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Meetings and Team Management

By Joanne Cleaver

Are traditional meetings still relevant in today's tech-driven world?

Executive Summary

Not for nothing are so many "Dilbert" comic strips set in meetings. Notorious for wasting time, dulling motivation and draining creativity, meetings are widely seen as a necessary evil—one poll found that 46 percent of Americans prefer almost any "unpleasant activity" over a meeting. Not surprisingly, managers are trying to reinvent meetings to make them more productive and to meet the changing needs of a 21st-century economy. Technology and startup companies are experimenting with meeting formats and lengths, and some established organizations are following suit. And as staffs become more diverse, managers and researchers say meeting dynamics must include more points of view, communication styles and ways of arriving at decisions. Some experts agree that new technologies may help solve many problems associated with routine meetings. Yet others say that changing corporate culture is more important. Among the questions under debate: Is technology fundamentally changing the nature of meetings? Are planned meetings better than spontaneous meetings? Can women be heard in meetings?

Meetings are evolving as technology and corporate culture change.   (Al Seib/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

Overview

Ask Jeanette Martin about the worst business meeting she ever endured and she will recount her stint at a German auto parts manufacturer. Everybody on the team spoke fluent English, but Martin was the only one who also wasn't a native speaker of German. Every week, the team held a meeting to review the status and progress of ongoing projects. And every week, the meeting opened in English and then quickly transitioned to German. She put up with it for a year, then snapped.

"I said, 'If you don't need all of us in this meeting, because you're speaking German then I've got other things to do.' And they apologized," says Martin, who teaches management at the University of Mississippi School of Business Administration and is co-author of "Global Business Etiquette: A Guide to International Communication and Customs." [1]

Martin also has a happy meeting tale from her days as a staffer at a medical supply manufacturer. Managers were stymied by how to make the most of employees' often excellent suggestions for saving time or money. The suggestion program rewarded the person who came up with a good idea, even though the results often depended on how well others carried out the suggestion.

"One person was getting rewarded while somebody else did all the work," Martin says. A cross-section of executives met to hash out the problem, well aware of the likely repercussions on employee morale and of the potential for blowback. "It was a good meeting because it took on a long-standing company practice—the suggestion box—and we saw people's minds change in the meeting" as participants came up with an innovative solution, Martin says.

Meetings: They're inevitable, inescapable and often intolerable aspects of any organization. Yet the meeting as a form of collaborative energy is so compelling that some meetings have achieved epic status: The Last Supper, the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and the post-World War II Bretton Woods conference on monetary policy, to name a few. In the best cases, the collective minds of meetings hash out agreements, breakthroughs and alliances impossible to engineer in individual conversation.
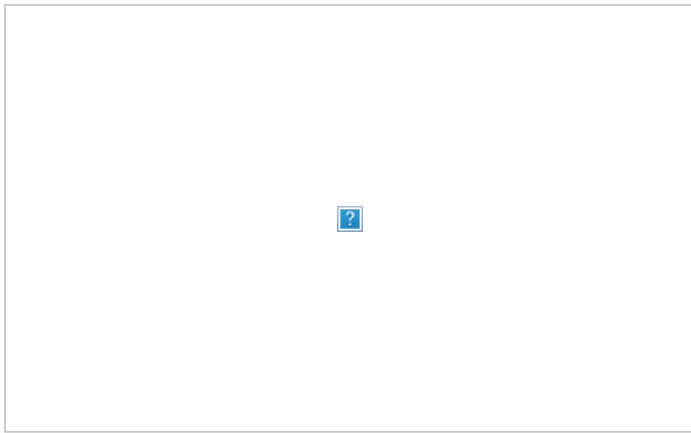
Some meetings have achieved epic status because of their impact on history; the Constitutional Convention, held in Philadelphia in 1787, was one. Here George Washington presides as delegates meet.   (Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

As the pace of business accelerates, managers are trying to reinvent meetings. Technology and startup companies are experimenting with meeting formats and lengths, and some established organizations are adopting the resulting new practices. The emergence of the flat corporate structure (i.e., few bosses overseeing an army of self-directed, self-managing staff) appears to be diametrically opposed to traditional meeting culture. And as staffs become more diverse in terms of gender, generation and ethnicity, managers and researchers say meeting dynamics must adapt to include more points of view, more styles of communication and more ways of arriving at decisions.

