say, give it to a busy person. On the face of it that makes a certain amount of sense because busy people are often famous for getting many things done. But that doesn't mean all of their projects get done successfully. The distraction of competing priorities can lead them to juggle their schedules and efforts, often resulting in mediocre work or errors.

The "Gatekeeper" -- Very often the group working on a project will bump into someone who can explain the many reasons why the group's solution won't work. Perhaps it's been done before unsuccessfully or perhaps the right people aren't available to make the project a success. But whatever the reason the Gatekeeper knows it can't be done!

The "Absentee" -- there are some people who become over-committed and get involved in too many projects beyond their capacity. They may show up for meetings but often have so much on their plates they're distracted and may not be able to contribute much.

Unfortunately, meetings are an unavoidable way of life in modern organizations, both large and small. At their worst they may prove to be burdensome "time wasters." But when they work well meetings may be the most important tool for maintaining communications and ensuring that our

organizations achieve the goals we set for them.

ABOUT JAN:

Jan is a seasoned consultant and President of KEYGroup®, a 35-year international speaking, training, coaching and assessment firm and co-author of ***Keeping the Millennials: Why Companies are Losing Billions in Turnover to This Generation and What To Do About It***, and the author of ***Millennials 2.0: Empowering Generation Y***. Jan's work focuses on creating productive workplaces and retaining talent while increasing the bottom line.

Publications and media that have called on Jan and KEYGroup® for advice and guidance include Industry Week, TIME, Diversity Executive, NPR and Forbes, to name a few.

