

**CIPD**

# Productive meetings

An evidence review

Practice summary  
and recommendations  
May 2023

The CIPD has been championing better work and working lives for over 100 years. It helps organisations thrive by focusing on their people, supporting our economies and societies. It's the professional body for HR, L&D, OD and all people professionals – experts in people, work and change. With almost 160,000 members globally – and a growing community using its research, insights and learning – it gives trusted advice and offers independent thought leadership. It's a leading voice in the call for good work that creates value for everyone.

Practice summary and recommendations

# Productive meetings: An evidence review

## Contents

1	Introduction	2
2	What is a productive meeting and why is this important?	2
3	What drives productive meetings?	3
4	Face-to-face and virtual meetings	8
5	Cross-cultural differences	9
6	Overview: Key insights from the review	11
7	Conclusion	12

## Acknowledgements

This report was written by Jake Young and Jonny Gifford of the CIPD, based on a rapid evidence assessment conducted by Eric Barends, Denise Rousseau, Iulia Cioca and Emilia Wietrak of the Center for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMA).

## Publication information

When citing this report, please use the following citation:  
Young, J. and Gifford, J. (2023) *Productive meetings: An evidence review*. Practice summary and recommendations. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

This report and the accompanying practice summary are available at [cipd.org/en/knowledge/evidence-reviews/productive-meetings](https://cipd.org/en/knowledge/evidence-reviews/productive-meetings)

# 1 Introduction

Meetings are an inevitable and vital aspect of modern organisations. They enable collaboration, offering a forum for ideas, consensus, priorities and the consideration of individual, group and organisational objectives. For these reasons, managers and employees tend to spend a great deal of time in meetings, with the regrettable result that they can proliferate to the point where they can often feel unnecessary, monotonous, unproductive and exhausting. Indeed, many would say that meetings are the bane of their working life.

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted organisations to rethink various aspects of their work. Many more people now work in virtual or hybrid teams, leading to a focus on how to run effective remote meetings. However, understanding how to make the most of meetings has always been important.

This evidence review investigates the importance of productive meetings and identifies the factors that contribute most to these. We uncover the key areas of focus and practical actions you can take to make the most of these spaces of collaboration and teamwork.

## **An evidence-based approach**

We live in an age of information overload, in which it is easy to be swayed by the latest fads or received wisdom. Effective decision-making can be difficult – it requires us to critically question our assumptions and avoid cherry-picking evidence that suits us. Evidence-based practice gives well-established approaches to help with this and, while hard proof is elusive, we can identify the best available evidence to help us decide how best to achieve our desired outcomes.

This evidence review summarises the best available scientific research on effective meetings. It is based on a rapid evidence assessment (REA), a concise form of systematic review. We also draw on some additional sources on cross-cultural meetings and our previous evidence review on virtual teams. You can see the information on which this report is based in the accompanying scientific summary, at [cipd.org/en/knowledge/evidence-reviews/productive-meetings](https://cipd.org/en/knowledge/evidence-reviews/productive-meetings)

# 2 What is a productive meeting and why is this important?

Meetings serve such a wide range of functions that it wouldn't be feasible to have a consistent gauge of how productive a meeting has been in terms of achieving outcomes. Instead, research usually considers the characteristics of a meeting – specifically, *meeting effectiveness*.

### Assessing meeting effectiveness

When measuring meeting effectiveness, we must consider the perceptions of those involved, that is, the extent to which attendees *believe* a meeting achieves their goals and those of the organisation. This perceived meeting effectiveness links closely with meeting satisfaction, or how well a meeting experience measures up to participants' expectations.

In most studies, perceived meeting effectiveness is assessed by asking participants to rate the effectiveness of the meeting in terms of:

- achieving their own work goals, those of their colleagues and those of the department
- providing an opportunity to acquire useful information
- providing an opportunity to meet, socialise or network with people.

### What is the impact of meeting effectiveness?

When attendees see meetings as effective, they are more likely to attend them, hold positive attitudes towards them and display positive behaviours during them. They are also more likely to benefit from them, for example in terms of their wellbeing.

Although meeting effectiveness is important, it needs to be supported by other factors to have a positive impact on key outcomes at work. For example, attendees must see a meeting as *relevant* as well as effective for it to contribute to psychological meaningfulness, work engagement and task performance. Moreover, when employees feel that they have a *voice* in a meeting – opportunities to speak up and express their thoughts and ideas – it is more likely to contribute to psychological safety, work engagement and positive leader–employee relationships.

*When attendees see meetings as effective, they are more likely to attend them, hold positive attitudes towards them and display positive behaviours during them.*

## 3

# What drives productive meetings?

What makes a meeting effective, and what should we focus on to get the most from these collaborative spaces?