This change is sending stress fractures through long-standing meeting culture and assumptions. From intern orientations to board of director assemblies, many meetings are happening in different ways, with different players, for different reasons.

Workers typically loathe meetings because they appear to wick away the one thing no one can make more of: time. For 18 percent of Americans, a trip to the Department of Motor Vehicles is a more appealing way to spend time than attending a "status" meeting—a prototypical form of meeting in which attendees update each other on the progress of various projects, according to a survey released in 2015 by software company Clarizen. [2]

The same poll found that 46 percent of Americans would rather do almost any "unpleasant activity" than sit through a meeting. For respondents, death by meeting was not hypothetical: The poll found that staff members spend an average of 4.6 hours weekly preparing for status meetings and 4.5 hours weekly attending such meetings—a full day of each workweek. [3]

A seminal study by University of Southern California (USC) researchers found that status and informational meetings (the latter is where announcements are made) accounted for 45 percent of all meetings. [4] Widespread dislike of these routine meetings has spawned an entire industry dedicated to

eliminating them via "virtual collaboration platforms." Only 5 percent of the meetings identified in the USC study were creative or brainstorming meetings—the types, according to organizational psychologists, that are both the most fun and the most productive to attend.

But the USC study also had a cheerier side that validates Martin's best-meeting scenario. Purposeful, well-run meetings that achieve their goals generate high satisfaction among participants and goodwill for those who called and ran them. And a study found that 97 percent of workers consider the collaboration that meetings foster essential "to do their best work." [5]

Many consultants, psychologists and business anthropologists—those who study the underlying dynamics of meetings from a cultural point of view—agree that new technologies may solve or support many aspects of routine meetings, likely for the better. Technology innovators have introduced "collaborative project management systems" intended to eliminate the tedious status meeting. Such software creates online modes of continuously updating team members' progress on projects, eliminating the need to hold a meeting to accomplish that goal. In theory, tech company executives say, the remaining meetings would be productive, enjoyable and mission-driven brainstorming that can focus on idea development and strategy. [6]

Meetings don't just feel like they go on forever—meetings as a ritual actually have been going on forever, says Tomoko Hamada, a professor of anthropology at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., who studies cross-cultural business customs.

Humans are hard-wired not just to communicate but to communicate in structured formats that reinforce who belongs to a group and that perpetuate the group's culture, she says. Contemporary business meetings are on the continuum that began with humans gathering to discuss how to stay alive by planning tasks. "We are social animals. From an anthropological point of view, meetings are corporate rituals," Hamada says. "Americans are always saying they're going to eliminate meetings, but they're not going to go away."

Tomoko Hamada: "From an anthropological point of view, meetings are corporate rituals."

Routine meetings are platforms for power players to exercise their authority and for attendees to demonstrate that they are insiders who belong. Newcomers often must go through rituals of "rebirth" to affirm their status as learners, experts say, and to take their proper place (think of the notion that certain chairs are traditionally where certain attendees sit). Communication traditions, such as raising one's hand to signal the desire to speak, also affirm attendees' common culture. The corporate meeting even has a version of the tribal "talking stick": the PowerPoint projector remote.

Inherently, face-to-face meetings include the broadest spectrum of nuance, from side conversations to facial expressions to small gestures and tones of voice. Virtual platforms typically omit pre- and post-meeting rituals because technical requirements dictate the protocols of webinars, virtual meetings and similar formats. These formats are efficient, but the subtleties

that reinforce the value of face-to-face meetings are lost, Hamada says. Often, participants make decisions in prior, private discussions so the actual meeting becomes a formality.

Layer on national culture, and it's a wonder that anything is accomplished in meetings that span companies, countries, time zones and generations. In some countries, anxious meeting-goers obsess over small points of protocol, such as when and how to present business cards to Asian colleagues, Hamada says. She once arranged a virtual group meeting between American and Japanese business school students. "The Americans were worried about how formal the Japanese usually are in how they dress, so they all put on neckties for the meeting. The Japanese were worried about how casual Americans are, so they all wore T-shirts and jeans. When they saw each other, they just laughed," she recalls.

Precisely because they are the stage for so much missed opportunity, meetings are ripe for reinvention. "The dilemma of meetings is that you have to invest time to make them more efficient, but then you have to have a meeting about it," says Alok Sawhney, a business psychologist and management consultant in South Florida. And there's no way to agree that a meeting is unnecessary except by having at least a brief virtual meeting to cancel the meeting, he says.

