

► High Performance Meetings

How to set up and run meetings to create business value in an efficient way

INSIGHTS

//01

Meetings are indispensable as long as their structure is truly necessary and their processes are optimally aligned.

//02

High performance in physical and digital meetings symbolizes an optimal number and setup of meetings (meeting structure) as well as efficient execution and decision-making in meetings (meeting process).

//03

The Porsche Consulting framework combines structural and procedural approaches for optimizing meetings.

Introduction

The world is slowly returning back to holding physical meetings in times of COVID-19, as they are proven components of everyday business life. Whether physical or digital, their number has been growing steadily over the past decades, but is every single one a good idea, not to mention efficient or effective? The reasons for holding meetings are often based solely on routine and habit. By now, the “meeting culture” has acquired a poor reputation. Why is this so?

Porsche Consulting examined this question and developed a framework for an achievement-oriented, high-performance approach to meetings.

01

The bitter truth about meetings and decisional processes

Employees in organizations across the globe are slowly returning to their offices to hold business meetings. While physical meetings are everyday components in business interaction, the “New Normal” of holding post pandemic-meetings has demonstrated a surge in use of virtual meetings. This development will ultimately reshape the organizational meeting landscape towards a more hybrid model of combining physical and digital meetings in times of post-COVID. Now is the chance to challenge prevailing meetings for their right to exist as well as refine new meetings in ways that are supportive to the renewed meeting landscape. After all, most of us can most likely identify with the following situation that has not changed in times of the pandemic but has arguably intensified with the use of virtual meetings, as people today tend to spend more time now in meetings than they have before the pandemic.

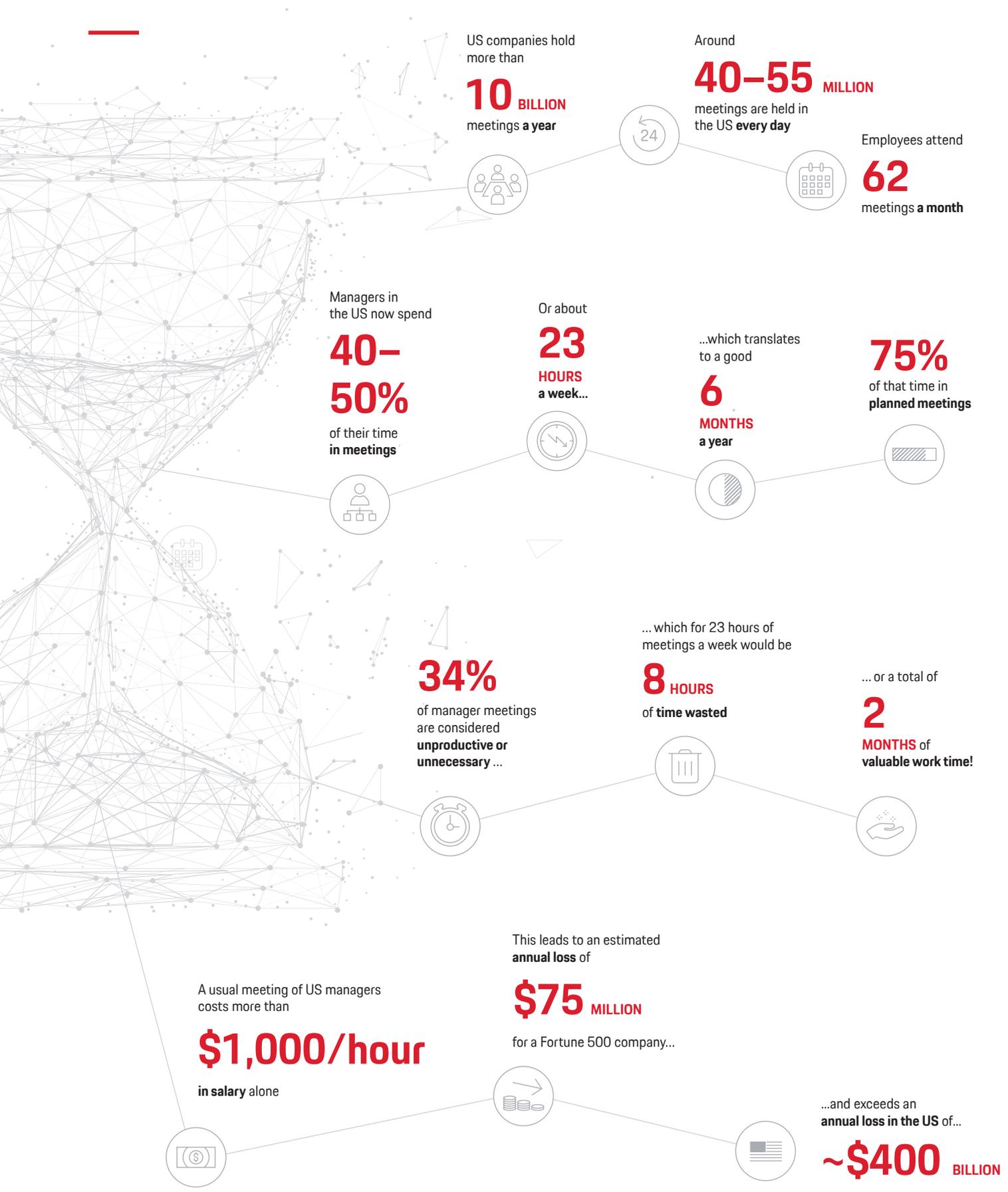
A typical Monday morning: twelve managers sit around an oval conference table. An hour later, there is no end in sight to a gathering that should only have taken forty-five minutes. During the presentation, the CEO’s smartphone starts vibrating silently to remind him of the next meeting, which is scheduled to begin in fifteen minutes... To judge from upcoming events at the beginning of the week, his calendar will be tightly packed with countless steering-committee meetings, follow-ups, and regular meetings. This scenario is probably familiar to most leadership personnel as full calendars seem to be an inevitable feature of executive-level communication and decision-making culture on almost every office floor in the world these days.