Many studies have explored and identified the factors associated with perceived meeting effectiveness. None of this research is experimental, so we do not have strong evidence on specific approaches or interventions. Rather, the research looks at factors *associated with* meeting effectiveness, which is a less trustworthy indicator of 'what works'. All the same, the body of research

does give valuable insights into what characteristics you should be aiming for in meetings and, by implication, what sorts of actions or approaches are most likely to be successful.

Table 1 summarises the main factors that drive effective meetings, and we discuss these below.

**Table 1: Factors that influence meeting effectiveness**

Factor	Effect size
<b>Practicalities and setup</b>	
Meeting facilities	●●●○○
Meeting frequency	●●○○○
Meeting size	●○○○○
Meeting duration	Data unavailable
<b>Preparing</b>	
Goal clarity	●●●◐○
Meeting punctuality	●●○○○
Formal agenda	●●○○○
Meeting rules/procedure	●●○○○
<b>Behaviour</b>	
Meeting-leader behaviour	●●●●○
Focused communication	●●●○○
Positive humour, playful activities, small talk	●●●○○
Surface acting	●●●○○

Notes: Effect sizes indicate positive influence on the specified outcomes. We interpret statistics using a standard rule of thumb: ●●●●● very large; ●●●●○ large, anybody can easily see the difference; ●●●○○ moderate, visible to the naked eye of an expert or careful observer; ●●○○○ small, the difference probably needs to be measured to be detected; ●○○○○ very small. For more detail, see the accompanying scientific summary.

## Practicalities and setup

### Meeting facilities

Appropriate facilities, particularly an effective space, refreshments, a comfortable temperature and suitable lighting, make a small contribution to meeting effectiveness. Table shape and seating arrangements have no general effect.

### Meeting frequency, duration and size

Meeting too often can be damaging for meeting effectiveness, meeting satisfaction and employee wellbeing. However, meeting *duration*, or time spent in meetings, has no negative impact on effectiveness. This suggests that attending meetings too frequently, rather than the amount of time they consume, is what leads to negative consequences. The same is true

for interruptions, where frequency is seen as worse than the duration of an interruption. No significant link has been found between meeting size and effectiveness, although it has been suggested that larger meetings are negatively associated with punctuality and attendee involvement.

### **Virtual or remote meetings**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, remote working has increased dramatically, organisations are making vastly more use of virtual meetings, and videoconferencing has become an omnipresent aspect of many people's working lives. When leading virtual meetings, it becomes even more important to have clarity of roles, good coordination and clear communication. For more information, see our evidence review on effective virtual teams.

### **Recommendations for practice**

While research shows that a meeting's duration is likely to have little impact on its effectiveness, Rogelberg suggests sensible practical recommendations to help you make the most of timing.

Meeting leaders should:

- Carefully set a meeting's length based on the goals, attendees and agenda. Whatever time you allow is likely to be filled – but this doesn't mean all meetings should be standard one-hour events.
- Decrease meeting times thoughtfully. Once a time estimate is generated, consider cutting it by 5 or 10%. A bit of extra time pressure and added stress can actually help attendees stay focused, stimulated and reach optimal performance.

## **Preparing**

### **Goal clarity**

Meeting leaders should explain to attendees the importance of the topics on the meeting agenda and what they hope to achieve by discussing them. Goal-setting is a well-researched topic and we know that specific, challenging goals can strongly affect performance for both individuals and groups. Unsurprisingly, this relationship holds for meeting goals, which are associated with positive performance outcomes, notably meeting and team effectiveness. For more information on goal-setting, see our evidence review on performance management.

### **Meeting punctuality**

Many consider it a minor discretion to be late for meetings. Unsurprisingly, though, lateness is harmful to meetings, being linked to:

- meetings that are less effective
- lower levels of job satisfaction
- reduced psychological safety, group cohesion and trust among colleagues
- increased disrespect and intentions to quit one's job.

Negative feelings towards latecomers, such as anger and antipathy, are especially common if a meeting is considered important, or the person has an excuse that's 'controllable' (that is to say, which is perceived to be not very good).

### **Meeting procedures and agenda**

While it is important to follow meeting procedures and set a clear agenda, these only have a small effect on meeting effectiveness. Longer meetings are more likely to rely on agendas.

