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Effectiveness of Virtual Meetings in the Workplace



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The primary concern addressed in this thesis dealt with the inefficiencies in virtual meetings, recognizing that a substantial portion of employees' time is allocated to this form of work. The objective of the thesis was to assess various factors impacting the efficiency of virtual meetings. These factors encompass meeting purpose and objectives, agenda formulation and structure, alignment of ownership and roles in meetings, management of meeting outcomes, and the utilization of meeting technology and tools.

This thesis draws insights from existing academic work as well empirical research within the selected case organization.

A comparative analysis between theoretical propositions and empirical findings reveals strengths and best practices across several areas including meeting purpose and objectives, managing meeting outcomes, and leveraging technology. Nevertheless, gaps can be found in agenda design, clarity of roles and responsibilities, resulting in high meeting volumes.

The thesis concludes in a series of actionable recommendations tailored for the case organization, including both immediate and long-term initiatives. These include cultural implementation of meeting roles into all meetings as well as long term investments into AI to assist with meeting administration tasks.

Keywords: virtual meeting, meeting efficiency, workplace productivity, meeting planning, virtual meeting technology, future of work.

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1 Introduction

Due to the post-pandemic shift into hybrid work, it is estimated that twenty to twenty-five percent of the workforces in advanced economies work from home between three and five days a week. This represents four to five times more remote work than before the pandemic. (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021)

The trend of hybrid work is here to stay. According to research by Buffer, ninety-eight percent of employee respondents would like to work remotely, at least some of the time, for the rest of their career. Many companies are responding to this, where seventy one percent of companies are permanently allowing some amount of remote work. (Buffer, 2023)

As a result of the flexibility provided by virtual working, companies have been better able to position themselves competitively by tapping talent from all corners of the world, decreasing expenses related to fixed office locations and broadening brand reach. (Sobel, 2020)

Even though recently there has been some push by certain companies to encourage employees back to the office, companies like Amazon, Meta, Salesforce and Zoom discovered that many of their best performers prefer working from home and that enforcing a five-day-a-week return to the office would have meant culling their top talent. (Bloom, 2023) Therefore, remote working makes sense both financially and from the perspective of employee satisfaction and retention. The evolution of working in this way is a win-win for both organizations and employees.

Increased remote work means increased number of virtual meetings. The internet, phone, audio, and videoconferencing have created a diverse set of tools that can be used to facilitate communication and collaboration across distances. (Sobel, 2020) Following the increased amount of remote work, research shows that time spent in video meetings has risen dramatically, from forty eight percent in 2020 to seventy seven percent in 2022. It is estimated that

on average, professionals now spend more than half of their forty-hour workweek in virtual meetings. (Lindner, 2023)

Provided that the tools, processes, and ways of working in virtual meetings are efficient, a company's business performance benefits from the shift towards virtual collaboration. However, problems arise when the way of working in virtual meetings are less than optimal.

If more than half of the employee's time is spent in meetings, lack of effectiveness in this activity can be expensive. Some estimations show that unproductive meetings cost businesses thirty-four billion dollars annually. (Pumble, 2023)

A Harvard Business Review article found that seventy-one percent of senior managers believe that meetings are inefficient. This aligns with research findings that suggest only half of all meetings are effective, well-used, and engaging. The above-mentioned numbers drop even lower when it comes to remote meetings. (Fernandez;Landis;& Lee, 2023)

Most executives say they frequently find themselves spending way too much time on pointless interactions that drain their energy and produce information overload. (McKinsey & Company, 2022) Inefficiency in the workplace is not only frustrating but also de-moralizing. Evidence shows that good meeting productivity has an impact on employee satisfaction and empowerment. (Pumble, 2023)

The problem statement of this thesis is the following: If a sizable proportion of employees' time is spent in ineffective virtual meetings, what are the best practices that can be applied to make virtual meeting ways of working more efficient?

The objective of this thesis is to analyze how numerous factors affect the effectiveness of virtual meetings in the workplace as well as what theory suggests would be optimal for efficiency.

The study includes a literature review providing a theoretical insight into virtual meetings and discusses the ways how to run effective virtual meetings in the workplace. The thesis also includes empirical research into what are the current virtual meeting practices in the chosen case organization, diving into the case organizations' as-is, current state of meeting practices, conducted through focus interviews.

The comparative analysis between theoretical and empirical investigation provides valuable information on what are the most significant areas for improvement in the case organization's virtual meeting practices. The research question can be articulated in the following flow:

- What are the main characteristics impacting effectiveness of virtual meetings in the workplace?
- How well are the current virtual meeting practices in the chosen sample organization aligned with recommended best practices?
- What are the most relevant suggestions for improvement based on the above investigation?

The scope of the type of work which uses virtual meetings is computer-based office work, not specific to any industry, and the type of meetings in scope of the analysis is internal meetings.

2 Role of Virtual Meetings in the Modern Workplace

Technology and globalization have reduced barriers in work. Teaming across borders is common, and this refers to heterogeneous, multicultural teams across geographic borders or all in the same country. (Ubell;Hultin;& Mayadas, 2010)

Because team members are often situated in distant geographical locations and since they rarely engage face-to-face, they must rely on reliable communication technologies to accomplish their tasks. (Ubell;Hultin;& Mayadas, 2010)

As a result of virtual work, work-related communications and meetings are no longer bound to a specific location and can now take place at coworking offices, coffee shops and airport terminals. (Sobel, 2020) It is estimated that by 2025, half of all enterprise events will be held on the video meeting platform commonly used by their organization every day. (Webex by Cisco, 2024)

Virtual meetings provide critical channels of communication between multi-located teams. It can be argued that working life as it is designed today would not function without virtual meetings. In fact, virtual communication channels are so integral to the modern working life that their sheer volume has become overwhelming to employees.

McKinsey analysts suggest that even though interacting has become easier than ever, productive, value-creating collaboration is not as evident. Where engagement is occurring in volume, its quality deteriorates. Ineffective virtual communication wastes valuable resources and eats into time that could be used for important, creative, and powerful activities. (McKinsey & Company, 2022)

2.1 Characteristics of a Virtual Meeting

Cisco's Webex Virtual Meeting Guide defines a virtual meeting in the following way: A virtual meeting is a form of communication that enables people in different physical locations to use their mobile or internet connected devices to meet in the same virtual room. In the business world, virtual meetings are usually held when employees are in various locations, but sometimes workers in the same office will opt for one simply so they do not have to leave their desks. (Webex by Cisco, 2024)

Typically, to schedule a virtual meeting and invite others, a user would need a PC, laptop, or mobile device with a microphone or camera, online meeting software, and an internet/data connection. (Webex by Cisco, 2024)

Lossen's top picks for the best virtual conferencing and team communication tools include Zoom and HipChat. MS teams and Troop Messenger. (Lossen, 2021)

Some common features of remote meeting tools include (Collins, 2021):

- Screen sharing.
- Moderated discussion.
- Meeting recording.
- Collaborative workspaces like virtual whiteboards.
- A chat space and/or shared meeting notes.

Organizations may use only a proportion of the above-mentioned tools as part of their daily communication through virtual meetings.

2.2 Benefits of Virtual Meetings

Virtual teamwork is made possible through technology enabled communication through various time-zones and countries. This suggests virtual teams typically include more diverse people than local, face-to-face teams. This means a wider

range of skills, knowledge, experience, and culture, which can be invaluable when dealing with customers or staff from around the world and understanding their needs. (Pullan, 2016)

In addition to providing a more environmentally friendly collaboration option, platforms for video conferencing can provide a more cost-efficient alternative to traditional face-to-face meetings which may involve, for example, business travel. (Sobel, 2020)

Another example benefits provided by virtual technologies is international recruitment: recruiters can interview people via video link from anywhere in the world. Technology can also allow academics to provide education at a fraction of the cost and broaden access that was previously location specific. (Pullan, 2016)

2.3 Challenges of the Virtual Meetings

Even though various flexibility brought on by flexible working options may help employees improve their work life balance, may also face an elevated risk of blurring boundaries between their work and private life or between their professional role and personal identity. Likewise, the boundaries between paid and unpaid work can be fluid. (Korunka, 2021)

As suggested earlier, high volume of virtual communication around the clock can lead to lack of focus.