The traditional office routine for businesses today is changing and remaking itself. Faced with ever-increasing demands, it is becoming quicker, tighter, and more agile—in short, more achievement-oriented. It is also attempting to give the world of “VUCA” (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) the aura of a modern organizational culture. It seems obvious that the need for additional rules, guidelines, and formalities should be reined in as much as possible. In fact what dominates many offices today—everywhere from medium-sized companies to globally active major corporations—is still the obverse of a flexible and dynamic

organizational culture. Excessive structural elements and hierarchies still prevail. As far as everyday operations go, this excessive type of organizational control is reflected in the sheer number of coordinating steps required, disguised as “meetings,” and built-in phenomena that modern forms of leadership and communication attempt to display. In Germany, the English word “meeting” is often used to make the usual “get-together” sound more glamorous, and is also associated with a higher degree of teamwork and a continuous exchange of knowledge: meetings are supposed to accelerate decisional processes across reporting levels in “democratized” form—or that at least is the theory.

The problem: over recent years many companies have made inflationary use of the instrument of meetings—whether in the form of committees, regular meetings, conferences, or regular discussion rounds—without really having tested its contribution to their organizations’ decision-making processes. This hypothesis is supported by an analysis of time-cost effects and productivity losses for managers at S&P 500 companies in the United States (Figure 1): approximately ten billion meetings are held annually in the US, and C-level leadership personnel currently spend around 40 to 50 percent of their time attending them. As a result, managers in the US now spend about twenty-three hours a week in meetings, whereas in the 1960s they only spent around ten. In monetary terms this amounts to an estimated productivity loss for American companies of approximately \$400 billion every year, without even considering the negative effect of fragmenting the working day into ever smaller and less productive periods of time.

To counter this development, it is crucial to systematically examine the approach to meetings that has arisen at companies over time, and to look more closely at meeting structure, efficiency, and effectiveness. Otherwise, managers are in danger of getting caught up in an overpowering system of manifold meetings—whether formal or informal, traditional or agile, in-person or electronic—which will inevitably end up consuming them.



