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MEETING DOOMSDAY:

WHY WE NEED A FULL-SCALE RESET IN HOW WE THINK ABOUT AND DESIGN MEETINGS

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In 1943, during the height of World War II, agents from the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency, were hard at work developing a new form of warfare. But they weren't designing new battlefield tactics, cracking enemy codes, or planning espionage.

They were writing the *Simple Sabotage Field Manual*.[1]

It wasn't meant for soldiers or spies. It was designed for ordinary citizens living in enemy territory. Open resistance was too risky, so the manual recommended subtle acts of sabotage.

It instructed civilians working in offices, factories, transportation hubs, and shops to inject inefficiencies into the systems that kept the enemy's operations running—by misfiling paperwork in an office, sending trains to the wrong destinations, dulling tools on a factory line, and misdirecting telephone calls. The goal? Clog the enemy's systems with so much dysfunction that they'd collapse under the sheer weight of their own inefficiency.

One of the most soul-sucking sabotage tactics? Meetings. The manual urged citizens to weaponize them. A civilian railway clerk, for instance, might lure enemy officers into a pointless, mind-numbing meeting, dragging out every excruciating detail under the noble-sounding banner of "coordinating train schedules."

The manual advised citizens to schedule meetings with groups "as large as possible—never less than five," derail discussions with pointless chatter and "problems which are largely imaginary," rehash old decisions, and avoid any shortcuts that might make things less painful.[2] In other words, turn meetings into productivity sinkholes, where time, energy, sanity, and brain cells go to die.

Sound familiar? What was once a wartime sabotage tactic now reads like a modern meeting. Today's meetings swell with people who contribute little beyond nods, sighs, and side-eyes. Discussions meander aimlessly around fake or trivial problems. Decisions get rehashed until no one remembers what problem they were trying to solve. And *poof*. Another hour gone, swallowed whole by a slow-motion time heist. How did we get here?

After World War II, military leaders swapped their uniforms for suits, but they didn't leave their battlefield strategies behind.[3] The chain-of-command leadership, rigid hierarchies, and love of process didn't disappear. Instead, they were repackaged and redeployed in the office.

At the same time, the postwar boom gave rise to sprawling multidivisional, multinational corporations.[4] To manage the growing complexity, these organizations draped themselves in layers of red tape, built hierarchies so steep they could give you vertigo, and used meetings as a blunt instrument for control: a place to gather updates, delegate tasks, and reinforce the pecking order. Instead of coordinating work, meetings turned into mini battlegrounds where leaders asserted their power, commandeered the airwaves, and made sure everyone in the room knew exactly who was in charge.

Over time, meetings started to feel less like real work and more like theater. Executives took the stage like Broadway actors, delivering monologues designed more for applause than action. They strutted into conference rooms like generals inspecting their troops, puffed up with pride over their ever-expanding calendars. Meeting invites turned into status symbols—proof you were important enough to be pulled into the spectacle. The ultimate flex? "Sorry, I'm double-booked," which became corporate speak for "I'm just too important."

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And while the performance unfolded, the real work piled up. The more time meetings chewed up and spat out, the less time anyone had to actually get things done. And because most meetings didn't solve real problems, they set off a chain reaction of follow-ups, clarifications, and cleanup meetings to fix what the original meeting failed to accomplish. Soon enough, the dysfunction that the OSS once weaponized to sabotage the enemy had turned into just another day at the office.

Today, even executives, with all their power and perks, are drowning in calendar carnage. Back in the 1960s, they spent fewer than ten hours per week on average in meetings.[5] By 2007, that number had ballooned to twenty-three hours a week according to some estimates.[6] That's like spending your workweek trapped in meetings from Monday morning to Wednesday afternoon, leaving two measly days for heads-down work.

