

FUTALEUFU MUSINGS

SEARCH FUND INVESTING. OLD SCHOOL.

White-Collar Work Is Just Meetings Now

“The meeting-industrial complex has grown to the point that communications has eclipsed creativity as the central skill of modern work.”

— Derek Thompson



While the details of what to do about this serious problem are outlined in chapter 11 of *The Manager's Handbook*, this article in *The Atlantic* does a great job of explaining the toll we pay every day in serving our obsession with meetings. This toll impacts you personally as well as your team's well-being, and we believe it massively impacts your firm's creativity and ability to “get things done.”

This is not window dressing. Solve this and you will create a massive competitive advantage over your rivals.

White-Collar Work Is Just Meetings Now
***The Atlantic* (July 9, 2024)**
By Derek Thompson

The paradox of the modern white-collar worker is that she is simultaneously more and less alone than her analogue in any previous generation. On a given weekday, the share of the labor force working from home is roughly four times higher than it was before the pandemic. At no other point in modern history have so many workers spent so much time in a room by themselves during the weekday.

But how much of that time is truly alone—in the absence of other people's faces and voices? By some measures, our colleagues are with us more than ever, whether or not we'd like it that way. The share of the typical white-collar workday spent in meetings has steadily increased for the past few decades, and it continues to grow by the year.

Official data on the time we spend in meetings are hard to come by. We don't have federal calculations for, say, GMP: gross meetings prescheduled. But the private data suggest that we are deluged. In 2016, a small group of work researchers calculated that time spent in meetings had increased by 50 percent since the 1990s. “Collaboration is taking over the workplace,” they wrote in an article in *Harvard Business Review*. “Buried under an avalanche of requests for input or advice,” some workers were spending so much time in meetings, taking calls, and combing through their inbox that their most “critical work” often had to wait until they were home. Wall-

to-wall meetings from 9 to 5 were pushing any creative or individual work to some period after dinner.

In 2022, Microsoft researchers published a study that anonymously tracked workers using the company's software. They discovered that, in fact, a miniature workday was forming in the late evening. About one-third of the workers in their study were as likely to work at 10 p.m. as they were at 8 a.m. The reason? When the pandemic sent knowledge workers home, official meetings replaced casual interactions and made it impossible for many people to get things done unless they found time to log back online after dinner. In further research, Microsoft has found that, since 2020, workers in their sample have tripled the time they spent in meetings.

"I think we've hit the high point of max human inefficiency in white-collar work," Jared Spataro, a vice president at Microsoft who focuses on artificial intelligence and work trends, told me. "It sometimes seems as if the modern worker spends more time talking about work than actually working."

If someone had to defend this meeting-industrial complex, they might point out that as an economy gets bigger and more complicated, it depends on bigger and more complicated organizations. As firms grow, they accumulate bureaucratic habits. Departments are born, and workers within those departments develop expertise and lingo that is alien to people just down the hall. Working across these divisions requires that people spend more time getting up to speed on what their colleagues are doing.

Imagine, for example, an online retailer making a major adjustment to its free-returns policy. This might require a profit-loss analysis from the research division, input from a design team, front- and back-end software developers to build a product for consumers, coordination with shipping firms, and several layers of management to oversee the decision. A more complex economy with more complex firms will require more communication among firm divisions, which could lead to an ever-rising number of meetings.

But Spataro also said that recent cultural changes might be driving the surge in meeting times. "In the last few years, the business world has focused much more on inclusion and on letting more people's voices be heard in decision-making," he said. Inclusion can be a virtue, Spataro emphasized. But it can also be a cost. A business culture that allows more people to "say their piece" is, automatically, one that requires people to spend more time listening to other people talk. In some decisions, that might be appropriate. At extremes, an office that requests more input is an office where talking about work can intrude on efficient decision making.

Complaining about meetings is like complaining about telemarketers, or modern political parties: an unoriginal protest, perhaps, but fundamentally justified. Perhaps the most common critique is that many meetings are theatrical presentations of information best conveyed in an email.

The typical meeting is a leaky time suck, absorbing people's attention in a way that cannot be fully measured by simply counting up the total number of hours blocked out for calls. On the front end, getting a hold of co-workers in an age of hybrid work—their location, their time zone,

their schedule and availability, their preference for phone or Zoom or Teams or Skype—imposes a huge invisible “coordination tax,” even if the work never appears on somebody’s calendar.

On the back end, every interruption to the workday leaves behind a wake of dead time. When you have to stop individual work—whether it’s writing a document, putting together a PowerPoint, or working in Excel—you experience switching costs as you move away from that activity to go into a meeting. Gloria Mark of UC Irvine has found that workers require an average of 25 minutes to return to their original task after an interruption. By this measure, a 30-minute meeting is, for the typical worker, best thought of as a one-hour detour.

Altogether, the meeting-industrial complex has grown to the point that communications has eclipsed creativity as the central skill of modern work. Last year, another Microsoft study found that the typical worker using its software spent 57 percent of their time “communicating”—that is, in meetings, email, and chat—versus 43 percent of their time “creating” documents, spreadsheets, presentations, and the like. Today, knowledge work is, quantitatively speaking, less about creating new things than it is about talking about those things.

Spataro told me he is optimistic about artificial-intelligence tools eliminating unnecessary meetings and allowing people to focus on their work—or, even better, to slash hours of meetings that they can instead devote to leisure. I’m not so sure. As we’ve built more communication tools—fax machines, email, corporate chat software, videoconferencing—knowledge work has become more and more about talking. Rather than making workplace communication more efficient, office technology has mostly made it more inescapable.

Your Partners at FTF,



David Dodson



Susan Pohlmeier



Jason Jackson



Samuel Spar



Kirstin Siegrist



Andrea Chiang