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Figure 1. Economic time-cost effects of business meetings in the US¹

02

Structural and procedural measures to optimize the use of meetings

Meetings are universally considered to be necessary parts of everyday business life, yet they are also regarded as "efficiency sinks." The reasons why managers attend meetings often have to do with routine and habit, or with the need to put in a personal appearance. However, key questions about the purpose of these meetings often fade into the background. Although most meetings occupy decision-makers' attention, they do not necessarily increase their productivity. So why are meetings considered positive, popular and productive in nearly sacrosanct ways, and why do most organizations stick with them despite the prevailing poor reputation of meeting culture as currently practiced?

conducted. In terms of these two aspects, meetings lay a crucial foundation for decisions that affect the central success of organizations and their interdisciplinary teams. Porsche Consulting has developed a framework that combines structural and procedural approaches for optimizing meetings, and anchored these approaches as central components of an achievement-oriented, high-performance way of organizing meetings (Figure 2). The framework aims for **high-performance meetings: for the optimal number and setup** (meeting structure) at organizations and for a **sustainable increase in quality** (meeting process) with respect to how they are designed and conducted and how decisions are pursued.

The basic idea is simple: **meetings are important in so far as their structure is necessary and their processes are optimally**



Figure 2. Porsche Consulting's framework for optimizing meetings

02.1

“As many meetings as necessary, as few as possible”— The HPO meeting structure: optimized organization

Eliminating meetings altogether



Meetings are all too often convened without questioning their actual necessity within the organization. The problem is clear: time is a zero-sum game because every minute wasted at a superfluous or inconclusive meeting is a minute not spent on other tasks. If people were similarly wasteful with resources in a production process, a comprehensive plan to increase productivity would long since have been put into place. In the setting of a high-performance organization (HPO), this means that meetings are eliminated altogether.

Meetings make sense when information should be processed; when uncertainty, problems, and conflicts need to be resolved; and especially when major decisions are in order. They spread knowledge when certain topics cannot be judged alone and/or when interdisciplinary exchange is crucial to achieving a result. These decisional meetings are indispensable and will continue to be an integral tool for organizations when used correctly. Meetings that only exchange or disseminate information make less sense; such gatherings should be eliminated in the future and replaced with alternative means of communication. If exchanging information is all that is needed, an organization can do this in less time-consuming ways such as sending e-mail updates, sending logs and protocols, using messenger services in virtual work environments (e.g., MS Teams), or holding individual office talks. A simple thought experiment can help managers assess whether a meeting is the best option: imagine that it is not possible to hold a discussion in a conventional manner. What should be done to get the requisite input if a meeting is not a feasible mode of communication? Only if digital channels, two-person talks, or a working lunch will not suffice should invitations be sent out for a meeting at a big table. Further indications for eliminating a meeting altogether include frequent postponements, numerous cancellations, or decisions that have already been made at other meetings.

Google co-founder Larry Page hits the nail on the head when he says unnecessary meetings are counterproductive for both the employees and the organization.² No one wants to be kept

from doing their work without a good reason. Meetings at Google help the company organize itself and make important decisions. This approach actively questions the basic necessity of individual gatherings.

This is one of the easiest ways to control the number of value-adding meetings—and hardly any managers will complain if they no longer need to invest so much time in unproductive events.

Delegating decisional authority



Whether a company is making major changes to its strategic orientation or issuing escalation instructions to prevent delays in product development, as soon as managers raise questions about how decisions are being made a hive of activity immediately breaks out. Driven by classic hierarchical constructs, countless coordination loops quickly kick into action and official preliminary meetings are convened with the sole aim of presenting multiple options to the boss on the “big day” while simultaneously favoring the one that the operational unit has already identified as the most reasonable in its own comprehensive rounds of meetings. By contrast, high-performance meetings sharpen, expand, and optimize the content without watering it down by compulsively including multiple decisional circuits and cascades. As such, a high-performance organization generates the appropriate framework conditions for its meetings, which enable it to make its own decisions at relevant interfaces, master challenges, and act autonomously for the good of the company. Shifting decisional authority to lower reporting levels can also ensure that decisions are made where their effects can best be anticipated.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella recently told his managers to be very careful with respect to their seniority and meetings.³ The giant tech company will no longer tolerate countless advance agreements on reviews called by leadership personnel. Why should upcoming decisions be rehearsed fivefold in all manner of meetings leading up to and including the decision-maker when the judgement and expertise of those affected would long since suffice to put the theory into prac-

tice? The relevant supervisor should serve as a coach and central guide who fully trusts the autonomous decisions of his or her employees and experts, and knows to intervene only in the event of an escalation.