Ironies aside, Sawhney and other psychologists say meetings are prisms into an organization. Observant participants can read company culture, writ small, in a meeting. [7] Who leads, how they lead, how they shepherd the process, how they assign and measure results—all of this, says Sawhney, yields insights into the dynamics of power, influence and action.

Early in his career, Sawhney was excited to be invited to sit in on board and senior-level meetings at the hospital management company where he was a management intern. "It was fascinating," he says. "The most straightforward stuff took on a life of its own, with all the perspectives and conversations, the differences in personalities. That's the beauty of meetings."

"Meetings are a microcosm," says Bill Treasurer, CEO of Giant Leap Consulting, a team development consultancy in Asheville, N.C. He recalls a privately owned company whose leadership team would painstakingly plot meetings without consulting the owner. "They figured they'd show him the agenda for a three-day offsite meeting at the last minute, fearful that he'd change it.… And, of course, he changes it the very first time he sees it." That, Treasurer says, is the sign of a corporate culture driven by fear and obedience. "If there is a general dysfunction, you are likely to see it magnified."

As managers, consultants and researchers consider the role of meetings in a changing business world, these are some of the questions under debate:

Weighing the Issues

Is technology fundamentally changing the nature of meetings?

The conundrum of meeting technology is that it makes good meetings better and bad meetings worse.

Now that webinars, conference calls and video conferences are standard formats, managers are realizing that these technologies are best used for transactional discussions: solving relatively routine problems and discussing concrete topics, says Jonathan Lane, managing partner of ProductWorks, a Massachusetts management consultancy that works with technology and startup firms.

In fact, routine meetings seem to generate the most irritation. A 2013 study found that meeting-goers confessed to being late about one time in 20—with the cumulative effect of forcing 37 percent of all meetings to start late. [8] A quarter of meeting attendees reported through the USC study that "irrelevant issues" took up 11 percent to 25 percent of time in status meetings. [9]

Research indicates that new technology doesn't make attendees pay better attention to tedious topics. Standard conference calls have become notorious as gatherings for participants who are doing other things while listening: sending emails, eating and even going to the bathroom. [10] Video conferences command a bit more attention because participants can at least see each other, says Lane.

Conference calls persist for companies and teams that must communicate with workers across many locations because at least the call officially communicates the same information to everyone at the same time, Lane says.

Information published via complementary technology, such as internal social media, intranets, email and digital company communications, might not be read.

But "if the purpose of the meeting is to do real work, the virtual platform degrades terribly," Lane says. A 2015 Boston College study found that telecommuting, while often popular with those working from home or other remote sites, left office-bound colleagues feeling lonely and disconnected. Nonverbal cues and the indefinable value of being together appear to reinforce team understanding and morale in ways not yet fully understood—and not replicated by virtual meeting platforms. [11]

But virtual meetings have their defenders. One is Edward Sturm, a self-employed video and digital marketing content creator in Brooklyn, N.Y., who specializes in collaborating with technology startup companies. [12] He notes that virtual meetings address questions and decisions as they emerge, instead of batching them for resolution at a scheduled later time. In Sturm's experience, this timeliness prevents problems

Susie Kim appears on a Beam robot video conferencing device in 2013. The screen is atop a motorized base that can turn on the user's command, so that meeting attendees can move about but still be seen and heard.   (Robert MacPherson/AFP/Getty Images)

from snowballing.

"Virtual tools give the respondee time to think and time to continue in a flow state if they need it," Sturm says. "Face-to-face meetings are done more for the benefit of the person calling the meeting, so that person can advance in the company or get a connection that he or she needs."

At the same time, though, virtual platforms can undermine the value of face-to-face meetings, says Michael Randel, a Kensington, Md., consultant who specializes in facilitating meetings. "It's a counterintuitive attitude of 'let's *not* meet,' " he says. "People put all this information in shared folders and dashboards so they don't have to have a meeting."

Multitasking by participants during meetings via texting and sharing, often blamed on Millennials, is committed by all generations, says Paul Cooper, a professional facilitator based in Washington, D.C. He has seen many a meeting host struggle with "technology etiquette," with solutions ranging from forcing all attendees to park their devices in a basket that's put to the side, to actually asking attendees to do research during the meeting on their devices.