The financial toll is staggering. Elise Keith, the founder of the meeting management platform Lucid Meetings, estimates that up to eighty million meetings happen every day in the US,[7] costing well over $1.4 trillion annually,* more than 5 percent of the country's gross domestic product.[8]

It's gotten so bad that complaining about meetings has become a workplace sport. A sponsored Harris Poll found that 18 percent of US adults would rather sit at the DMV, 17 percent would rather watch paint dry, 12 percent would rather endure a four-hour commute, and 8 percent would prefer to suffer through a root canal than attend a status meeting.[9] When surveys start comparing meetings to dental procedures and bureaucratic hellscapes, you know something has gone spectacularly wrong.

Then the pandemic hit and things got even worse. Stripped of their ability to "manage by walking around," many leaders panicked. Their knee-jerk solution? More meetings. Couldn't swing by someone's desk? Schedule a meeting. Worried your team wasn't working hard enough? Schedule a check-in to micromanage them. Miss the sound of your own voice? Fire up Zoom.

*Keith originally ran this calculation in 2022 and estimated the cost to be around $1.4 trillion. In 2025 she shared an updated estimate with me, now well over that amount.

Within two months of the pandemic lockdowns, meeting volumes had surged. A study of 3.1 million people across sixteen global cities found that workers attended 13 percent more meetings than before, and these meetings were packed with 14 percent more attendees.[10] Meetings replaced hallway chats, quick check-ins, coffee breaks, and even those painfully awkward happy hours. They became corporate duct tape: the lazy fix slapped onto every problem, whether it fixed anything or not.

In the post-pandemic era, as uncertainty has sunk its teeth into our workplaces—fueled by remote and hybrid work shifts, AI hype, economic whiplash, and a general sense of what-the-hell-is-happening—unproductive meetings have reached soul-crushing new lows. When we're unsure what to do, our slap-happy meeting reflex kicks into overdrive. Meetings give us the comforting illusion of progress, but behind the smoke and mirrors, they're often just unproductive time sucks.

In 2024 individual contributors, managers, and executives spent an average of 3.7, 5.8, and 5.3 hours per week, respectively, in *unproductive* meetings, an increase of 118 percent, 87 percent, and 51 percent since 2019.[11] Managers now spend more time languishing in unproductive meetings than anyone else. They're stuck in the middle, ping-ponging between high-level strategy meetings that are too abstract to do anything with and low-level status updates that regurgitate what happened instead of what matters. Hours get burned passing information up and down the org chart—work that a well-built communication system could handle without dragging everyone into another dead-end meeting.

For over fifteen years, I've studied the good, the bad, and the utterly broken realities of workplace meetings. Few things frustrate me more than watching bad meetings gobble up time, energy, and sanity from good people. And I've seen some truly epic time guzzlers. Like the designated notetaker who, when asked for meeting notes, handed over a pile of Post-its. Or the executive who nodded off mid-meeting, not long after urging everyone to "stay focused." Or the manager who called an urgent hour-long meeting to discuss reducing pointless meetings—and then ended it without assigning a single action item.

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When I joined Dropbox in 2014 fresh out of college, I had a front-row seat to the aftermath of its radical Armeetingeddon, a companywide crusade to eliminate unnecessary meetings.[12] That was my first glimpse of how a bold meeting reset could jolt people out of their broken meeting habits, at least temporarily.

Over the years, as I've studied, advised, and consulted for organizations across industries, including some of the largest in the world, I kept seeing the same slow-motion train wreck. Meetings multiplied, while productivity and engagement nosedived. Instead of doing real work, people sat in circles discussing work, slowly suffocating under the dead weight of broken meetings.

Eventually, I wanted to do more than help organizations manage the symptoms of bad meetings. I wanted to help them find a real cure. So in 2019 I enrolled in a PhD program at Stanford's Center for Work, Technology, and Organization to study how organizations adapt their work practices for the future of work—just months before COVID-19 turned the workplace upside down.

Over the next few years, I saw how organizations tried to repair their crumbling communication systems, including their meetings. For many, the pandemic was the wake-up call they desperately needed. But for others, it just meant doubling down on dysfunction. Instead of solving the root problems, they flooded calendars with even more meetings, turning an already bad situation into a full-blown dumpster fire.