Shifting decisional authority renders all preliminary gatherings to ensure the flow of information and participatory decisional integration de facto obsolete in a high-performance organization. The effective number of decisional meetings is a key factor in an agile organization that is oriented toward speed and efficiency. Instead of opting for a cascade of ascending meetings, modern organizations are open to accelerating decisional processes that take account of a lean meeting structure from the core of the business.

Integrating new meetings into existing ones



Experience shows that many organizations are careless in how they establish new meetings. After all, it is relatively easy to generate a recurring series of invitations in Outlook. The following applies to both the everyday exchange of knowledge and the central need for coordination: as soon as an organization requires additional coordination, further structures in the form of joint decisional meetings are quickly instituted in a desperate attempt to reduce the “fever” by means of greater exchange—but without treating the actual “illness”: the deficit in coordination. No matter how varied the reasons for convening additional meetings might be, they all display the same trend: the organization’s meetings

swell to an unhealthy degree although existing ones could already address some of the reasons for new ones.

Valid reasons do exist for establishing new meetings in an organization. Here are three examples: participants selected for a temporary project need to come together; a company task force gathers to deal with escalating topics in a limited period of time; expanded reports have to be compiled about newly created responsibilities at an organization. As a general principle, high-performance organizations follow a clearly defined “meeting blueprint” to structurally assess the processes that determine whether a new meeting should be established, or possibly arrange its integration into existing meetings (Figure 3).

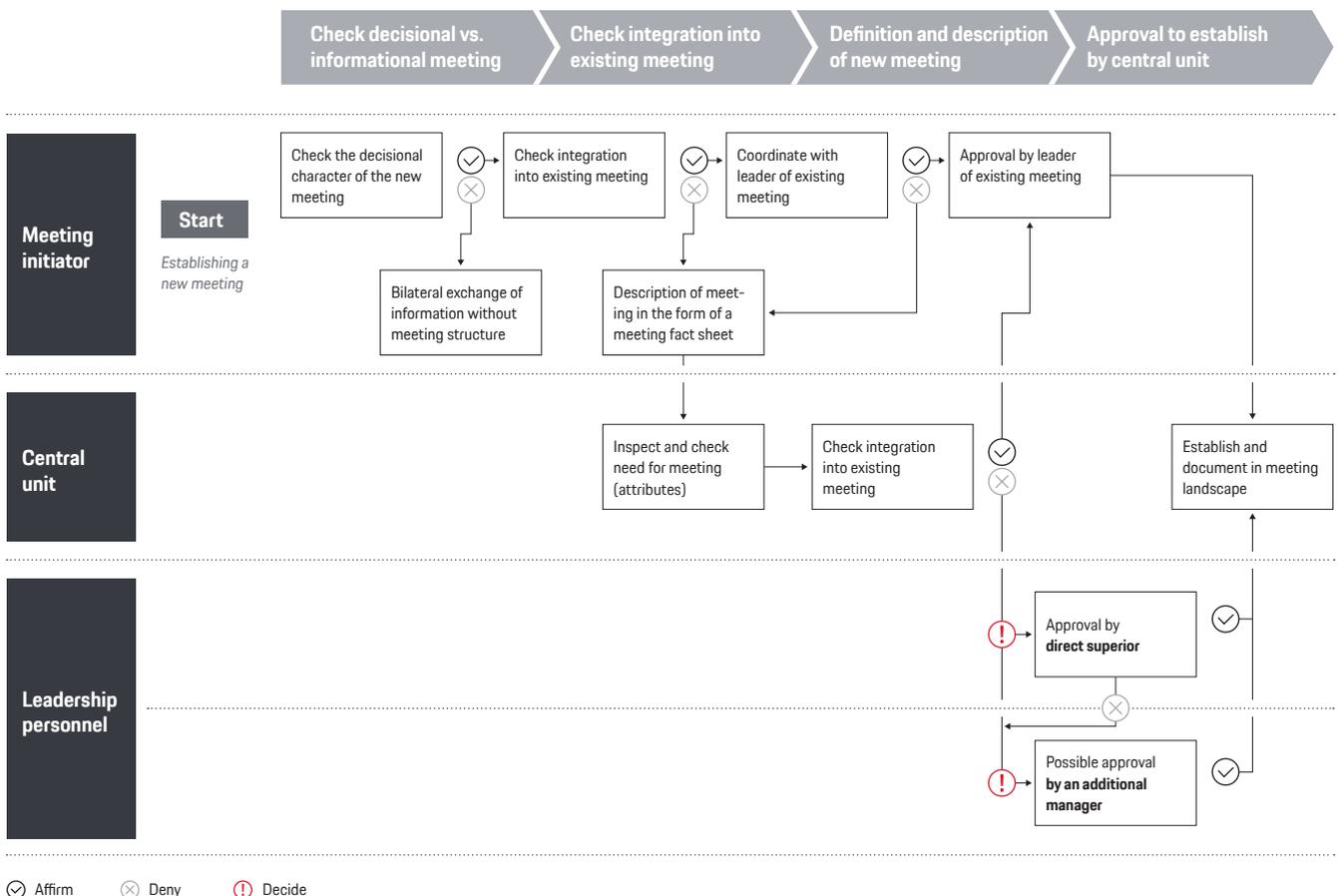
A central unit serves as a contact partner and supervises the entire process from initiating a meeting to possibly establishing it and then also incorporating it into the meeting landscape. The need for the meeting and its possible integration is constantly questioned throughout the process. The initiator is thus compelled to examine the purpose of the proposed meeting. If deemed necessary, the meeting will be integrated into the existing landscape and documented. High-performance organizations thereby prevent unchecked growth of various regular meetings and the associated control elements that will accompany and anchor them over the years to come.