#### **Recommendations for practice**

Meeting leaders should:

- Respect the meeting process and give time to create a concise schedule in advance of meetings. This means writing and encouraging input to an agenda, starting and ending on time, and recapping meeting goals throughout its duration to ensure tasks have been addressed.
- Arrive on time and set the tone for the meeting. Encourage latecomers to consider reasons for their lateness and how these can be communicated. Lateness due to uncontrollable factors is more likely to be received sympathetically and less likely to upset the mood in the meeting.
- Prepare strategies to take account of latecomers, for example by structuring the agenda with the most impactful items in the middle. This lessens the risk of starting late and helps ensure everyone is present for the key discussions.
- After a meeting, follow up on the objectives by sharing minutes, action points, and roles and responsibilities for achieving the meeting's outcomes.

### **Behaviour**

#### **Meeting-leader behaviour**

The behaviour of the person leading the meeting has a great impact on its effectiveness. Leaders directly contribute to meeting effectiveness by being considerate, arriving before the start of a meeting, avoiding monologues, paraphrasing attendees' comments and summarising the decisions made at the end of the meeting. Many factors affecting a meeting's effectiveness are under the control of the meeting leader. They can boost the perceptions of attendees by displaying fairness, for example through sharing relevant information, explaining and following procedures, and providing opportunities to speak up, ask questions or share ideas.

*The behaviour of the person leading the meeting has a great impact on its effectiveness.*



### **Focused communication**

Meetings are helped when attendees refrain from digression and stay focused on the agenda items. Focused communication helps foster perceived effectiveness as well as other positive outcomes, such as meeting satisfaction, team productivity and organisational success.

### **Positive humour, playful activities and pre-meeting small talk**

Meetings can be an unpopular aspect of work. Survey findings suggest employees often find them boring, unproductive and a waste of time. Key to preventing this is lightening the meeting atmosphere. This can be done through positive humour and playful activities such as icebreakers, pre-meeting small talk and re-energisers, all of which help increase meeting effectiveness and satisfaction. Positive humour (which is not offensive and seen to come from good intent) helps people feel connected, unlike negative humour, which can cause humiliation or defensiveness. Small talk before a meeting is a predictor of meeting effectiveness, and this can be boosted through icebreakers, which increase trust, psychological safety and interaction, and re-energisers during a meeting, to clear the mind and re-engage attendees. An example of a re-energiser is an exercise where attendees describe a bumper sticker based on what they have learned from the meeting so far.

### **Avoid 'surface acting'**

*Surface acting* is expressing inauthentic emotions in response to the context or social expectations – for example, pretending to be supportive or pleasant despite disagreeing, or smiling when we are angry. It is common in workplace meetings, especially when higher-status colleagues are present. Surface acting makes for meetings that are less effective and psychologically safe and more emotionally draining (although these effects are small). A possible explanation is that surface acting may undermine an attendee's ability to focus on the goals of the meeting, such as genuine attempts to build relationships and share information with others. Moreover, feeling certain emotions while outwardly expressing different ones requires effort and is in itself emotionally taxing.

### **Recommendations for practice**

Meeting leaders have a direct opportunity to influence the effectiveness of meetings and encourage high-quality bonds and interaction between attendees. But that's not all; you should recognise the importance of meetings and put resources into ensuring they, and those attending them, are as successful as possible.

Employers should:

- Seek to ensure their staff feel well looked after and valued for their contributions at work, so they feel able to express themselves authentically in meetings, without worrying about social hierarchy.
- Develop training on effectively leading meetings, for example by including relevant skills in mentoring and coaching programmes for leaders. Meeting leaders need to feel confident they have the skills to organise meetings successfully.

- Introduce feedback and accountability systems to enhance leaders' capability, such as by including an evaluation of meeting leadership in performance appraisals or employee surveys.

Meeting leaders should:

- Make the most of the critical moments immediately before meetings formally get under way, by encouraging small talk, not just for those who arrive early but for everyone before you kick off the agenda. This helps build relationships and promotes a level of comfort that allows people who may not usually speak up to feel more at ease.
- Facilitate attendees to authentically express how they are feeling, allowing them to speak up, take risks and contribute honestly in a psychologically safe setting.

## 4 Face-to-face and virtual meetings

With the boom in virtual meetings in the past decade, particularly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is somewhat surprising that there is limited research on the extent to which the factors covered above apply in a virtual setting. The few studies that do compare in-person and virtual workplace meetings were conducted more than a decade ago, and concern technological circumstances that are very different from those of today's workplace. This review identified only one recent study in which virtual meetings were explored. It suggests that a leader's virtual meeting skills, many of which relate to those addressed above, positively influence meeting effectiveness.