When I finished my PhD in 2022 I launched the Work Innovation Lab at Asana,* an external-facing research and innovation center focused on fixing broken ways of working with evidence-based strategies (and pressure-testing them inside Asana, too). It didn't take long for one problem to shoot straight to the top of our dysfunction leaderboard: bad meetings.

Our first mission was to declare Meeting Doomsday at Asana, a full-scale calendar cleanse designed to eliminate the bloated, pandemic-era meeting overload.[13] People reclaimed their time. Their sanity returned. They rediscovered the joy of getting real work done. And for the first time, I had real hope. Maybe it was possible to escape the nightmare of bad meetings for good.

*Asana is a leading work management platform

Since then, I've worked with dozens of companies around the world to help them improve how their teams collaborate. Each organization has its own special brand of dysfunction, but the root cause is almost always the same: Their meetings weren't intentionally designed. They just happened. And then they kept happening.

The true scale of the problem hit me when one of the world's largest videoconferencing companies reached out for help. It turned out that the folks engineering the tools we rely on for meetings couldn't figure out how to fix their own. If they were willing to shell out big bucks for help, what does that say about the state of our meetings? It's a sobering reminder that even the fanciest video tools, or the most buzzed-about AI, won't magically rescue us from bad meetings.

What we need isn't just better meeting technology. We need a full-scale reset in how we think about and design meetings.

Meetings aren't broken just because someone forgot to add an agenda. They're broken by design. And no amount of duct tape can fix a fundamentally flawed system.

YOUR MOST BROKEN, OVERLOOKED, AND EXPENSIVE PRODUCT

Quick meeting fixes are everywhere. Some folks think slapping an agenda on a meeting invite is a magic bullet. Others pin their hopes on meeting cost calculators, convinced that flashing a daunting dollar sign will guilt their people into canceling. Then there are No-Meeting Day evangelists who are under the illusion that cramming five days of dreadful meetings into four will miraculously make them less miserable. And now AI has joined the list of false prophets, with people sending digital twins to sit through meetings on their behalf.

If these quick fixes were all it took, we'd have fixed this mess years ago. Meetings aren't broken just because someone forgot to add an agenda. They're broken by design. And no amount of duct tape can fix a fundamentally flawed system.

It isn't about halfhearted hacks. It's about rolling up your sleeves and rebuilding your meetings from the ground up. The secret? Treat your meetings like products. And not just any products. They're the most important, most expensive, and most overlooked products in your entire organization.

Meetings are where decisions are made—or die slow, painful deaths in circular debates. They're where teams align—or spiral wildly off course. They're where relationships deepen—or fracture. And they devour time, energy, money, and sanity at spectacular rates.

Unfortunately, most meetings aren't treated like products. They're treated like junk drawers: overstuffed, disorganized, rarely cleaned out, and crammed with things no one needs or wants. And that tangled mess doesn't just waste time. It drags down morale and chips away at job satisfaction. Research shows that how employees feel about their meetings is a significant predictor of overall job satisfaction, even after controlling for factors like the nature of their work, pay, their boss, and their colleagues.[14] In other words, bad meetings don't just eat up your workday. They can rot your culture and leave your employees feeling miserable.

And yet, instead of treating meetings as the high-stakes, high-cost product they are, companies view them as an unavoidable workplace tax. Something to endure rather than design.

Imagine if companies launched products the way they run meetings: without a clear purpose, riddled with bugs, bloated with useless features, zero user feedback, and no one held accountable when they flop. Customers would riot. Stock prices would tank. Competitors would pounce like vultures. The products would crash and burn. And yet that's how most meetings operate.

Meetings need to justify their cost. If we sink this much time, energy, and money into them, they should deliver real value. Otherwise, they're just painfully expensive illusions of productivity.

Info

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Rebecca Hinds is a leading expert on organizational behavior and the future of work. She holds a BS, MS, and PhD from Stanford University. Her research is consistently featured in top-tier publications like *Harvard Business Review*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *Wired*, and more. She is a trusted advisor to companies navigating the challenges of modern work—from meeting overload and hybrid dysfunction to the messy realities of AI adoption and organizational change.

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