“Too many discussions are a clear sign of a bad organization,” noted Cyril Northcote Parkinson, the British historian and publicist who died in 1993. The first and basic principle is to question “the purpose of holding meetings,” in order to optimize the number of meetings in a future model of governance and to begin reorganizing how meetings are used. The three structural optimization levers shown create a clear structural basis for optimizing the processes.

Before establishing a new meeting, ask yourself the following questions...

- 01 Is this a meeting where decisions are made, or do I only want to provide information?
- 02 Do I know of an existing meeting within the organization that already handles similar content?
- 03 How does my meeting differ from others in the existing meeting landscape?
- 04 Which participants do I need for the meeting, how much time for the meeting's content, and how regularly do I wish to coordinate with the participants?
- 05 Can I shift/delegate the meeting to an operational working level?
- 06 Which decisional authorizations apply to my meeting and what do clear escalation paths for it look like?
- 07 Are there any upstream/downstream meetings that flow into/out of mine?
- 08 What is the overarching aim of the proposed new meeting?



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Figure 3. Process for establishing a new meeting or integrating it into an existing meeting

02.2

“Priority on results”—

The HPO meeting process: effective and efficient

The remaining meetings are those that are sufficiently worthwhile for the organization to briefly interrupt its operations. Their process-related properties are therefore evaluated for their efficiency and effectiveness. **Meeting efficiency** is the ratio of input—i.e., the energy invested by the organization into the meeting—to output. **Meeting effectiveness** is the extent to which the meeting and how it is conducted ultimately contribute to achieving an overarching aim. With the help of these two properties, the optimization parameters for any given meeting—duration, frequency, number of participants, and meeting type—can be further developed toward high performance.

INCREASING MEETING EFFICIENCY

Small participant numbers



Whether due to mailing lists that have grown over time or to the fear of excluding an employee from supposedly important decisions, invitations to meetings - from both medium-sized companies to corporate giants - are often sent to an excessive number of people. While there may be good reasons for this, a large number of peripheral participants can inhibit the ability to reach a consensus on decisions, and thereby lower the meeting's efficiency. The productivity of a gathering has been shown to decrease as a function of the increase in participants.

The principle of “as many as necessary, as few as possible” should be applied when determining the number of people to invite. Amazon head Jeff Bezos embraces this idea with his “two-pizza rule,”⁴ which doesn't mean that high-level meetings have to feature the popular Italian dish but rather is a metaphor for restricting participants to a number that two pizzas could satisfy. This simple trick prevents gatherings from becoming absolutely unmanageable. Even considering the size of American pizzas, that would mean no more than five to eight people. Another method is to define the number of attendees by the participating departments (e.g., marketing & sales, finance, R&D, etc.). This principle would limit participants to a maximum of two per department: one with the

requisite decisional authority (the decision-maker), who can bring another with specialized expertise (the content expert). The latter can also represent the former and make decisions in their stead. Additional ways of optimizing participant numbers include issuing tickets for a meeting, and limiting the agenda slots.