But don't blame technology for the easily distracted, Cooper says. The real issue is that the meeting topic and organization aren't interesting enough to hold people's attention. For meeting organizers, hosts and facilitators, "the task is to get people to focus on the here and now, and make it so compelling they don't want to do anything else," he says.

Even though technology itself does not appear to have transformed meetings, others note that management approaches pioneered by some technology companies have been adopted more widely.

For example, "agile project management," which has taken root in software development, is a "spiral process" in which projects are redefined as they progress, partially by

An employee uses the video conferencing room at Facebook's office in Seattle in 2012. Critics say virtual platforms can undermine the value of face-to-face meetings. (Kevin Casey/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

ongoing collaboration and many short meetings. [13] (By comparison, traditional project management is linear: Define the project, break it into parts, get the parts done, assemble the parts and complete the project.)

Often, Lane says, agile project team leaders start each day with a short "getting on the same page" meeting. The meetings are intentionally so short —10 to 15 minutes—that everyone can stand, thus sidestepping the usual meeting protocol of sitting around a table. Typically, the team leader organizes the discussion around a board with notes, erasing project tasks just completed and adding tasks and problems to be solved that day. Stand-up meetings are often given nicknames borrowed from sports: "Scrum" and "huddle" are popular.

The concept of a short, stand-up meeting has spread to departments and companies beyond IT, Lane says.

He worked with one established technology services company that felt bogged down by meetings that took too long and accomplished too little. Adopting the agile team management approach, the CEO established a daily 15-minute, 11:45 a.m. standing meeting. "It was about getting visibility into what was happening that day," Lane says. "Everybody has a piece to bring in terms of service challenges, finance, new sales leads, whatever is happening in their departments. The time-boxing … moves it along, compared to other meetings where everyone leans back in their chairs with coffee."

The 11:45 meeting has "changed the company culture," Lane says. "It reduces anxiety and 'fire drills,' in which everyone scrambles to find out what's going on with a problem. Everybody knows a problem will be brought up at the 11:45. Over five years, this has become the basic organizing principle of the company."

## Are planned meetings better than spontaneous meetings?

Traditional meetings follow a well-worn groove: set a time and agenda; prepare; attend; follow through. Thus, anticipating a meeting forces participants to prepare, clarify their thoughts and validate information, says Dana Ardi, founder of Corporate Anthropology Advisors, a New York City-based consulting firm that works with large corporations. Even short stand-up meetings require participants to bring items to present, she points out.

The collaboration needed to prepare for a meeting is so much a part of emailing, document-sharing and slide-designing that people don't realize how much actual work—analyzing, prioritizing, clarifying—gets done along the way, Ardi says. "It's a whole value chain that surrounds the meeting."

Preparation escalates along with a meeting's importance. When top executives are involved and the stakes are high, including significant decisions about people, money and corporate priorities, attendees prepare more. A "tribal council" meeting involving top leaders usually is preceded by bands of staff preparing research, presentations, charts and briefings. Young managers are often included as observers so they can see what's involved in staging such events.

Most Office Workers Support Meeting Face to Face

How effective or ineffective do you think face-to-face meetings are at your company?
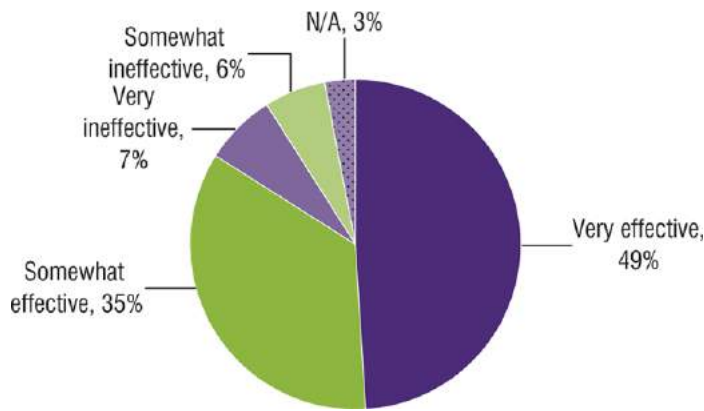
About half of U.S. office workers at companies with 500 or more employees say their face-to-face meetings at work are "very effective," according to a survey conducted by Harris Poll for project-management software company Workfront. Thirty-five percent of workers said such meetings are "somewhat effective," while 13 percent said they are "somewhat" or "very" ineffective.