Most employees confess that they are not always completely focused on their virtual meetings. Virtual meetings, especially ineffective ones, are often tedious and other work, projects, social media, and games can tempt people away from being completely focused. (Pullan, 2016)

Additionally, ineffective meetings can impact employee engagement. When meetings are irrelevant to invitees and do not serve a purpose, they can kill morale. Instead of being able to focus on more critical work, attendees are stuck in a meeting that they feel is a waste of time (Rampton, 2019)

As digital devices and their connectivity advance, it is suggested that this, in fact, makes people feel more disconnected from work and from each other. There is a widening chasm between rising productivity expectations, on the one hand, and actual productivity measures and decreasing social well-being on the other. Sobel calls this the productivity paradox. (Sobel, 2020)

The virtual working world brings about flexibility but also added responsibility. What was once regulated and defined by the organizations' management has been handed over to individuals, who now, to varying degrees, must take much more responsibility for their work. (Korunka, 2021)

Communicating exclusively in a virtual manner has led to signs that this will impact the workforce psychologically. Research suggests that virtual communication has caused people to distance themselves from the human characteristics of others. From a brain-based perspective it is suggested that this distorted view of relationships has led us to behave as though others are more like the dots instead of living, breathing human beings. (Sobel, 2020)

Most employees have also heard of "zoom fatigue." Stanford Virtual Human Interaction Lab (VHIL) examined the psychological consequences of spending hours per day on virtual meeting platforms and found many of the effects to be negative on the human mind. (RAMACHANDRAN, 2021)

In response to the negative impacts of virtual and remote work, some companies have opted to dramatically decrease virtual meetings. Certain companies have even banned meetings all together on certain weekdays. (Rampton, 2019)

Some companies have set standards of no more than 10% of employees' time in internal meetings. (Metcalf, 2021)

2.4 Future of Virtual Meetings

While this thesis will focus on the current ways of working around virtual meetings, a short consideration must be given to future technology which

impacts meeting practices in the next five to ten years. Work life is currently in the brink of a major shift in application of AI into the everyday work practices, with increased commercialization of this type of technology and the situation is about to change soon.

Ninety one percent of business leaders surveyed in 2022 said they have an enterprise-wide AI strategy, they are typically using AI in the workplace to generate insights, optimize processes, lower costs, and improve collaboration across businesses. (Mahto;Miller;Sniderman;& Ogawa, 2022)

Artificial Intelligence aided automation, including AI aided meeting facilitation, is coming to the aid of professionals in the workplace and releasing their time to do other, more value-added activity,

For example, large scale players like Microsoft have released Microsoft Copilot in early 2023 into their MS Office software which will have AI to help with MS tools document creation and meeting facilitation. (Warren, 2023).

This technology will have a major impact on the daily working life of millions.

A less talked about area is the potential of AI to facilitate human-to-human relationships and collaboration, and this applies also to meeting practices.

For example, before a meeting or presentation, leaders can practice interactions with AI avatars representing team members. Based on the narrative, AI would generate arguments, assess persuasiveness, and give feedback to make communication more effective. (Mahto;Miller;Sniderman;& Ogawa, 2022)

In an article by Deloitte Insights, below are examples where AI can drive inclusion and accessibility in meetings, including:

- Microaggression coaching. AI can detect microaggressions by analyzing written or verbal communications, suggest alternatives and provide feedback confidentially to the communicator to improve their sensitivity over time.

- Encouraging turn-taking. Based on simple voice detection, AI can identify individuals and groups that take over a conversation, leaving no space for others to contribute to the discussion.
- Improving accessibility. AI can remove language barriers and improve accessibility in meetings and discussions. Meeting notes can be immediately transcribed into multiple languages to improve participation from global teams. Accessibility of content can be improved by providing lip-reading recognition for people with hearing impairment, facial or image recognition for people with visual impairment, and text summarization for professionals who are not comfortable with digesting large bodies of text in one sitting.

(Mahto;Miller;Sniderman;& Ogawa, 2022)

The list above may seem like science fiction, but language aided AI (Large Language Model), for example, is something already embedded in most commercially used AI tools today. This suggests that the technology available to enhance meetings in the above-mentioned manner is not far off.

3 Effective Virtual Meetings defined.

This section of the thesis discusses the different theories that are widely considered as “best practices” for optimal meeting efficiency in the virtual working environment.

It should also be noted that the scope of this thesis is in internal meetings only. Examples of internal meetings are status update meetings, decision making meetings, problem solving meetings as well as team building, information sharing and innovation generation meetings. (Thompson, 2022)

This means that out of scope for this investigation are meeting types such as executive, board, strategic, approval, sales & supplier meetings as well as meeting topics under Non-Disclosure Agreements.

In many cases it is still common to try to chair virtual meetings in a (traditional) “command-and-control” format that are typical for face-to face meetings. However, this type of methodology can be difficult to apply virtually. People tend to mentally check out meetings that are led in this way as available technology is pulling employees focus elsewhere. It takes a modern style of facilitative leadership – inspiring people and engaging their interest – to keep them paying attention in virtual meetings. (Pullan, 2016)

Research is consistent in suggesting that virtual meetings need a different type of approach to traditional face to face meetings.

When targeting effective virtual meetings, Lossen, (Lossen, 2021) suggests most important questions to ask are the below points.

1. Is the meeting necessary?
2. Who should be in the meeting, and what are the roles and responsibilities of the participants?
3. Is the meeting agenda clear and is everyone familiar with it?
4. How are the meeting outcomes and next steps followed up?

The overall theory on this topic can be summarized into three considerations or “themes” which are minimum requirements for effective meetings.

Each theme is explored in more detail in the following sections. These areas can be categorized into three areas: meeting purpose & objectives, meeting agenda & structure and ownership & Roles and Responsibilities in a meeting.

3.1 Meeting purpose & objectives

“This could have been an email.” Most people can relate to being stuck in a meeting, considering whether time would have been better spent reading an email or on a short phone call to address the issue. (Collins, 2021) Thus, a meeting should be reserved for alignments and decision making that would be ineffective to try to do “offline,” without an official alignment.

Live interactions in the form of meetings can be useful for information sharing, particularly when there is an interpretive lens required to understand the information, when that information is particularly sensitive, or when leaders want to ensure there’s ample time to process it and ask questions. That said, many employees will agree that most meetings are not particularly useful and often do not accomplish their intended objective. In fact, certain organizations have begun to realize the urgency of driving meeting efficiency and of questioning whether meetings are truly required at all. (McKinsey & Company, 2022)

Some companies have gone as far as opening employee’s calendar details to give transparency into the meeting agenda, objectives, and notes. This gives people within the organization a quick view into what type of meetings their colleagues are spending their time on. While it is not necessary for everyone to see everything throughout the organization, access to that information is part of the company culture and leads to employees taking a higher level of responsibility for attending only those necessary meetings. (Metcalf, 2021)

The question of whether to hold a meeting should therefore start with a statement of objectives. (Haynes, 1996)




If the objectives of the meeting are necessary and meaningful, a meeting should be held. This can be considered as the first checkpoint when planning a meeting.










Metcalf suggests that meetings should be limited to the “Three Ds”: Debate, Decision-making, and Discussion. Asynchronous communications should be used for everything else like updates, reporting and quick questions (Metcalf, 2021)

In a very similar line, McKinsey research has found that a meeting is only worth people’s time if its purpose fits into one of the following categories (McKinsey & Company, 2022). The categories are also shown in Figure 1 below.

- Decision-making: These are meetings to discuss quarterly performance, new company policies, setting a budget, or future strategies.
- Identifying creative solutions and coordinating actions: Examples of these meetings include hackathons, recurring planning, and kick-off meetings for new projects.
- One-way information sharing: This category of meetings includes company-wide “townhalls,” briefings or webinars, and business update meetings fall into this category.

Collaborative interactions fall into three categories.

