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**Harvard
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Meeting Management

Dear Manager, You're Holding Too Many Meetings

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HBR Staff/Getty Images/Denis Novikov

Summary.   New research shows that 70% of meetings keep employees from doing productive work. While there was a 20% decrease in the average length of meetings during the pandemic, the number of meetings attended by a worker on average rose by 13.5%. In addition, newly promoted managers are holding almost a third more meetings than…   **more**

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Meetings serve different purposes, ranging from informal social gatherings to formal brainstorming sessions. They often show up on our calendars as recurring events (with no end date in sight!). New research shows that about 70% of all meetings keep employees from working and completing all their tasks. While there was a 20% decrease in the average length of meetings during

the pandemic, the number of meetings attended by a worker on average rose by 13.5%. Ineffective meetings that waste our time can negatively impact psychological, physical, and mental well-being.

Our recent research found that newly promoted managers may be contributing to the problem. New managers hold almost a third (29%) more meetings than their seasoned counterparts. When we set out to understand the hidden costs of flexible working practices, we discovered that meetings have steadily increased in frequency and duration since companies transitioned to the remote workplace.

Possible reasons include:

- Without the ability to connect with their team members in person often in the new hybrid workplaces, people newly promoted into management roles feel an extra pressure to build connections digitally. They are driven by a desire to be more visible and get buy-in from their teams.
- It's easier than ever to stack our days with back-to-back meetings. When we're working remotely, we don't have to travel between private meeting rooms. We can pretty much leave one meeting and log into another a minute later.

What's the impact? Our research shows that 92% of employees consider meetings costly and unproductive. Countless online interactions often lead to "Zoom fatigue" — a condition neuropsychologists say is a big contributor to technostress. In short, more meetings don't help *anyone* reach their goals.

To investigate further, and consider the implications for new managers, we surveyed 76 companies that reduced the number of meetings during the last 14 months. We found that although building trust and achieving cohesion relies on the frequency and quality of a team's interactions, meetings are no longer the best way for newly promoted managers to accomplish those things. In fact, there are much more effective ways to develop bonds in the absence of face-to-face meetings — including having *less* meetings altogether.
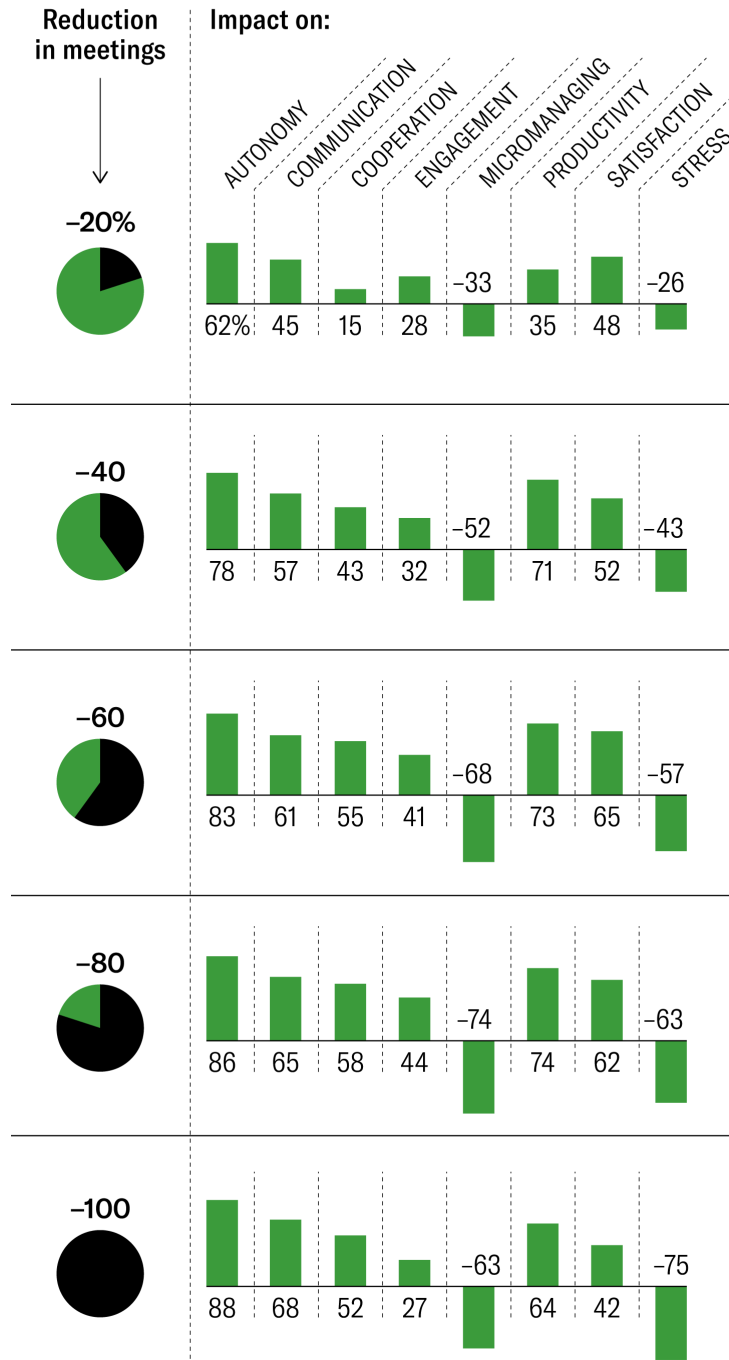
The Benefits of Having Fewer Meetings

Across the 76 companies we surveyed, we found that employee productivity was 71% higher when meetings were reduced by 40%. This is largely because employees felt more empowered and autonomous. Rather than a schedule being the boss, they owned their to-do lists and held themselves accountable, which consequently increased their satisfaction by 52%.