Long Description (/file/images/SBR0206-MainReport-Graphic1-longdesc.html)

The structure of formal meetings, Ardi says, usually ensures that participants have an official chance to make their points.

Organizational psychologists and anthropologists agree that purely spontaneous meetings are valuable mainly for building relationships. By definition, spontaneous meetings don't involve preparation, agendas, research and goals, so the information exchanged is informal and may or may not achieve organizational goals.

In fact, says Cooper, the professional facilitator, a frequent outcome of spontaneous meetings is the decision to call a formal meeting with all the attendant trappings.

Somewhere between spontaneous meetings and formal planned meetings sit periodic regular meetings, says Steven Hunt, vice president of customer research at SuccessFactors.

"There are certain people you should meet with on a regular basis, because there's something to talk about, but you don't know what it is until you get together," he says. Successful account representatives, for instance, will check in with key customers "whether or not there's something to discuss," Hunt says. The agenda for such regular meetings is implied: what's going right, what needs attention and what needs are emerging, he says.

Regular meetings also build relationships and trust, banking understanding for times when things might not be going so well. "Knowing the person in real life, you can 'hear' them in emails, read between the lines in emails and have context," Hunt says. "It builds a lot of tolerance into the relationship."

Focusing on *how* meetings are called overlooks the more important issue of *why* they are called, says Cooper. Format is less important than culture, he says. Northwestern University anthropology professor emerita Helen B. Schwartzman came to the same conclusion when she theorized that what the meeting is about is not what the meeting is. Meetings are not propelled by crises and decisions that must be made, Schwartzman says. For most organizations, it's really a case of the meeting "tail" wagging the issues "dog": Meetings are going to be held, thanks to human nature. The only real open question is, what issues are sufficiently important or pressing to justify the inevitable meetings?

Cooper saw this dynamic at a nonprofit where he frequently facilitated meetings. The group had been holding the same type of meeting in the same format, deciding the same types of things, for most of its 90-year existence. Its leaders realized one day during a sleepy meeting that they needed a wake-up call. Aimless meetings indicated a deeper drift of mission and culture. The organization was losing touch with its mission, just as its meetings were losing touch with attendees, he says.

"The meetings used to be easy. People didn't ask big questions," says Cooper. Now, with some new leaders and some reinvigorated old leaders, the meetings are the crucible for the converted culture.

"There used to not be any impatient people in the room. Now, they are more rambunctious," he says. "I have to be attentive to the fact that there are going to be people in the room who think that things are bull----. There's dissent, and energy."

Can women be heard in meetings?

As the only woman in an influential group of nine, a senior professional with several decades' experience, she often felt her views were overlooked in group debate. "When I will say something—and I don't think I'm a confused speaker—it isn't until somebody else says it that everyone will focus on the point," she told a reporter at a conference. [14]

The woman—Ruth Bader Ginsburg, inarguably at the top of her profession as an associate justice on the U.S. Supreme Court since 1993—added, "The same thing can happen in the public setting of oral arguments." She cited instances during which another justice would reiterate the question she had just asked during the oral argument and the lawyer presenting the case would direct his response to the male justice. [15]

If fellow justices don't hear the Notorious RBG, do other women have any hope of being heard in workplace meetings?

Women have a hard time being taken seriously in meetings, according to researchers. Academics at Northwestern and Cornell universities have found that in meetings, women's expertise is overshadowed by female identity and expectations of women in social settings. That makes it harder for the group to hear and use the skills that women offer. The group might not achieve its goals because it didn't make the most of the expertise represented by women—specifically because they were women. [16]

Supreme Court Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, seated far right, says women—including herself—have a hard time being heard in meetings.   (Roger L. Wollenberg/Pool via Getty Images)

Researchers such as Deborah Tannen, professor of linguistics at Georgetown University and author of several best-selling books on gender communication, argue that it's up to both women and men to consciously negate dynamics drowning out women's voices in meetings. [17]

The stereotypical male style of being direct and straightforward isn't always better in corporate meetings, Tannen told one interviewer. [18] "And in some contexts, men tend to be more indirect than women," she said. "It's true that I have heard from women's groups who tell me that it's very hard sometimes to come to a decision, because people are so committed to consensus that they can never move on and say, 'OK, we're not all going to agree on this point, but we're going to have to do something, so let's do this.'

"At the same time, though, I would certainly say that there are things men could benefit from by adapting styles more common among women. One is apologizing," Tannen said.