 Virtual
  In person
  Other mechanisms

	Interaction	Suggested Format	Purpose	Characteristics	Outcome
Decision making	Complex or uncertain decision		Make uncertain, hard decisions	Most complex, hard decisions Quality debates	Decisions for complex issues and actions
	Cross-cutting routine decision	 	Make routine decisions	Standard set of routine decisions Well-defined protocol for approvals Most time spent on exceptions or escalations	Routine decisions
Creative solutions and coordination	Innovative session		Identify innovative solutions	Innovative problem solving Usually half-day sprint Solutions to be brought into a decision meeting	Potential innovative solutions—preparation for a decision meeting
	Routine working session	 	Coordinate actions Get input Crowdsource ideas	Round-robin Usually short	Considerations and next steps
Information sharing	One-way		Share information	No interactions required Other effective mechanisms; eg, memo, email, podcast, vlog, Slack-based town hall	Awareness of new information
	Two-way	 	Share information and answer questions	Interactions (eg, Q&A) required to be successful	Awareness of the new information and concerns and questions addressed

McKinsey & Company

Figure 1 : Collaborative interaction categories.

The above interaction categories proposed by McKinsey ensure best use of participants time, while giving a standardized collaboration framework for each type of meeting. (McKinsey & Company, 2022)

3.2 Meeting Agenda & Structure

Frequent problem with meetings is the lack of structure. While people know that they “should” have an agenda, notes and action items, most companies do not have any specific procedures or templates in place for making sure that happens. (Metcalf, 2021)

It is common for meetings without structure to become hijacked by people with their own agendas.

Meeting agenda is therefore a best practice and should be prepared in advance and given to participants before the meeting. It will serve as a roadmap to keep discussion on the topic. When distributed before a meeting, an agenda encourages advance preparation. (Haynes, 1996) With group meetings, it makes sense to give everyone the opportunity to list agenda items or even comment on other people's agenda items. With a transparent structure for meeting planning, it may turn out that some of the agenda items get resolved among a subset of the meeting members, even before the meeting takes place (Metcalf, 2021) Agenda design includes two smaller steps: figuring out your agenda items and assigning them to an "owner." (Fernandez;Landis;& Lee, 2023)

During meeting preparation, employees should be able to view any relevant documentation, including minutes from meetings on this topic previously. As part of preparation, employees can consult with peers who are knowledgeable on the topic to make sure you are operating with the most up-to-date information available. (Fernandez;Landis;& Lee, 2023)

Together with an agenda is a set of meeting rules. It is important that everyone knows how to approach the meeting, and what behavior is expected on a call. Some of the below examples seem obvious but the more structure is provided prior to the meeting, the more efficient the meeting can be: (Collins, 2021).

- What order people will speak in
- What the procedure is for asking questions or speaking up on an issue
- Whether or not people should mute their microphone when someone else is talking
- Whether people should have their cameras on

With regards to meeting duration and time management, a best practice is to always start on time and keep things moving toward an announced ending time. (Haynes, 1996)

Lossen mentions certain virtual meeting functionalities that are useful for improving time management, for example Raise Hand and Break-Out Rooms functions. By Raising Hand, one does not interrupt the speaker and the facilitator can queue people's questions effectively. Break-Out Rooms can be utilized to split the group into sub-tasks, sub-decisions or producing creative solutions faster with multiple groups working on various parts of the problem. (Lossen, 2021)

Sticking to meeting duration is not only good time-management but is also necessary as most people will have back-to-back meetings, forcing them to drop off the line at specific times.

Since people sometimes find themselves back-to-back in meetings, it is a promising idea to end before the hour is over if possible. Once the one-hour mark has been crossed there is a risk of losing many attendees as they will be forced to decide if they should remain in your meeting or join a second discussion (Fernandez, Landis, & Lee, 2023)

It is a clever idea to try and identify as closely as possible the amount of time needed to allocate to meeting agenda topics, keeping in mind there is a tendency to underestimate how long it will take to address topics. This process of planning will also help determine the overall meeting length. (Fernandez;Landis;& Lee, 2023)

Some research suggests that 30 minutes is the ideal length of a productive meeting. In the case of a more complex agenda to discuss, 45-minute meeting may be productive or at the absolute maximum a 60 minute one. (Fernandez;Landis;& Lee, 2023)

There are multiple examples of companies that are exploring innovative ideas on improving meeting practices. As one example, Netflix launched a redesign effort to drastically improve meeting efficiency, resulting in a tightly controlled meeting protocol, where meetings cannot go beyond 30 minutes. Meetings for one-way information sharing must be canceled in favor of other mechanisms such as a memo, podcast, or vlog. Two-way information sharing during

meetings is limited by having attendees review materials in advance, replacing presentations with Q&As. Early data show Netflix has been able to reduce the number of meetings by more than sixty five percent, and more than eighty-five percent of employees favor the approach. (McKinsey & Company, 2022)

As a similar example, the company Shopify uses “No Meeting Wednesdays” to enable employees to devote time to projects they are enthusiastic about and to promote creative thinking. (McKinsey & Company, 2022)

3.3 Roles and Responsibilities in a Meeting

McKinsey estimates that according to its clients one of the key factors for fast, high-quality decisions is to clarify exactly who makes the decisions. Their research indicates while it is often helpful to involve more people in decision making, not all of them should be deciders (McKinsey & Company, 2022)

This learning is relevant for meeting roles and responsibilities, for those meetings where the main point is to capture a decision as outcome of the meeting. Maintaining the right people in the right roles attending the call is critical for keeping meetings productive and engaging. While many would put their focus solely on the agenda and final outcomes, it is equally important to assign and define roles and responsibilities in a meeting to ensure the former are being met (Erkic, 2022)

As a meeting leader or chair, it is best practice to ask others for their feedback on who should be in the meeting, review the roles of each meeting participant to ensure all “owners” are attending. However, meeting leaders often over-invite participants to be inclusive, but this can lead to decreased productivity and fatigue (Fernandez;Landis;& Lee, 2023) Making sure that people are prepared and gathering relevant background information on the topic falls normally under the responsibility of the meeting leader.

As another example, it is expected for the meeting facilitator to keep the conversation on track and guide the group towards more efficient decision-making. (Erkic, 2022)

Overall, research suggests at minimum the below roles are needed as best practice to conduct effective meetings:

- **Leader (Chair)** — this person arranges, leads, and concludes the meeting. This person is normally the decision maker of the group and often the most senior manager in the meeting. It is quite normal that the meeting facilitator and leader prepare the meeting together. While the meeting Leader oversees meeting outcomes, the Facilitator takes a more active role during the meeting as they control the process of the meeting. (Erkic, 2022)
- **Facilitator** — this person responsible for keeping the discussion and decision making on track. This role sets the tone, guides the discussion, and often manages time. It is possible for one person to oversee both leading and facilitating the meeting, as the two roles are similar.
- **Notetaker/ Scribe/ Recorder** — this person responsible for documenting key action items, decisions, and questions. Virtual meeting platforms such as Microsoft Teams now have AI-powered insights like automatic generated meeting notes, recommended tasks, and personalized highlights in built into their premium teams meeting type, making the work of the scribe easier. (Microsoft , 2023)
- **Participants** – These people are attendees who have interest in the meeting content but may or may not participate actively. In exceptionally large, informative meetings it is common for attendees not to have a speaking option and only defined speakers are speaking and presenting. Virtual meetings may also include a **Chat Moderator** — the person who manages the chat. (Erkic, 2022)

The above theoretical research provides adequate guidance for conducting virtual meetings in an efficient manner. This theory supports the need for modern facilitative leadership over traditional "command-and-control" methods when it comes to virtual ways of working in the workplace. Some companies have gone as far as restricting meetings all together to "protect" a culture of innovation and productivity, suggesting that virtual meetings are widely considered to have the potential to destruct efficiency. The best practices in this chapter highlight the importance of aligning meeting purpose with necessity and meaningful objectives. Structuring meetings with clear agendas, roles, and responsibilities is crucial. Essential roles for effective meetings should be defined and these include the leader, facilitator, notetaker, and participants of the meeting.

4 Data Collection & Methodology

This section of the thesis describes how empirical research was done within the selected case organization. Primary research was conducted through focused interviews, giving insight to existing virtual meeting practices. This analysis will provide an opportunity to compare theoretical propositions with empirical findings.

4.1 Interview design and methodology

For the primary data collection of this thesis, focused interviews were utilized for more in-depth access to the current situation and to ensure adequate response rate and insight to the topic. The primary research data collection plan included focused interviews targeting five people in the chosen case organization. These respondents were selected through purposeful sampling. They are participants who are most relevant or informative for the research objectives, rather than selecting randomly from the population. The individuals were chosen from different teams and locations to represent a variety of different perspectives. The respondents were also chosen so they represented various roles, career stages and areas of expertise.

