



A WORK MEETING: AN ACTIVE CHOICE

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*"Enhance your hybrid work meetings through reflection.
Avoid the pitfalls of quick fixes!"*



Is this situation familiar? Could it happen to you?

Samuel, a middle manager, can't help the deep sigh that slips out as he sees yet another meeting invitation in his inbox: when to work? There are just meetings, meetings, and more meetings. A quick glance at the laptop clock tells him he has time for a quick trip to the coffee machine. He walks across the hallway and sees Andrew. 'Haven't seen him for a while', Samuel thinks to himself. Andrew often works from home so they usually meet over Zoom. They briefly discuss the management meeting they attended the day before and that they clearly experienced in different ways - 'is it because I also talked to the others after the formal meeting ended?',

Samuel asks himself. Samuel needs to hurry back to his desk. His next meeting is a one-on-one with Claire, one of his subordinates. Next is a meeting called by the HR department. Samuel suppresses another sigh: there is just no time to prepare for these meetings. The weekend was taken up by the football cup his youngest daughter participated in (Samuel is one of the coaches), Monday was spent in meetings and today is Tuesday... He rushes downstairs after realizing that he is already a couple of minutes late. When he connects, Claire is already there. Time to focus.

What are the **key** issues here? Read more on next page.

Key issues

Meetings are the very foundation for organizing since they are arenas where groups come together and work as a collective. Organizing is about distributing work (which is often relatively easy) and about coordinating and keeping the work of individuals together (which tends to be harder). This means that the work of the individual is dependent on the work of other individuals, not only in terms of tasks to be accomplished, but also in terms of coworkers continuously 'producing' each other's work environment. This is even more important to consider in hybrid meetings that connect individuals located in different places.

Work in an organization is a collective performance despite tasks being performed individually, and despite the sense of coherence being an individual experience.

When we enter a meeting, we often do so as individuals, but once in the meeting we are expected to work and act as a group. Although meetings have different purposes and are arranged differently, the core is the

same: to bring individuals together and thereby bring together their work practices. This is done at the expense of other activities that could have been performed instead.

In calling or inviting to a meeting, the meeting organizer claims other people's time and physical or virtual presence. This means that calling to a meeting is something to be taken seriously since it comes with an intrinsic tension:

- it can be seen both as an intrusion into the individual's right to decide independently how to best spend one's own time
- and as a necessity for the organization to function.

You may recognize having thought "is this meeting really worth participating in?" when deciding whether to accept a meeting invitation or not. Hence, when organizing a meeting, you may need to take more into consideration that the time together is precious and should be respected by making sure participants focus properly on the meeting. The purpose of meetings is to

bring individuals and their (different) work practices together, and support coordination in order for the group and organization to function. This is very important when individuals are not co-located and demands time and focus.

On the other hand, inviting people to a meeting is also something to be taken seriously since not including someone in the invitation also comes with consequences – the meeting may suffer from lack of people with the right knowledge and competence, and individuals may feel excluded.

In conclusion, sending the invitation to a hybrid meeting is easy - it is just a case of adding all the participants you want to the email-software invitation and pressing Send. They may attend wherever they are. However, organizing a meeting should always be an active choice. Not all issues can, or should, be handled by organizing a meeting. Who, why, when and where are very important questions to think about before pressing the Send button.

🧐 Questions for reflection

As a meeting leader, ask yourself...

- How often do I actively choose meetings as the solution to attending to issues in your daily work? How often is it because this is how i usually do it? How often is it because this is how others do?
- What alternatives do I see to meetings?
- What is preventing me from using one of these channels rather than calling a (hybrid) meeting?

As a meeting participant, ask yourself...

- How often do I find myself in meetings where what is discussed could have been 'solved' through other communication channels?
- Do you think that those that invite you to meetings have actually considered other possible channels to deal with the issues at hand?

This reflection guide offers you some insight to further reflect on the key issues presented above. If you want to discuss and reflect with your colleagues or other interested people, you may explore possibilities and dilemmas in an interactive discussion about your hybrid meetings by using one of the workshop modules we suggest.

Read more below if you are interested in:

- Are meetings work?
- “Let’s set up a meeting” *Is the answer to all issues?*
- Inform, communicate or collaborate?
- How do meetings fit with the other pieces of the puzzle?

The workshop based on metaphorical thinking and photographs will help you verbalize assumptions, ideas, and fantasies about meetings. You will discover, for instance, your individual and your shared taken-for-granted assumptions about hybrid work meetings. Have a look at the workshop guide on <https://sites.mdu.se/inpro-hym/en/inpro-hym>

Are meetings work?

Whether meetings are perceived as work or as something that takes time from work is a question we may need to ask ourselves more often. Meetings are often seen as something that gets in the way of producing tangible output. The transformation to more digital and hybrid meetings seems to have amplified the perception of meetings taking more and more time, with less time in between meetings, as digital meetings can easily be organized back-to-back throughout the working day.

”There is no time to produce...We have maybe 6-8 meetings per day... How to find the time to produce?”

On the other hand, a recent survey performed as part of the MeetWell project, shows that most people appreciate the meetings they participate, which something challenges the general discourse of complaining about meetings. Hence, there is also quite a shared understanding that meetings may be valuable.