Shorter meetings



Meetings are often scheduled at general times and usually based on blocks of an hour. Outlook calendars have standard quarter- or half-hour blocks, but this should not prevent individual meetings from being scheduled for unorthodox periods of time. Can the content be discussed in forty-eight minutes? Or even thirty-five? Moreover, two-hour “meeting blockers” are increasingly finding their way into managers' calendars, although the initiators forget that discussions of more than an hour are not only tiring but also deter invitees with the specter of time sinks.

It is surprising how many items can be handled in half an hour if this short time span is clearly announced from the start. Deliberate limits to discussion times mean that both the leader and participants treat the meeting with focused perception and attention. Discussions should therefore only be allowed to exceed thirty minutes in exceptional cases, and only when explicitly specified in advance, e.g., if the number of items on the agenda cannot be treated otherwise. And in fact, project experience shows that most meetings of more than an hour can be shortened by up to 25 percent without reducing the quality of their decisions or topic coverage. Another way of preventing discussion marathons is to terminate the meeting at a point when its participants can be expected to lose their patience anyway. Instead of the core working time of 10 am, meetings can be scheduled for unattractive peripheral times such as 11:30 am, i.e., shortly before lunch, or 5:15 pm, i.e., toward the end of the day.

Meeting-free times in calendars



The problem with today's meeting mania is not just the sheer number that people are expected to attend but also the way

they fragment the working day. Being compelled to attend “informational updates” and discussions on diverse topics at ever shorter intervals pulls employees and leadership personnel out of their everyday work and tasks. Moreover, scheduling conflicts not infrequently require most leadership personnel to prioritize, which necessarily limits the effectiveness of the de-prioritized events.

A calendar with meeting-free periods serves two purposes. A meeting-free day such as Friday can ensure sufficient time for bilateral discussions and value-adding work. Pinterest, for example, gives its product engineers a “no-meeting blocker” from Tuesday through Thursday in order to increase their productivity and the quality of the software they develop.⁵ Parallel events can be avoided by well-managed weekly calendars. For example, board meetings can always be held on Monday and specialized groups can always meet on Tuesday so relevant managers can ensure their participation in both events.

INCREASING MEETING EFFECTIVENESS

The “Good enough, move on!” principle



A meeting is probably unnecessary if it presents facts to a silent amenable audience instead of eliciting lively discussion. Discussions encourage people to evaluate each other's ideas and spread information. They also enable the decisions thereby made to gain traction for all concerned. But there is also a negative side. Discussions of this type can often bloat or lose focus. The meeting then quickly devolves into a marathon marked by a frustrating fixation on detail.

“Are there any questions about this item on the agenda that still need to be considered?” Or possibly: “Are we getting caught up in unnecessary details?” The GEMO principle of “Good enough, move on!”—in other words, “that’s enough, it’s not worth discussing any more details, let’s continue with the agenda!” might seem to hinder clear results, but in practice leads to a more efficient focus on results. Leadership personnel no longer feel compelled to find an absolutely perfect solution at the meeting. If a general decision is made with a few open details, those details should not be flogged but

finalized afterwards via short operational paths. The GEMO method enables all participants to be satisfied with a good interim result to the discussion, and to accept the heart of the decision. The focus on essentials remains, and individuals not involved in the details are not detained.

Digital meeting tools



Today's products and services are becoming more complex than ever, and organizations are forging ever wider and deeper interconnections on a global scale. This makes it all the more important to have more means of coordination besides conventional meetings. Most current ways of communicating outside conference rooms still involve phones or e-mail. But these have certain disadvantages. Phone conferences not infrequently encourage participants to multitask, which in turn can lead to misunderstandings that require more time to resolve while attention spans decrease the longer the call goes on. E-mail correspondence might well proceed quickly, but important information can be diluted by the daily flood of new items.

Organizations are marked by an increasing exchange of information but their effectiveness depends on the quality of the informational flow and the decisional authority of meeting participants. Video conferences—whether by Skype, Zoom, or Lync—have developed into effective and economical alternatives. Virtual meetings can save travel costs, minimize the time spent away from the office, and maximize communication with colleagues at other locations. They require half the time of classic forms of communication because all participants are necessarily involved in the face-to-face discussion, which leads to greater attention and focus and better understanding. Digital meeting tools accelerate this and increase effectiveness. They include live reports or a live agenda, as well as Doodle lists for scheduling purposes.