The focused interview structure is standardized with ten questions, both open ended and scaled. The duration of the interview was thirty minutes. The focus interviews were done over duration of two weeks during February 2024

All the focus interviews were conducted as virtual meetings and responses were recorded into Microsoft Forms.

4.2 Focus interview contents & questions

Prior to the focus interview, the participants were presented with a brief introduction (Appendix 1) to the topic as well as clarifications on the scope of the discussion, which should be focused on internal virtual meetings. The

participants were encouraged to voice out their thoughts and insights at any point of the discussion, including any thoughts that they had during scaled questions. These additional comments were captured in either dedicated open ended question sections, or in a separate section of the interview dedicated to additional comments, pain points and suggestions for improvement.

The focus interview itself consisted of overall seven question areas and in total fifteen questions (Appendix 2). The focus interview was conducted using a mixture of open-ended questions as well as scaled questions. Each interview question is explained below.

The first section (questions 1-3) focused on getting to know the participants role, department, and location.

In the second section the participants were asked to provide an average estimation of how many virtual meetings they attend daily. (question 4)

The third section asked the participants an open-ended question (question 5) about their experience with meeting purpose and objectives as part of meeting preparation.

The fourth section (questions 6-9) explored the participants experience regarding meeting structure, durations, and agenda preparation.

The fifth section (questions 10-12) asked the participants about their experience of meeting roles and responsibilities as well as their experience effectiveness of meeting outcomes management, including that of action tracking.

The sixth section was dedicated to participants satisfaction regarding meeting tools and technology. (question 13)

The final, seventh section of the interview was dedicated to the respondents' overall perceptions, pain points and improvement suggestions. (questions 14-15). These comments and improvement opportunities captured here have been integrated into the corresponding sections of the analysis, as opposed to their own separate section of analysis.

5 Analysis & Findings

This chapter and its subsections analyze the results of the focus interviews conducted in February 2024 on select participants of the case organization. Focus interview results were extracted from Microsoft Forms to Excel for further data breakdown.

The graphics and data visualization were done using an artificial intelligence presentation tool called beautiful.ai.

The interview was done with five select participants of the case organization. The average duration of the focus interview was approximately twenty-five minutes and fell well into the originally scheduled thirty-minute interview slot. The data was analyzed using different variables, and expressed through tables, graphs, and percentage measurements.

The subsections of this chapter are consolidated as follows:

1. Information regarding respondent's roles and locations
2. Meeting frequency
3. Meeting purpose & objectives
4. Meeting structure & agenda
5. Meeting roles & responsibilities and meeting outputs
6. Meeting tools & technology

5.1 Information regarding respondent's role, department, and locations

The first section (Questions 1, 2 and 3) aimed at capturing some basic information about the participants; their roles, departments, and location.

The figure below Figure 2 communicates graphics regarding the respondent's basic information: their department, Location and Role type.

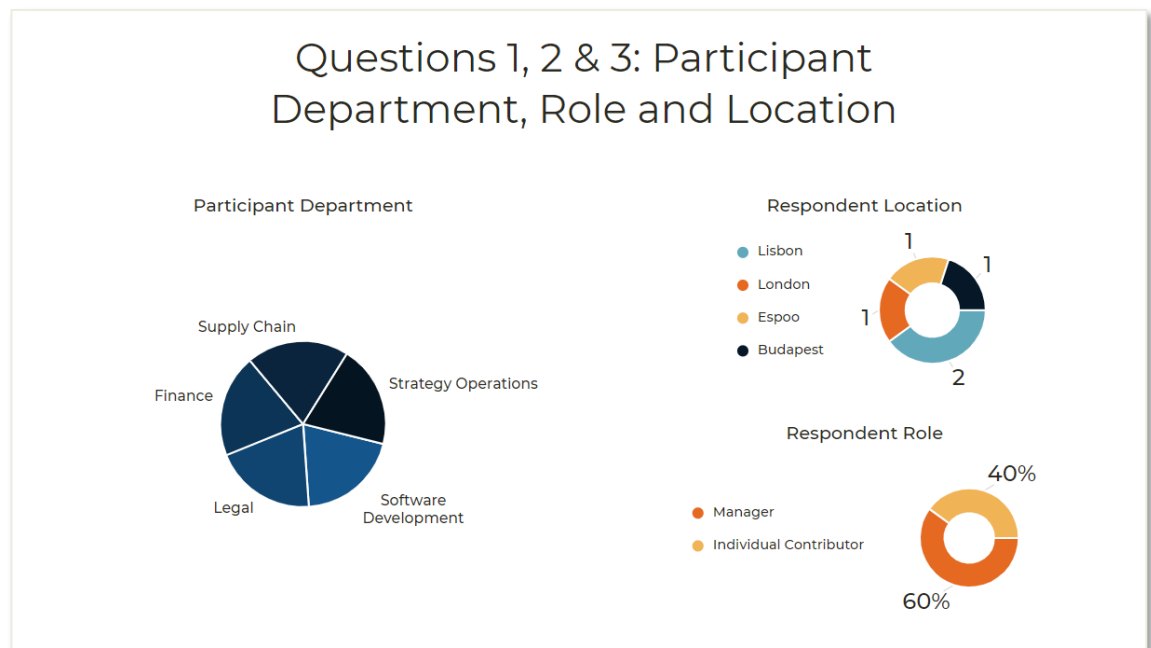


Figure 2: Participant Department, Role & Location

The participants represented a good variance of different departments in the case organization. These departments were Finance, Software Development, Strategy & Operations, Legal & Compliance as well as Supply Chain.

Additionally, the interview respondents were in four distinct locations: Espoo, Lisbon, Budapest, and London. This selection of multiple locations was seen as adequate to bring out any possible cultural differences of the meeting practices.

The interview also aimed at capturing any differences between the type of roles the respondents had with regards to leadership responsibility, as this may impact the type of meeting practices. This is the reason both individual

contributors and managers were interviewed. The split between managers versus individual contributors were sixty to forty percent, respectively.

5.2 Meeting frequency

In this section the participants were asked to estimate the average amount of virtual meetings they attend per day.

Figure 3 below shows the results of the responses, where the average amount of meetings resulted in seven meetings a day. This number correlates accurately to the literature around the subject, which was explored earlier in this thesis, where it was estimated that half of employees' time is spent in virtual meetings. If we assume that the meetings in question are thirty minutes long, it does indeed amount to three and a half hours out of the seven and a half hour working day which is spent in virtual meetings. According to the participants feedback, an average of forty six percent of the working day is spent in virtual meetings.

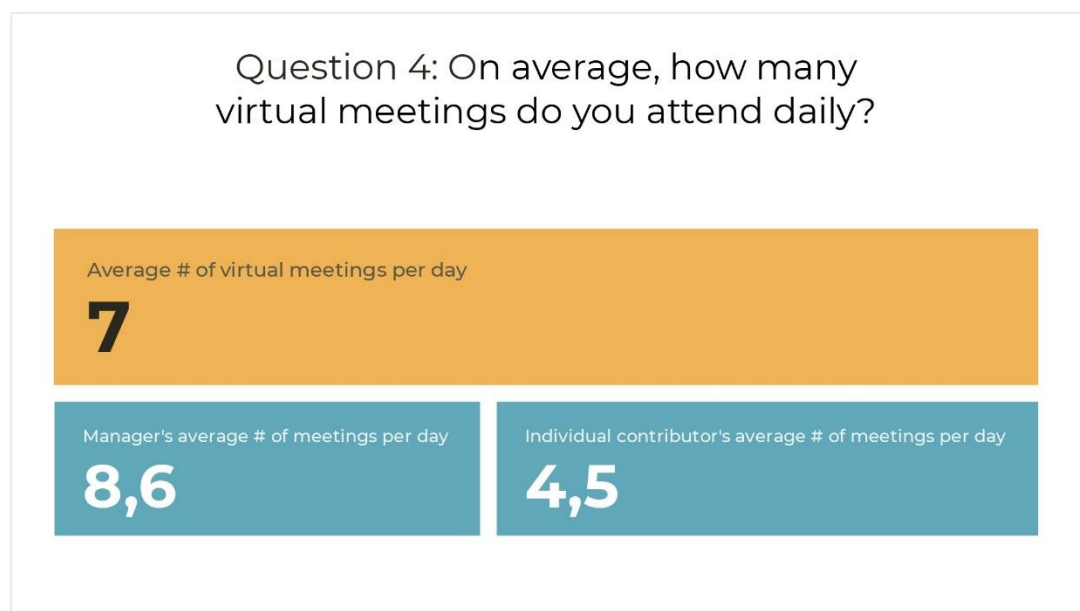


Figure 3: Meeting Frequency

The managers who responded to the interview reported to having more meetings than the individual contributors, where the managers averaged about eight meetings a day, and contributors half of that, at four meetings a day. This finding suggests that with added responsibilities, more time is spent in meetings. It is logical to assume that managers with subordinate responsibilities need to attend alignment and team meetings more frequently.