🤔 Questions for reflection

- Are meetings work, or do meetings take time from work? Does the kind of work I do affect my answer (for instance depending on if you need to coordinate a task as part of your work)? Does the modality of the meeting (that is, digital, hybrid or physical meetings) affect my answer?
- If meetings take time from work, can I do something to make them become part of doing work?

Being tied up in back-to-back meetings may bring with it a sense of lack of autonomy, and sometimes also of non-effectiveness and non-productiveness, as well as exhaustion. Whether meetings are perceived as interruptions or not depends to some extent on how focused one is on accomplishing work goals:

- Individuals with a strong desire to accomplish work goals may perceive meetings as an interruption in their work.

- On the other hand, individuals that find the meeting effective or are dependent on others' tasks for performing their tasks may benefit from large numbers of meetings.

Consider the possibility of reducing the number of meetings in order to free time for other work than meetings. Fewer meetings may also increase the perceived sense of autonomy. However, this depends on the specific work and situation. Meetings also enable social interaction and may provide a structure helpful in organizing one's own workday.

It is easier to consider meetings as proper work if there are concrete results: decisions made, figures reported, forms filled in, etcetera. But meetings have several purposes:

- They may function as rituals, helping in supporting or changing the cultural values in an organization.
- They may also be occasions for collective sensemaking that enable us to make things understandable in a group together and to discuss how to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty.

We may easily forget about these purposes in our strive for more productive meetings

Questions for reflection

- Have I recently been part of a hybrid meeting in which organizational values were reproduced or where we made sense of something together? Did I consider this as proper work? Why?

IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER HOW TO EVALUATE THE PRODUCT- TIVENESS OF A MEETING

“Let's set up a meeting” Is it always the solution?

Meetings are often seen as the natural way to solve issues of collaboration or coordination, without properly considering alternatives. In the context of hybrid meetings, it is even more important to ask yourself if a meeting is really what is needed, since hybrid meetings are more complex to organize and there are more aspects to take into consideration, such as the available technologies or the quality of interaction through digital media.

If you follow the approach of “let's set up a meeting’ whatever the issue, there is also a risk of choosing the “easy way out’ when it comes to accountability, by inviting more people than actually necessary, just to be on the safe side. This is easier now with digital and hybrid meetings, since you can connect from everywhere, and

increases even more the number of meetings individuals are invited to.

Such a way of using meetings may also lead to frustration since there may be different expectations of the meeting and it may become unclear over time why you have meetings at all.

“We invite too widely – we want belts and suspenders”

Since meetings are delicate “instruments” that in some situations are extremely helpful and in others become a source of stress or frustration, they need to be mobilized carefully, taking into consideration individual and organizational aspects.

Meetings are delicate instruments since they may lead to different results depending on many different factors, such as:

- attending many meetings increases the perceived workload and stress levels
- humor and laughter in meetings stimulate positive group performance

- positive team interactions in meetings predict organizational success.

Concluding:

- In order to avoid using meetings as the default option for solving issues and inviting too widely (to play safe or just because digital technologies enable us to), it would be beneficial to be careful in inviting to meetings.
- Moreover, you may consider who is needed when, rather than inviting everyone for the whole meeting. You can read more about structure, roles and similar aspects of a meeting in the other reflection guides.

🤔 Questions for reflection

As an organizer/meeting leader, ask yourself ...

- Is a meeting really required for this issue?
- Is it required now?
- In that case, where and why?

MOBILIZING MEETINGS TO ORGANIZE WORK SHOULD BE A CAREFUL CONSIDERATION THAT TAKES FACTORS SUCH AS MEETING FREQUENCY, TASK INTERDEPENDENCE, GROUP COMPOSITION, ETCETERA INTO ACCOUNT IF THE MEETINGS ARE TO BE PERCEIVED AS FRUITFUL AND AS CONTRIBUTING TO PROGRESS INSTEAD OF BEING PERCEIVED AS STRESS-ADDING EVENTS

Informing, communicating or collaborating?

What types of meetings to use for what types of activities is a continuous discussion - in research as well as in management training and in advice provided by experts. Pure information meetings may, for instance, be questioned due to the one-way communication they constitute. Other ways of informing, such as setting up something close to a TV-show production, are instead proposed by the InPro-Hym project participants.

”It requires a different kind of production, more like a couch-like session in a TV-show.”

During meetings, presentations are often shared with great speed, with too many slides containing too many details. This information overload may drain the meeting participants of energy (see the reflection guide on energy in hybrid meetings) during the current as well as upcoming meetings.

There may be other ways of informing, for instance sending out video recordings ahead of the meetings (and keeping the meeting for discussing the information), or even using the video recordings only to inform, instead of having a meeting.

To understand more about how to deal more deliberately and carefully with meetings as a way of organizing, we can talk about the different types of ‘exchanges’ that may take place during meetings.

Information is knowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event. *Communication* is the transmission or exchange of information, knowledge, or ideas, by means of speech, writing, mechanical or electronic media, etc. *Collaboration* is the act of working together.