Our evidence review on [developing effective virtual teams](#) explores the unique challenges faced by such teams and what can be done to facilitate their success. Notably, they rely on electronic communication, spend less time building relationships and may have less overlap of working hours. Some of these challenges can be mitigated by encouraging the use of rich media such as video calls, synchronising work schedules where possible, and bringing team members together in meaningful ways to develop strong bonds and shared interests. Specific icebreakers/re-energisers might be suited to online meetings, such as attendees posting and responding to interesting quotes.

*The effectiveness of virtual meetings can be boosted by encouraging the use of rich media such as video calls and synchronising work schedules where possible.*

### Recommendations for practice

Generally, the elements of an effective meeting transfer to a virtual setting. However, the unique challenges faced during virtual meetings require particular practical action.

Managers should:

- Encourage the use of rich media, namely videoconferencing, for communication. This allows immediate feedback and enables meeting attendees to share views and resolve differences quickly.
- Develop a common working timeframe that is as long as possible – that is, allowing staff to have the maximum overlap in which to meet. Flexible workers in different time zones will have less difficulty coordinating meetings and face less delay in sharing information.
- Invest in team-building so members can share expectations, get to know each other and boost their cohesion.

## 5

# Cross-cultural differences

Most academic research on meetings has been conducted in English-speaking work contexts, with much influential work coming from UK, US and Australian samples. Given that these countries have similar underlying cultural values, it's fair to assume similar expectations of how meetings should be conducted. But we don't know if these expectations can be generalised across other cultures.

Prior research has shown that different cultural backgrounds bring different expectations and norms for teamwork, communication and work styles. Cultural differences are clearly an important factor in organisational life and this should also apply to meetings. Unfortunately, research has so far largely failed to address expectations of purpose, duration, and roles and responsibilities in meetings.

Such research has only begun to emerge in the past decade, and some of it is quite specific. For example, a [study on lateness in different cultures](#) found that Dutch and South African respondents were more likely to define lateness by time, whereas Pakistani respondents were more likely to define it in relative terms, by arrival time compared with others in the meeting, and were more accepting of lateness.

*Even countries whose underlying values align, such as the US and the UK, show considerable differences in meeting behaviour.*

A [study](#) that gives a more general view of meetings in different cultures summarises the literature through a framework with five dimensions: purpose, content, roles, structure and timing. The countries from which most relevant studies were found were the US, Germany, the UK and Japan. The study

confirms that meeting expectations and norms consistently differ across these cultures. Indeed, even countries whose underlying values align, such as the US and the UK, show considerable differences in meeting behaviour. We summarise key insights below.

### **United States**

In the US, a typical meeting sees attendees exchanging information and ideas, sharing thoughts on salient issues and assigning tasks. Persuasion or changing people's minds is also common – to achieve this, meeting numbers are often larger than in other cultures. Scheduled meetings are often perceived as fast-paced and goal-oriented; unscheduled meetings, called ad hoc as the need arises, tend to last just a few minutes. While meetings in the US often begin with small talk or jokes (which are also often interlaced throughout the discussion), attendees don't hang around – task work and problem-solving quickly begin and attendees move swiftly through the agenda. Nevertheless, arriving at consensus and maintaining friendly rapport is key. In terms of roles, managers are expected to provide space for brainstorming, but often make the final decision. The meeting leader determines the pace of discussion and, through clarifying outcomes, discussing strategies and setting deadlines, can positively influence how the meeting is perceived.

### **Germany**

German meetings often focus on sharing information, solving problems and building consensus to reach decisions. There is an emphasis on equal participation and opportunities for everyone to use their voice. Timing is influenced by the agenda but the predetermined duration is less important than sticking to the agenda: German meetings tend to be agenda-driven, with items addressed in sequential order and decisions made only when all details are known and uncertainties clarified. Meetings are conducted with formality and precision; jokes and small talk are rare, and private issues don't tend to be discussed. Unlike in other cultures, meetings often occur without designated leaders, so there is no hierarchy or difference in status among attendees. If someone does chair a meeting, it is likely to be the most senior employee, but Germans are not shy in challenging leaders.

### **UK**

In the UK, building relationships is an important factor in meetings, alongside sharing information and problem-solving. Ensuring people get along is vital. Meetings tend to take longer than in other cultures; while task work is prioritised, attendees often take the 'scenic route' and the need for small talk is emphasised. Meeting content is largely predetermined by a top manager, or meeting leader, who sets and distributes an agenda. Agenda-setting is seen as a privilege, but the list is not set in stone and can often change, with input encouraged from others. Senior staff tend to chair meetings and team-member hierarchy often influences the level of input, with discussion dominated by more senior members.