Some respondents offered some additional opinions to meeting volumes and frequency and these statements can be seen below. In particular, the respondents raised issues on the psychological strain of being in virtual meetings continuously:

“Overall, it is getting increasingly unbalanced when it comes to meeting volume. As though overall wellbeing of the employee is not considered very well. For example, quite often we will end up eating lunch while trying to focus on a meeting. People are also expected to finish meetings exactly on the minute and then be on time exactly to the next one. The modern working style is mostly attending meetings only and getting little chance for focus work.”

- *Manager, Finance Department*

“Meetings are the way to do work now. Before, when we were physically co-located, we had other options of communicating, but now virtual meetings are the only channel. It has really boosted productivity in one way. However, the downside is that physically and mentally it takes a heavy toll to be in meetings constantly all day. Your brain is wired to working mode that you feel you are only "working" if your calendar is fully blocked with meetings, and if you have free slots then you are “not working.” Physically it is also heavy e.g., voice glands are failing because you are speaking all the time.”

- *Manager, Supply Chain Department*

This chapter reveals that participants have an average of seven virtual meetings per day, occupying approximately 46% of the working day. Managers typically have more meetings compared to individual contributors. Respondents expressed concerns about the psychological strain of continuous virtual meetings, highlighting issues like multitasking during lunch breaks and the pressure to fill calendars entirely with meetings. While virtual meetings enhance

productivity, they also pose challenges such as mental fatigue and physical strain, affecting overall employee well-being.

5.3 Meeting purpose & objectives

In this section the respondents were asked an open-ended question on whether they felt the meetings they attend have a clear objective and purpose defined.

The interview results show that in this area, the virtual meeting working practices are working well. All five of the respondents felt that majority of the meetings were held for a purpose, and it was clear why a meeting was necessary. Three of the respondents mentioned that meetings which were a part of a defined governance were especially clear on purpose and what the outcome of the meeting should be.

However, some respondents still felt like there was room for improvement in running purposeful meetings: One respondent stated:

“If the meeting type is a regular meeting, part of a regular governance set up, then normally these meetings are well structured, and the objectives are clear. When new stuff is coming up and there is a need for innovation meetings, this is when meetings become less structured, and it impacts the efficiency of the call.”

Another respondent felt that the organization had been overall well trained to “not waste people’s time with useless calls” but still stated that about 20-30% of the meetings could have been overseen offline with more rigorous topic preparation.

One of the respondents also made a correlation between work tenure and purposeful meeting scheduling.

“Even though meeting purpose is normally quite clear, the younger generation (especially newcomers and trainees) tend to schedule a lot of meetings to simply confirm issues, because they do not have the experience to oversee things offline without asking people over meetings. As experienced employees, we know that it is a tough line between deciding what is a meeting best for and what is an

email, as sometimes detailed discussions are best done through meetings. Through experience we know what is worth having a meeting for and what is not.”

According to one of the respondents some meetings are held simply because the virtual working environment leaves people no choice:

“What used to be small checkups in the office walking over to your colleague to ask something, has now converted into virtual meeting blockers to be able to work together.”

One of the respondents questioned whether it has become acceptable in the case organization to have many open-ended questions as *the* agenda;

“Yes, most of the time, the purpose is well defined but does not mean the meeting should be a meeting and not an email. We know why we got together but it is not the same as being efficient. We could get rid of a lot of meetings; we could cover many of them over emails or chats. Open items and questions could be clarified a lot of the time offline instead of taking space as a vague meeting objective. When this is not done, we often hit a wall, and you need a park an item and wait until you get to it in the next meeting.”

Based on the responses in this section, it can be deducted that meetings are held with a clear purpose for majority of the time. This topic seemed to be one of the better managed areas of the meeting practices. However, with a little more crystallization and preparation of the topics to be discussed offline prior to the meeting, the meeting efficiency could be even better.

5.4 Meeting structure & agenda

In this part of the interview the respondents were asked about their perceptions on current virtual meeting structure, duration, and agenda design.

In question 6, when asked how frequently the agenda was distributed prior to the meeting, four out of five (eighty percent) of respondents felt this was done only rarely and with only one respondent replying “occasionally”. The participants were offered a scale here, choosing from Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Frequently or Always. The results of the responses can be found in Figure 4.

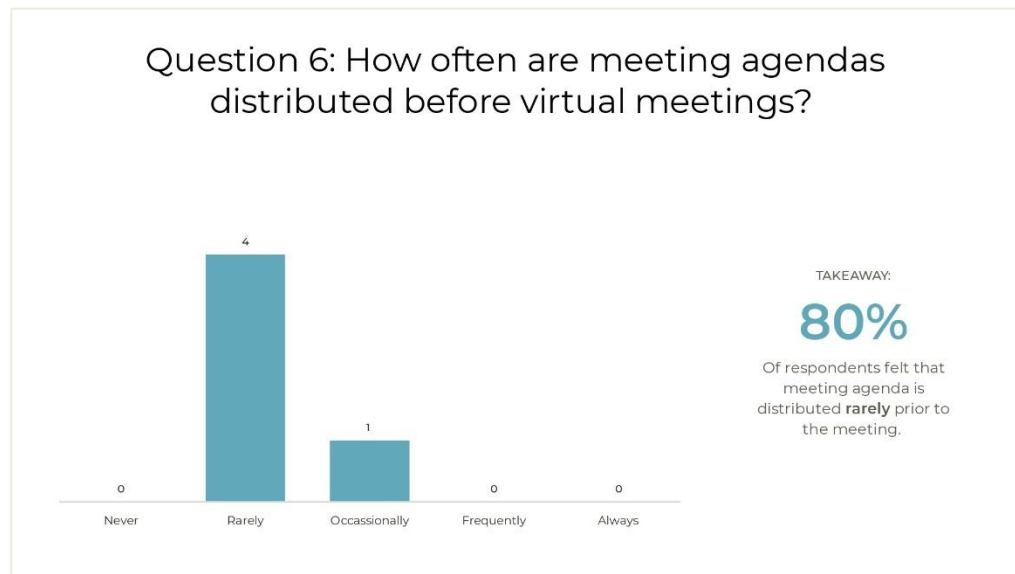


Figure 4: Meeting Agenda distribution

Based on the results of this question, we can conclude that even though the topic of the meetings is mostly known and defined, further structure in the form of agenda is rarely defined and shared with other participants.

Question 7 was about capturing further insights on meeting agenda, as part of overall meeting preparation. The respondents were asked about meeting agenda contribution prior to the meeting. The results of the responses can be found in Figure 5.

Similarly, to question 6, four out of five (eighty percent) of respondents responded “No”, when asked whether participants are normally offered a chance to contribute to the agenda prior to finalization.