When we have made the active choice to organize a meeting and thus have evaluated a meeting as the proper way to deal with the issue at stake, we need to consider what type of exchanges we anticipate or wish for during the meeting.

It will make a difference to our meetings how we envision what is expected during a meeting. If it is a "matter of fact"-information meeting, we need to prepare ourselves accordingly. If, on the other hand, it is an explorative collaborative meeting we wish to run, other preparations are necessary. This means that if you as the meeting organizers prepare for information and the meeting participants expect collaboration, the meeting will not be experienced either as meaningful or as energizing. Instead, we risk ending up with frustration and feelings of time not well spent.

If you can manage expectations (your own and those of others participating in the meeting) concerning what type of exchanges the meeting is set up for, the execution of a specific meeting will improve. Not only that, you and your colleagues will also be enabled to better optimize the time spent in meetings, for preparing for meetings and for other work.

If you have many meetings, you may need to discuss with managers and/or employees how to prioritize time depending on what kind of exchanges are expected and needed. This is even more important when you have hybrid meetings that may take more time to organize and may be perceived as less productive.

Maybe I do not need to attend a meeting where my manager will inform me about something that I already know about? If you want the people that work with you to be able to ask such questions and

autonomously answer them, the invitation to the meeting needs to provide proper information about the content, format and structure of the meeting and, maybe even more importantly, those invited need to be able to trust what the invitation says. If not, we risk ending up in a situation where we attend meetings 'just in case' because we are afraid of missing out on important discussions.

🤔 Questions for reflection

As a meeting participant, ask yourself ...

- By looking at the meeting invitations in my calendar for the upcoming week, can I tell what type of meetings they are (informing, communicating, or collaborating)?
- By looking back at the meetings I have attended lately, can I tell what type of meetings they were (informing, communicating, or collaborating)? Why/why not?

As a meeting leader, ask yourself...

- How can I invite to and organize my meetings to manage my own as well as other participants' expectations when it comes to type of meeting?
- How can I through my planning and conducting of meetings, support my colleagues in prioritizing and avoiding meeting fatigue?

Meetings as one of many pieces in the many puzzles

Questions for reflection

- In what ways do other things in my life (other work tasks, private life matters, family issues etc.) become part of my work meetings?
- Do I have any particular strategies for keeping meetings separate from other parts of my work and/or private life?

The increasing number of meetings, so-called meetingization in contemporary organizing, is in part the result of more complex organizational structures and increased interdependencies within and between organizations. This has led to the experience for many of work life as characterized by back-to-back meetings, to some extent with no breaks during or between meetings. This lack of breaks also affects participants in remote in different ways.

”There are so many meetings today... It is tight between the meetings which means that the meeting organizer doesn’t always have the time to start meetings on time. This risks excluding the on-line participants.”

Notice that work meetings are just one of the many activities we do during our workday. Maybe more importantly, work is just one part of life. Outside the particular meeting, there are also other meetings, other tasks, other collaborations, other relations, and other obligations and choices to consider.

Meetings need to be situated and understood in the midst of all this - as one of many pieces in the many puzzles of everyday life.

In research on meetings, we systematically study what goes on before, during, and after a meeting. That is, although research on meetings often focuses on "the meeting" itself and what goes on there, meeting science is in fact also about the meeting in relation to other aspects of organizational and private life.

For a particular meeting to be fruitful, it might be wise to acknowledge the multi-faceted lives of meeting participants (and of course also of the meeting organizer). Onboarding is a concept used in relation to new employees and how to get them onboard in a good way. One- on-one meetings in which cameras are on (in the case of digital meetings) may be beneficial. In a similar way, you may consider the beginning of a meeting as a phase of

onboarding, which could benefit from cameras on and preparation work to ensure a sense of people knowing each other.

Check-ins are also used to give everyone an opportunity to say something early during the meeting, thus co-creating a sharing atmosphere, and to spell out possible issues one is burdened by, and thereby park some 'irrelevant' issues outside of the particular meeting. Check-ins may be as simple as asking everyone to say something about what is on their mind at the moment.

THE COVID PANDEMIC BROUGHT THE ENTANGLEMENT OF LIFE SPHERES TO LIGHT, WHEN WE STARTED WORKING FROM KITCHEN TABLES, SOFAS, AND HOME-BUILT SOLUTIONS FOR ORGANIZING WORK FROM HOME. IN A RATHER EXPLICIT WAY, IT BROUGHT THE DIFFERENT SPHERES OF LIFE TOGETHER, BUT WE SHOULD REMEMBER THAT THIS IS ALSO THE CASE WHEN WORKING AT OUR OFFICE DESKS, ALTHOUGH THE ENTANGLEMENT MAY NOT BE AS VISIBLE.

This guide is the result of research we have done in the 2-years long project InPro-Hym (INclusive and PROductive HYbrid Meetings), and also draws on our work in the research projects MnC (Meetings and Community in the postdigital era) and MeetWell (Leadership and Employee Well-Being in Virtual and Hybrid Meetings). The InPro-Hym project has been performed in collaboration between Mälardalen University, the University of Gothenburg, Hitachi Energy and the municipality of Västerås. The project has been funded by Vinnova.

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