

Go meeting-free to boost productivity in the workplace

A few years ago, I remember seeing a hypothetical quandary that was being posed to parents of dyslexic children. Would you, they were asked, consider giving your 10-year-old dyslexic child something that would improve their reading age by a whole school year?

Hands went up everywhere.

Yes, of course, screamed every parent. Great, came the response, you just need to give them a mobile phone. Composing texts on a phone screen was found to massively help dyslexic kids improve their reading and writing.

Once parents knew the answer, however, they found it significantly less appealing. Every hand went down and out of sight.

The parents wanted the improvement, but they didn't want that.

Showstopping uplift

This example has many parallels with the moment that we're currently in. In the same vein, new workplace research was published last month that asked companies if they would consider making an intervention that had been found to improve team productivity by over 70%.

It is such a showstopping uplift that any business would be foolish not to consider it. The only change that a team needed to enact, the researchers declared, was to commit to two meeting-free days a week.

The nature of the solution gives us pause for thought. It causes us an itchy anxiety. We've only just dealt with the bombshell of people working from home, how on earth could we do our jobs with the additional complication of having no meetings?

What would we do all day? Worse still, bosses might muse, if my employees are at home all day and I can't see them, how do I know they are working?

The researchers found, however, that workers reported coping quite easily. Stripped of the weight of scheduled meetings, employees fashioned easy discussions with co-workers,



Lighten the meetings load to reinvigorate your people, writes **Bruce Daisley**

IMI business analysis



Stripped of the weight of scheduled meetings, research shows that employees fashioned easy discussions with co-workers, enjoying the flexibility of contacting colleagues themselves.

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There was no shortage of connection; there was just the absence of everyone staring into screens pretending to listen to each other.

The commitment of firms joining the research was that their company (of at least 1,000 employees) needed to commit to at least one meeting-free day per week. At the end of the experiment, not a single company reverted to their old approach.

Having one or two meeting-free days increased employee satisfaction by almost 50 percent and left workers feeling autonomous (rather than micromanaged).

Staying connected burden

This is one of the challenges of thinking about productivity and employee-experience.

It's possible for us to get so caught up in detail that we lose sight of our objective.

Our objective is to create a productive workforce, to empower the team to get a job done; it is only afterwards that we add conditions about the meetings and emails that our teams need to also commit to.

It reminds me of the thought experiment that writer Cal Newport posed to me: 'if you were spending a fortune, hiring the best software engineers in the world,

why would you give them a work email account?'

His argument was that once you gave someone an email account, it became the magnetic force in their day. Their attention is drawn to managing their communications, and away from writing world-class code. Instead, he suggests, it is worth at least asking what their jobs might look like if they were stripped of the burden of staying connected.

Now, once we've performed that thought experiment it is highly likely that we'll conclude that we do in fact want engineers to have inboxes, but it has invited us to think about their work in a different way.

Hence the meeting-less days might be an adaptation worth contemplating. We could reflect on how, if combined with a day in the office, it might liberate us to have a day's worth of those quick watercooler moments that we've romanticised about while we were shuttered in the spare room.

Combined with working from home, it might be the day we finish our paperwork, indulge in a couple of phone conversations with customers or think about next year. All of it is representative of the big trend consuming work right now, the 'great unbundling' of the office.

The office has completed its journey from being central and synonymous with all aspects of working, to being a tool that we use when needed. Organisations like Dropbox have declared that the office is a place 'for experiences'. Salesforce have said the office is now the place we gather for what we once might have gone 'off-site' for.

Yes, this unbundling is challenging; it is forcing us to reappraise how we get our work done.

But, like choosing to forge a meeting-free space in our calendar, it could well be in service of us getting more done than we managed before.

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