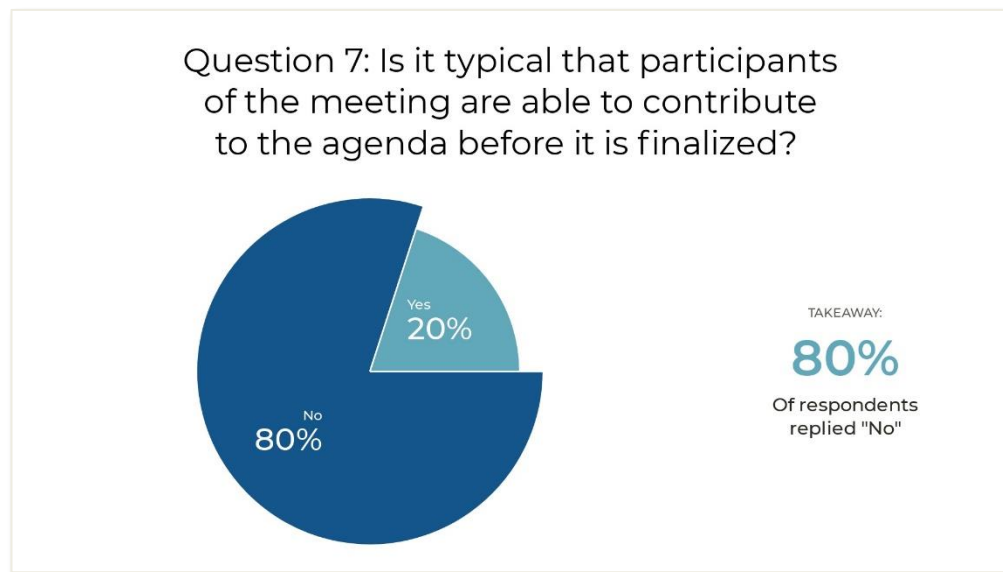


Figure 5: Meeting agenda contribution

Some participants offered further insight into agenda structure overall:

“It is quite rarely we have an agenda well-structured and defined, and even if we do, the agenda design is mostly done behind the scenes as a “closed room exercise.” If agenda preparation is done, it is mostly done by facilitator, and they are not really asking people for input.”

- *Individual contributor, Strategy & Operations*

The responses to questions 6 and 7 complement each other: As agendas are rarely prepared, it is also not customary to include others in the preparation phase of the agenda. The area of agenda preparation overall is an opportunity for improvement in the case organization. By providing more concrete timeslots and owners per topic the meeting organizers can manage time structure of the meeting more efficiently. By asking for contributions to the agenda, it is less likely that many topics from outside of the agenda flow into the meeting and sidetrack the discussion.

As part of meeting structure, the respondents were also asked about meeting duration in questions 8 and 9.

Question 8 was about capturing overall satisfaction of the respondents to typical meeting duration. This question was scaled, and offered three options: too short, exactly right or too long. Majority of the respondents (sixty percent) felt that the meeting duration was too short, and forty percent felt it was exactly right. No respondents felt the meetings were too long. The results of the responses are visually shown in Figure 6.

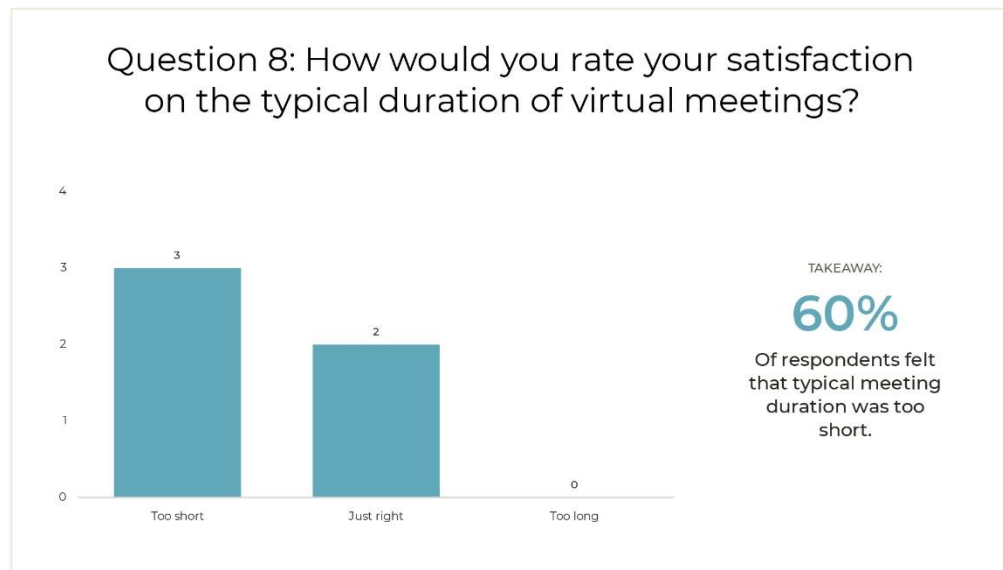


Figure 6: Meeting duration satisfaction

Question 9 was a follow up question on the topic of meeting duration and here the respondents were asked about what their preference for optimal meeting duration would be. This question was an open-ended question.

The default meeting duration for the case organization was 30 minutes, four out of five respondents mentioned that this default 30 minutes was seen as too short. Three out of five respondents mentioned that 45 minutes would be better duration to the current 30 minutes. Some respondents offered additional thoughts and comments to the meeting duration topic:

“Meeting duration usually goes to the very maximum of the allocated time or spills over. We could do meetings in 30 minutes with better preparation, but best would be 45 minutes to cover everything.”

- *Individual Contributor, Strategy & Operations*

“Most of the time we run over with meetings, and we need reschedule additional meetings to cover the missed-out points and this is inefficient. We would have been better off just taking 45 minutes or an hour originally. If we fall short, the agenda is then reshuffled due to bad planning. However sometimes 30 mins is all we can get because people's calendars are so fully blocked.”

- *Manager, Legal & Compliance*

“I do not suffer from long meetings. In fact, we have been trained to set up calls to be as short as possible, assuming shorter is better. But this is not necessarily the case if we cannot cover what we need.”

- *Individual Contributor, Software Development*

Whereas the theory explored in the literature review of this thesis suggests that many companies are going the route of cutting down on meeting time, in the case organization the opposite is true.

As a summary of the topic of meeting duration the employees felt that the shorter meetings are not sufficient to cover needed topics and spillover of topics into follow up meetings is contributing to the overall inefficiency of meeting practices. This result is surprising when comparing it to available theory on virtual meeting best practices, where many companies were in fact restricting meeting duration and volume as best, they could do boost productivity. This focus interview result can be partly due to poor agenda structure preparation, as indicated by the responses in questions 6 and 7. It is also possible that the sheer meeting volumes of most people prevent from blocking sufficient time in the calendar for a purposeful meeting. However, it can also be that with the disappearance of all other interaction, virtual meetings are the only option left for employees to align.

5.5 Meeting Roles & Responsibilities and Meeting Outputs

In the next section of the interview, the participants were asked about meeting roles and responsibilities as well as how well meeting outcomes are managed in the case organization.

Question 10 was a scaled question asking about how often the participants felt that roles and responsibilities in the meetings were clearly defined. The scale offered was choice of Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Frequently or Always.

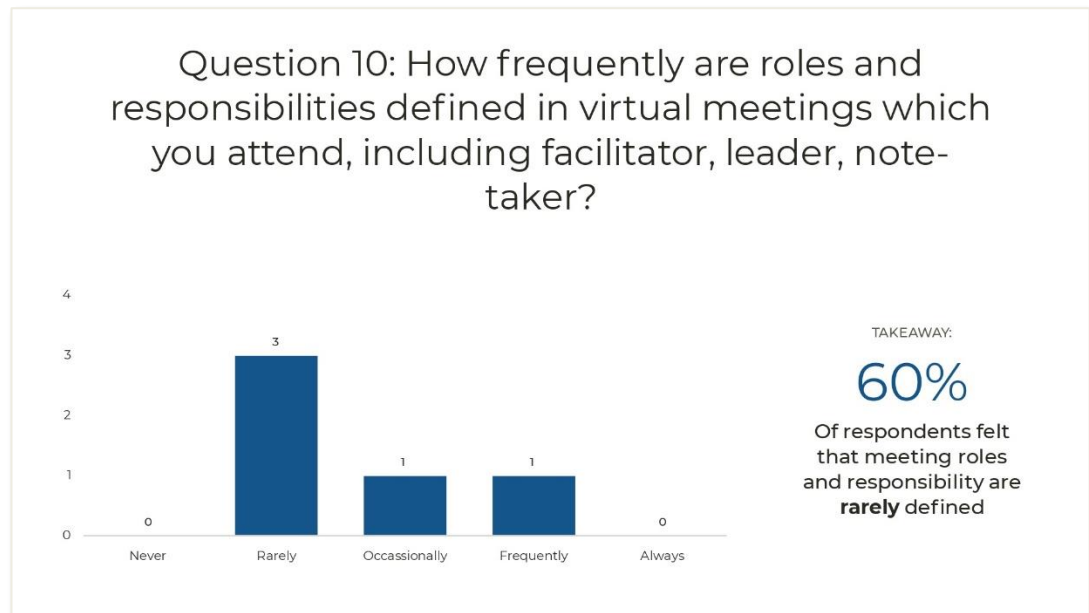


Figure 7: Meeting Roles & Responsibilities

Sixty percent of the respondents said that roles and responsibilities are defined rarely. One of the respondents commented on the meeting roles and responsibilities in the following way:

“With regular governance and recurring meetings, we have the roles and responsibilities well defined, however with almost all meetings outside regular governance it is up to the participants to play it by ear when it comes to roles.”