Meetings outside conference rooms



The meeting environment, which is often perceived on a subconscious level, plays a considerable role in ensuring creativity. Many start-ups have been holding meetings outside conventional conference rooms for years now, whereas

established organizations often lag behind in this respect. These venues offer a pleasant change of scenery and encourage employees to exchange ideas away from their desks — in short, they should be used more often by organizations of all sizes.

Instead of sitting around in conference and meeting rooms, participants could use new locations to make their gatherings more efficient and especially more creative. A "walking meeting" through a park (with participants tossing a ball to

each other to signal whose turn it is to speak) not only uses outdoor exercise to enhance fitness, but also demonstrably promotes openness and decisional willingness. Everyday stress is lowered when participants are removed from the traditional office environment. Another possibility is an office walk to a selected meeting point such as a nearby café. Participants can engage in informal discussion on the way there, and moderate background noise in lively environments even improves performance in creative tasks. A reward in the form of, say, coffee and cake, can be a pleasant side effect.

» Like all forms of communication, meetings require precise planning, preparation, and execution by the organization. Efficiency and effectiveness are the greatest premises for both participants and content: the result is all that counts. The six process properties shown enable an efficient meeting to be combined with an effective process. These two elements save time and human resources, and ensure the ability to make prompt decisions.

03

Case examples of optimizing meetings

Here are some examples of the measures presented in Section 2 for optimizing the structure and processes of meetings, from the everyday routines of individual CEOs at high-performance organizations:

» Leave meetings as soon as you realize they cannot help you achieve your aim. It is not good form to waste other people's time.



Elon Musk

» Start the meeting silently by reading documents created in Word. To avoid conformism, the person of lowest rank should give his/her opinion first.



Jeff Bezos

» For one-to-one talks with your employees, ask them to draw up their own agendas so they will take responsibility for both the content and significance of the meeting.



Ben Horowitz



» Before every meeting, appoint a decider and a challenger. This promotes innovation and further development of the content discussed for the decisional process.



Hal Barron



» Before each meeting, examine its purpose: what is the intention and what is the top priority for all present?



Oprah Winfrey



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Figure 4. Practical examples of optimization from well-known CEOs and pioneers in high-performance of meeting optimization levers⁶

These overall approaches to optimizing meetings serve as a key lever for achieving a modern and performance-oriented meeting structure. Companies can apply them to systematically stem the wasteful use of their most important resources in meetings: their managers and employees.

04

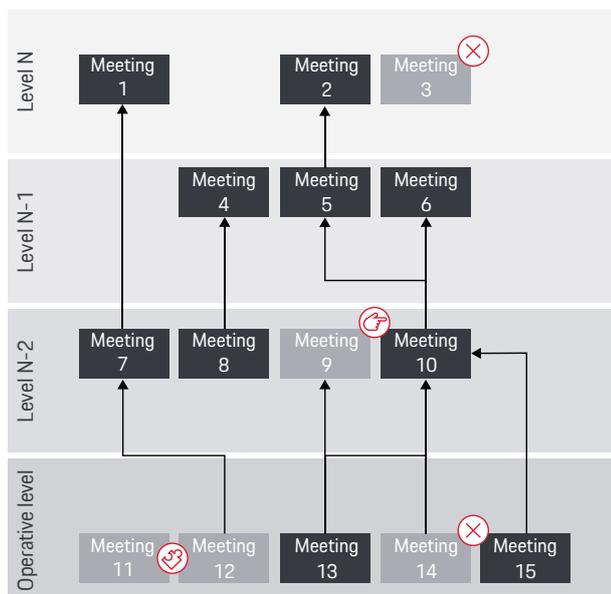
Porsche Consulting's "MeetA" tool for meetings

To optimize the structure and processes of meetings, the first step is to have clear requirements and rules for compiling meeting data.