Impact of Fewer Meetings

A survey of 76 companies that reduced their meetings over the course of 14 months found that overall employee ratings were positively impacted.

Change in employee ratings after introduction of meeting-free days

Reduction in meetings →

Impact on:
AUTONOMY · COMMUNICATION · COOPERATION · ENGAGEMENT · MICROMANAGING · PRODUCTIVITY · SATISFACTION · STRESS

−20%

AUTONOMY	COMMUNICATION	COOPERATION	ENGAGEMENT	MICROMANAGING	PRODUCTIVITY	SATISFACTION	STRESS
62%	45	15	28	−33	35	48	−26

−40

AUTONOMY	COMMUNICATION	COOPERATION	ENGAGEMENT	MICROMANAGING	PRODUCTIVITY	SATISFACTION	STRESS
78	57	43	32	−52	71	52	−43

−60

AUTONOMY	COMMUNICATION	COOPERATION	ENGAGEMENT	MICROMANAGING	PRODUCTIVITY	SATISFACTION	STRESS
83	61	55	41	−68	73	65	−57

−80

AUTONOMY	COMMUNICATION	COOPERATION	ENGAGEMENT	MICROMANAGING	PRODUCTIVITY	SATISFACTION	STRESS
86	65	58	44	−74	74	62	−63

−100

AUTONOMY	COMMUNICATION	COOPERATION	ENGAGEMENT	MICROMANAGING	PRODUCTIVITY	SATISFACTION	STRESS
88	68	52	27	−63	64	42	−75

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Removing 60% of meetings increased cooperation by 55%. Workers found better ways to connect one-on-one at a pace suitable for them, often using project management tools, such as Slack or Teams, to aid communications specific to each project. In doing so, the risk of stress decreased by 57%, which improved employees' overall well-being.

When meetings declined by 80%, we found that the perception that employees had that they were being micromanaged lessened by 74%. People felt valued, trusted, and more engaged (44%), subsequently working harder for their company. Communication was 65% clearer and substantially more effective. The reason is that there were far fewer misunderstandings. To review an assignment or request, people would quickly check a previous Slack conversation or a project outline. The often-used phrases "I thought you told me…" or "I was under the impression" were rarely used.

How to Scale Back Meetings

If you're a new manager trying to build rapport with your team, we have some advice to help you rethink your approach. By following our suggestions below, nearly half (47%) of the companies we investigated reduced meetings by 40% over a three-month period. Thirty-five percent achieved three no-meeting days per week, and 11% achieved four.

Be *very* selective.

Think about the meetings you've conducted or participated in recently. Which ones have been the most useful? You're probably

thinking about a new project launch or a brainstorm that required a two-way dialogue in real-time. As a general rule of thumb, we recommend holding meetings only when "absolutely" necessary. That typically includes:

- To review work that's occurred (what worked or didn't and why)
- To clarify and validate something (policies, team goals, etc.)
- To distribute work appropriately among your team

Even in the cases above, you should carefully edit your invite list. Is *everyone* really needed? Or can you make the meeting optional for some people? The less important the topic is to their work, the less engaged your team members will be.

On that note, encourage your team to flag or cancel meetings if they aren't the best use of their time. Make it clear that, as their manager, you encourage it and won't judge or punish them. Being judicious about which meetings add value and which don't will help free up people's calendars. Doing so also forces managers to rethink the informal "ad-hoc" engagements that pepper everybody's calendars.

Interestingly, we found this strategy garners loyalty towards managers. Granting autonomy is allows people to job craft, which previous studies show help them find meaning in their work.

Transition your daily status meetings to Slack or team.

Daily huddles are the most frequently held meetings, and often, they are the most difficult to give up. As a new manager, you may

feel that it's important for your team to be aware of one another's work in order to reach your goals as a group. These meetings may seem like the best time to do this.

We have another suggestion: Set up a Slack or Teams channel specifically for this purpose. Every weekday, schedule a message to go out at 9:00 am: "@here What's on your plate today"?

Ask your team members to respond within the hour, explaining what they're working on, any important project updates, setbacks, etc. Managers (and your team members) can then scan the responses and follow up privately on updates that may need more context.

Our research found that 83% of employees preferred using these chat touch points over traditional one-to-one meetings because it saved them time. If your team members have a question, they can drop you a message instead of having to find a 30-minute block on your calendar.

Use digital tools for asynchronous work.

The next time you have a brainstorming meeting, ask: Can some of this be done asynchronously? The answer is probably yes.

For example, tools like Mural and Google Forms can be used to get people to submit their ideas in advance. Then you can schedule a follow-up meeting to review them together, likely cutting your meeting time in half. Eighty-three percent of employees on our

survey preferred this approach over traditional methods, claiming it helps them contribute on their own time, and further refine ideas in person.

Additionally, meeting-dependent activities like checking in on the progress of projects can be tracked asynchronously on a dashboard in a way that is transparent to everyone. This approach, we found, can help prune calendars, leaving more space for valuable "no meeting" time and focused work.

Whereas our data highlights the importance of holding fewer meetings, we want to emphasize that new managers need an understanding of what works for their unique contexts to maximize the full benefits of these strategies. For example, we found that the advantages of no-meeting periods begin to plateau after reducing meetings by 60% and actually wane beyond that. Satisfaction, productivity, engagement, and corporation all decline when meetings are reduced completely, instead of retaining at least one day for meetings. We posit that when two days per week are retained for meetings, it can prove beneficial.

Even so, with the traditional meetings yielding little return on time investment, the opportunity cost is too high not to act now. Your teams are full of talented and capable people doing what they do best, but they need space to do so. By better understanding how they w*ant* to work together, how meetings fit into that, and where meetings do and don't add value, you'll minimize the need for useless meetings.

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