The outcome of this question is like question five, where roles and responsibilities are clear in regular governance meetings but in all other meetings, they are less clear. It is true that a certain level of flexibility in who does what in a meeting can make the meeting run more smoothly, but the theory suggests that the proportion of these “free flowing” meetings should be

small. It appears that proportion of the meetings with confusion on who does what is higher than it should be.

Continuing under the section of meeting outcomes, the respondents were asked two questions (Question 10 and 11) on the area of meeting outcome management.

Question 11 asked about meeting decision and outcome communication after the meeting, and question 12 asked about the effectiveness of action tracking as mechanism of follow up to meetings. Both questions were scaled. The results of responses to both questions can be found in Figure 8 and Figure 9, respectively.

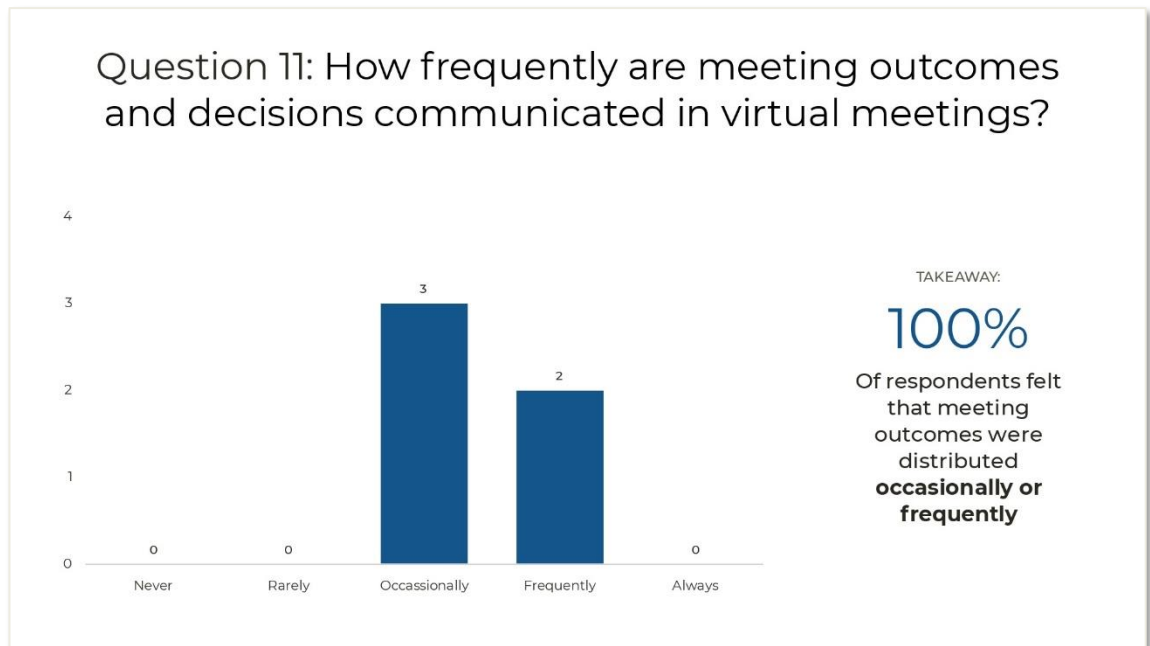


Figure 8: Meeting outcome communication

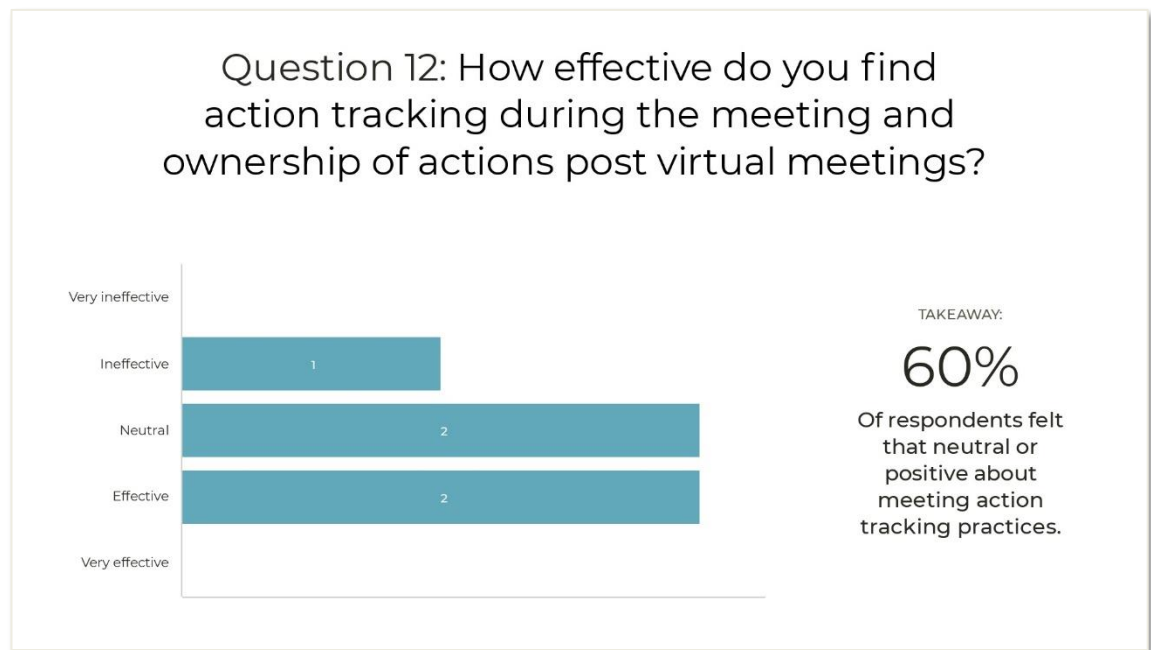


Figure 9: Meeting action tracking effectiveness

Some of the respondents offered additional thoughts regarding action tracking in the case company:

“Follow up and actions are communicated well, that is not the issue. However, that is only part of the follow up to communicate and write them down, but a different topic on how well the actions is addressed in real life. The action just becomes an email in your inbox.”

- *Individual contributor, Strategy & Operations*

“Outcomes and summaries are done frequently and quite well post-meeting. Action tracking is done OK, and the more critical and considerable risk the action is, the better it is followed up.”

- *Manager, Legal & Compliance*

“I feel inefficiency in action tracking and admin work in meetings 100% tooling and technology issue now. Technology is long overdue to be helping here. Right now, follow up is usually done manually “copy paste” by a human. There is no reason AI should not be helping with efficiency and accuracy in this regard.”

- *Individual Contributor, Software Development*

Meeting outcome management is a more professionally managed area of meeting practices in the case organization. The participants clearly feel that communication around outcomes of meetings is good, with all the respondents giving their input to the more positive side of the scale. Sixty percent responding to the question “occasionally” and the rest forty percent responding “frequently.”

Action tracking was seen as less managed. However, it appears that the room for improvement around action tracking is on the follow up of the action itself, not the tracking discipline. Another improvement area which the respondents indicated to, is the role of technology in meeting outcome management. The role of technology and potential for meeting efficiency aid is explored in more detail in the next section of the interview.

5.6 Meeting Tools & Technology

In question 13, the respondents were asked about their satisfaction level regarding the meeting platforms and tools used by their organization. They were offered the following scale to choose from: very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, neutral, satisfied, or very satisfied. 100% of the respondents replied “satisfied” to this scaled question, indicating that the technology enabling virtual meetings is currently well under control by the organization.

However, some of the respondents had some comments regarding potential efficiency gain regarding technology:

“Note taking and all the admin stuff of meetings is really frustrating now. I hope technology can help us get rid of this work soon.”