The innovative "MeetA" (Meeting Analytics) tool from Porsche Consulting is a rapid and comprehensive way to compile data and ensure transparency about the current state of how meetings are held. Meeting dates are exported directly from the Outlook calendars of those involved, then consolidated and structured in real time by the MeetA tool developed specifically for this purpose. Five minutes are sufficient to compile several thousand meetings into a basic data set. Direct extraction includes core calendar information such as start and end times, required and optional participant numbers, acceptance and decline rates, and serial invitations to determine meeting frequency. The tool also compiles information about, e.g., topics, preparatory and/or subsequent meetings,

meeting types, and meeting locations (for considering possible travel times). Export of all this data affects only relevant meetings, with selection done by a logical feature integrated into the tool. The mass of information is used to create a streamlined, updated, and always anonymized set of data to derive capacity allocations for meetings currently held, focusing on facts and figures. The diverse data can thus be used to generate precise capacity analyses (in person-years) and actual expenses in euros in the form of employee time-cost effects. One helpful byproduct of MeetA is a complete and automated visualization of the aggregated meetings on a map for individual departments, functions, or entire divisions.

The MeetA tool will enable organizations to compile and examine the often large amount of data about their meetings, in order to introduce structural and procedural countermeasures early on and thereby return to a performance-oriented meeting structure.



⊗ Elimination ⊕ Delegation ⊙ Consolidation

		No. of participants	avg. Duration	Meeting frequency	Capacity allocation
1	Meeting 1	45	4:30	12	██████████
2	Meeting 2	14	2:30	46	██████████
3	Meeting 3	63	0:30	23	██████████ Structural optimization
4	Meeting 4	115	2:30	4	██████████
5	Meeting 5	8	1:30	12	██████████
6	Meeting 6	10	2:00	46	██████████
7	Meeting 7	13	1:30	23	██████████
8	Meeting 8	110	0:30	220	██████████
9	Meeting 9	3	3:30	12	██████████ Structural optimization
10	Meeting 10	45	0:30	4	██████████
11	Meeting 11	23	0:30	12	██████████ Structural optimization
12	Meeting 12	8	0:30	4	██████████ Structural optimization
13	Meeting 13	45	0:30	12	██████████
14	Meeting 14	12	1:00	4	██████████ Structural optimization
15	Meeting 15	4	2:30	6	██████████

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Figure 5. Aggregated meeting overview from Porsche Consulting's MeetA | committee map

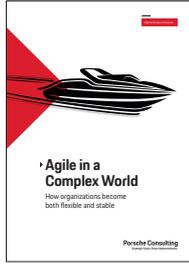
IN BRIEF

- 01** High performance meetings lay a crucial foundation for decisions that affect the central success of organizations and their interdisciplinary teams.
- 02** The traditional office routine is changing in today's world of VUCA, thereby excessive structural elements in form of meetings have to adjust, accordingly.
- 03** As many meetings as necessary, as few as possible – return the uncontrolled growth of meetings back to an efficient meeting amount.
- 04** Shift meeting authority to the operational level in order to accelerate decisional processes from the core of the business.
- 05** Before inviting new meetings, make use of the meeting blueprint to actively question the purpose of every new meeting in order to maximize your benefit in and thereby increasing the overall productivity of meetings.
- 06** Integrate procedural meeting optimization levers to increase meeting efficiency – the energy and time invested into the meeting – and meeting effectiveness – the positive contribution to the overarching aim of the meeting, the decision.
- 07** The meeting optimization approaches are also valid for the increased number of virtual meetings in times of the pandemic
- 08** Systematically implement plug-and-play meeting optimization levers from C-Level pioneers in high-performance organizations to optimize your most important resource in meetings – your employees
- 09** Porsche Consulting's MeetA tool enables organizations to swiftly aggregate meeting data in order to introduce structural and procedural counter-measures

Further reading



High performance transformation



Agile in a Complex World



Manage the present and shape the future



Spotlight on Company-Wide Efficiency Programs



Financial planning in disruptive times



Business process management reloaded

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Appendix

(1) Various statistical sources

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(5) <https://futurethink.com/pinterest-engineers-designate-meeting-free-days/>

(6) Elon Musk – Source: INC.com (<https://www.inc.com/justin-bariso/elon-musk-knows-how-to-run-a-meeting-heres-how-he-does-it.html>)

Jeff Bezos – Source: INC.com (<https://www.inc.com/justin-bariso/jeff-bezos-knows-how-to-run-a-meeting-here-are-his-three-simple-rules.html>)

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Oprah Winfrey – Source: Thrive Global (<https://thriveglobal.com/stories/heres-how-to-hold-a-meeting-like-oprah/>)

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