### **Japan**

In Japan, meetings are often preceded by pre-meetings, which involve information-gathering, problem-solving and conflict resolution. The formal

meetings are scheduled, have large numbers of attendees and are seen as the culmination of lots of planning and talking. They are frequent and often very long, with people from other cultures noting their long-winded nature. But pre-meetings are where Japan diverges from some other cultures; they require no formal planning and can be simple water-cooler conversations, or even take place outside work in cafés and bars. These are where stakeholder opinions are considered, consensus is achieved, new ideas are introduced and buy-in is gauged before a more detailed plan is drawn up. In contrast, at the formal meetings attendees address each other (and especially more senior attendees) with politeness, humility and deference. Another sign of respect of the workplace hierarchy is that only the chair initiates humour – this helps affirm their status.

#### Recommendations for practice

An understanding of cultural differences helps managers adequately prepare for international encounters and can have a huge impact on an organisation's wider success. When dealing with meetings involving different cultures, managers should:

- Take a holistic view of the meeting by looking at differences in expectations and norms across purpose, content, roles, structure and timing.
- Encourage meeting attendees (whose cultures may clash) to set out their expectations at the beginning of any collaboration.

## 6

# Overview: Key insights from the review

The body of research used to develop this review highlights key opportunities to make meetings more productive. The main points include:

- Meeting too regularly is more likely to negatively influence effectiveness, satisfaction and wellbeing than meeting duration. Research suggests that it may be better to hold longer meetings, less often.
- Setting out clear meeting goals by illustrating the importance of certain topics and what should be achieved by discussing them is vital for attendee engagement.
- The behaviour of meeting leaders is key. This starts with good preparation – planning an agenda and encouraging advance input. Starting and ending on time, encouraging participation, and ensuring goals and decisions remain clear are important during the meeting. Finally, socialisation – lightening the mood through small talk, icebreakers and humour – will help ensure the meeting is a place of psychological safety, where employees feel happy to attend and confident to contribute.

- Inauthentic expression of feelings – ‘surface acting’ – is common in meetings, and lessens the chance of an effective meeting. Meeting leaders can help avoid surface acting by creating an open environment of communication and fairness, encouraging risk-taking and speaking up.
- Poor punctuality can lead to reduced satisfaction, group cohesion and trust. Meeting leaders should encourage latecomers to consider the reasons for their lateness, and also arrange the items on the agenda to account for late arrivals.
- Leaders and attendees should not bear sole responsibility for effectiveness. Employers should facilitate meeting effectiveness by allocating sufficient time and resources. More holistically, employees who feel their contributions are valued and wellbeing supported are more likely to perceive the organisation positively and feel better able to express their views in meetings.
- Organisations can develop effective meeting leaders by including meeting management skills in mentoring and coaching programmes, and making evaluation of meeting leadership part of feedback and performance appraisal.
- The norms and expectations of meetings differ consistently across cultures. Meeting leaders should take a holistic approach to understanding these differences by considering the five dimensions of purpose, content, roles, structure and timing.

## 7 Conclusion

Meetings are an essential aspect of collaborative work and, when managed properly, are an effective tool to solve problems and develop shared goals. However, they can also be uncomfortable when poorly prepared, so it is important to get this right. When supported by a psychologically safe environment in which attendees feel comfortable speaking up, meetings can improve the attitudes, behaviour and wellbeing of staff.

But meeting effectiveness involves much more than just bringing together the right people and allowing them to share their insights. It's vital to understand the factors that enable meetings to run effectively. This review can be considered a reliable summary of the best available evidence on effective meetings, being based on research that focuses mainly on factors of influence and interventions that help boost meeting productivity. Our recommendations are targeted towards people professionals and meeting leaders, but the insights are relevant for anyone within the organisation.

Meetings may be an ever-present in many workplaces, but their importance cannot be undervalued or taken for granted. Organisational rhetoric may suggest that meetings are places where workplace bonds are formed, effective decisions are made and problems solved, but the reality for many is that

meetings feel like a chore, or a box to tick, rather than a way to grasp the full potential of collaboration. We are a long way from perfect when it comes to meetings, and this remains an area where high-quality research is limited. But this review highlights areas that employers can target to support their staff, and particularly meeting leaders, who should feel empowered to make meetings as successful as possible.



# CIPD

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development  
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ United Kingdom  
**T** +44 (0)20 8612 6200 **F** +44 (0)20 8612 6201  
**E** [cipd@cipd.co.uk](mailto:cipd@cipd.co.uk) **W** [cipd.org](http://cipd.org)

Incorporated by Royal Charter  
Registered as a charity in England and Wales (1079797)  
and Scotland (SC045154).

Issued: May 2023 Reference: 8385 © CIPD 2023