- Individual Contributor, Strategy & Operations

“We are not using all the functionalities of the Microsoft Teams now, for example the MS Co-Pilot assisted transcription & translation. Although, from a legal perspective, security is a bit of a concern. We are often talking about confidential and secret contractual issues in the virtual meetings.”

- Manager, Legal & Compliance

“When it comes to technology integration, on a day to day working basis we are not seeing the full potential yet. Virtual meeting is just a space to meet now and not many people are using all the functionalities available with Microsoft Co-Pilot.”

- *Manager, Supply Chain Department*

The case organization in question is using Microsoft Teams as a meeting platform. A more advanced AI driven version, Microsoft Co-Pilot is in use by certain pilot teams and individuals but not the entire organization. Some of the respondents had been involved in the pilot of the AI assisted meeting version and some had not. Microsoft Co-Pilot is already now helping with articulation of meeting summaries and actions. However, some AI elements can also be also used to enhance the ownership and follow up of the content of the actions as well, for example with the integration of AI into other Microsoft tools such as Outlook, To-Do, and Insights.

This means that Teams AI can help employees summarize and assign actions, and To-Do and Insights AI can help make sure those actions are followed up efficiently. Much of this meeting efficiency aiding technology is already available to the case organization but not used as widely as it could be. This could be both due to lack of licenses for all employees but could also be an awareness and training issue.

6 Conclusions & Recommendations

This study set out to explore which features affect the effectiveness of virtual meetings in the workplace. Available theoretical research as well as empirical analysis of this thesis concludes that half of the modern employees' time is spent in virtual meetings. This proportion of working hours is therefore significant, both financially as well as from the perspective of employees' time management and well-being. It is important for organizations to driveways of working in this area to be as efficient but also as sustainable as possible. The topic is vitally important for the future of modern working life.

The thesis included a literature review providing theoretical insight into virtual meetings and the optimal ways to run effective virtual meetings in the workplace. Best practices support the need for modern facilitative leadership when it comes to virtual ways of working in the workplace. Leading, facilitating and participating in virtual meetings is significantly different to face to face meetings. Theoretical best practices highlight the importance of aligning meeting purpose with necessity and meaningful objectives. Structuring meetings with clear agendas, roles, and responsibilities is crucial. Essential roles for effective meetings should be defined.

The thesis also included primary research in the form of focus interviews. The focus interviews were design to explore how well the theoretical best practice areas were applied in the case organization. The following areas of meeting efficiency were analyzed with the respondents of the focus interviews: Information regarding respondent's roles and locations, meeting frequency, meeting purpose & objectives, meeting structure & agenda, meeting roles & responsibilities and meeting outputs. The topic of virtual meeting tools & technology was also discussed.

The comparative analysis between theoretical and empirical investigation in this thesis shows many of the best practices suggested by literature review are in use in the case organization, however there is room for improvement in all areas.

The case organization manages well areas of defining meeting purpose and objectives, meeting outcome management including communication about the outcomes as well as action tracking as well as technology and tools used for virtual meetings.

Most significant gaps in virtual meeting efficiency in the case organization could be found are in the areas of meeting agenda and structure design, clarity of roles and responsibilities as well as meeting duration and frequency.

Some improvement recommendations on the analyzed gaps can be found in the following section.

While virtual meetings enhance productivity, they also pose challenges such as mental fatigue and physical strain, affecting overall employee well-being. This can be most easily seen through the time spent in meetings. Focus interview results suggest that almost half of the employee's time is spent in virtual meetings, and this amount can be considered non-sustainable on the long run, for managers who are doing not much else. It can be summarized that the high number of virtual meetings in a day is the effect and not the cause of inefficiencies in virtual meeting practices. By implementing improvements in the other areas of virtual meeting practices, the organization will be able to drive down the sheer volume of time spent in conference calls and as a result ease the mental and physical strain of employees.

Meeting duration was seen as another pain point where most respondents felt meeting default duration was too short to cover all needed topics. This result suggests there is a lack of planning and defined structure in meeting content and can also be seen as a symptom of inefficient meeting planning.

To address the root cause of meeting inefficiency in the case organization, improvements can be made in the meeting agenda and structuring culture. It appears that meetings that are included in regular governance cycles are structured well, but all other meetings lack agenda, preparation, and the opportunity for participants to contribute to the flow of the meeting beforehand. This, combined with the lack of defined roles and responsibilities can lead to

meeting inefficiencies and time wasted, most often leading to meeting duration overspill and in turn, leading to high volumes of meeting frequency. The case organization can address this root cause by implementing standard agenda templates in default meeting software. It can also be addressed by driving top-down meeting culture both by the organization's IT department as well as by leadership.

Even though meeting technology and tools were seen as one of the more positive attributes of meeting practices in the organization, further developments in this area can be a solution to the above-mentioned gaps in meeting default structuring, planning, and meeting roles and responsibilities. AI-powered tools can suggest agenda topics based on past meeting notes, emails and data and schedule a time and date that is chaotic situation attendees, and share reminders, including reminders to contribute to set agenda topics. (Herrmann Global, LLC, 2024)

To further help with meeting structure, virtual meeting technology is capable to set strict rules on meeting roles and responsibilities and prompt and aid these roles during meetings for needed actions they need to take. In this way less participants are likely to "switch off" during meetings and each participant will have a clear role against their name in the meeting.

The case organization is one where thousands of people spend a significant amount of their working time in conference calls. The focus interviews show that employees are looking for some help in making this work more sustainable. Technology is coming to the aid of this problem quite soon, but in the meanwhile, there are long hanging fruits in the areas of culture and meeting structure that can be implemented. To secure efficiency in the workplace also in the future, organization should already now put enough attention to this topic to ensure that sufficient financial investment is made in virtual meeting technology infrastructure to take strain off employees and place it on the shoulders of AI as soon as it is available.

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Appendix A: Focus Interview Introduction & Questions

The purpose of the focus interview is to explore what is the perception of select employees in the case organization on numerous aspects virtual meetings and their effectiveness. Additionally, the interview aims to capture the respondent's recommendations on making virtual meeting's ways of working more impactful. The outcome of the interviews will provide input into the interviewer's bachelor's Thesis.

Scope of this focus interview discussion is internal meetings only. Examples of internal meetings are status update meetings, decision making meetings, problem solving meetings as well as team building, information sharing and innovation generation meetings.

Participants are encouraged to elaborate on their answers with comments and specifics at all phases of the interview.

Section 1: Participants Role and Location Information:

1. Position
2. Department
3. Location

•

Section 2: Virtual Meeting Frequency:

4. On average, how many virtual meetings do you attend daily?
(free text number)

Section 3: Meeting Purpose & Objectives:

5. In general, do you feel virtual meetings you attend are held with a clearly defined purpose and objectives? (This means everyone understands why the meeting is held)
(Open question)

Section 4: Meeting Structure, Duration & Agenda:

6. How often are meeting agendas distributed before virtual meetings?

Scaled question:

- Never
 - Rarely
 - Occasionally
 - Frequently
 - Always
 -
7. Is it typical that participants of the meeting can contribute to the agenda before it is finalized?
- Yes
 - No
8. How would you rate your satisfaction on the typical duration of virtual meetings?

Scale:

- Too Short
 - Appropriate
 - Too Long
 -
9. What do you think is an ideal meeting duration? Feel free to expand on the answer why.

(Open question)

Section 5: Meeting Roles and Responsibilities & Meeting Outcomes:

10. How frequently are roles and responsibilities defined in virtual meetings which you attend, including facilitator, leader, note-taker?

Scaled question:

- Rarely
- Occasionally
- Frequently
- Always
-

11. How frequently are meeting outcomes and decisions communicated after the virtual meetings?

Scaled question:

- Rarely

- Occasionally
- Frequently
- Always

-

12. How effective do you find action tracking during the meeting and ownership of actions post virtual meetings?

Scaled question:

- Not effective at all
- Somewhat Effective
- Neutral
- Effective
- Very Effective

Section 6: Meeting Technology and Tools:

13. How satisfied are you with the virtual meeting platform/tools currently used?

Scaled question:

- Very Dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Neutral
- Satisfied
- Very Satisfied

Section 7: Overall comments and Suggestions for Improvement:

14. Please share in overall comments, pain points or improvement suggestions you may have regarding virtual meeting practices in your workplace.

- (open ended)

15. Are there specific changes or improvements you would suggest enhancing virtual meeting efficiency?

- (open ended)