Women's communication style results in better corporate performance, according to a 2013 study of 624 board directors. Researchers, according to one summary, found that "women are more likely to consider the rights of others and to take a cooperative approach to decision-making." Male board members like to follow the rules and trust that their process will result in a valid and defensible decision. Women, though, are more willing to challenge the group, ask outside-the-box questions, request and respond to a broader array of perspectives and collaborate with colleagues more effectively. All of this adds up to impressive results, one study found: Boards with large female representation experience a 53 percent higher return on equity, a 66 percent higher return on invested capital and a 42 percent higher return on sales. [19]

Meetings involving sales and purchasing decisions are especially rife with gender communication problems, say gender communication researchers.

Women tend to examine the major attributes and details of a potential purchase, whether it's for their company or for themselves, according to Marti Barletta, a Winnetka, Ill., consultant who specializes in marketing to women. [20] They often use a time-consuming "discovery process" to get a 360-degree view of what they are considering, looking not just at the essential functions of the item or service but also, for instance, at how much training it might take to get staff to actually use it. [21] Thus, in a sales meeting, other women know they're taking a journey together, while the men grow impatient with the process and wonder when the women will make up their minds, Barletta said.

Perhaps because their views often are discounted and overlooked, even high-ranking women tend to believe they have less influence in their workplaces than men do. [22]

Because so much evidence is accumulating that women's voices are drowned out in meetings, many corporate executives are consciously trying to change the tenor of their meetings, to invite and include more perspectives of all types, says Bernardo M. Ferdman, an organizational psychology professor with Alliant International University in San Diego and a diversity consultant who specializes in working with Latinos and Latinas.

"Top leaders realize the meaning of diversity, but it's the middle who lose power, so they feel threatened," says Hamada of William & Mary. Women often are crowded out of important pre- and post-meeting informal discussions. Astute senior leaders detect these shunnings and step up to advocate for women and other diverse participants, she says.

In a key shift, Ferdman says, executives are starting to recognize that no one person speaks for all people with whom he or she primarily identifies. Market profiles and demographic data often assign common experiences to women—mothering, for example, and the attendant details of caring for small children. But that doesn't mean that any individual woman has that exact experience or represents the statistically average point of view, Ferdman says.

And company leaders are realizing that claiming to be "gender blind" or "race blind"' is misguided. Deliberately ignoring gender or race amounts to dismissing characteristics that have shaped people's life experiences.

The emerging practice, Ferdman says, is to focus on what each individual uniquely brings to discussions and collaboration. "We're all products not just of our own selves, but of our identities, cultures and histories," he says. "Our perspectives are valuable—when we use our perspectives."

Background

In Pursuit of the Talking Stick

From North American tribes to medieval guilds to New England town meetings, purposeful gatherings have shaped communication and culture for centuries. Native Americans often used their meetings to decide matters of state—whether to wage war or seek peace—and simply to socialize. In Europe, guild meetings also mixed business and pleasure, not only organizing commerce but formulating funeral and

celebration traditions. [23] The famed New England town meeting of the 17th and 18th centuries brought residents together, at which every male citizen not only had the right but a responsibility to speak. [24] Painter and illustrator Norman Rockwell captured this democratic spirit in a painting that depicts a rough-hewn farmer taking the floor at a public forum. [25] The everybody-invited, everyone-can-participate meeting is so entrenched in American culture that even large political and corporate gatherings are often called "town hall" meetings.

One of the most consequential public meetings was the one that established the federal government: the Constitutional Convention, held in 1787. [26] Meeting behind closed doors for three and a half months, a group of male landowners, lawyers and merchants struggled to reach compromises on federalism, presidential powers and other difficult topics. Consensus was elusive, debate was fierce and leaks were common, but this meeting of federalists and anti-federalists, Northerners and Southerners, succeeded in producing a historic document that put the United States on a sound political footing. More prosaically, the convention showed what meetings could do when participants rallied around a common goal and evinced a willingness to compromise.

The office of Don Draper of "Mad Men," the TV show about an advertising firm, contains all the trappings of 1960s corporate culture: chairs to meet, a nice view—and booze. (Timothy A. Clary/AFP/Getty Images)

As the United States grew in the wake of the Constitutional Convention and a manufacturing economy blossomed during the Industrial Revolution, modern corporations emerged, complete with boards of directors, CEOs, marketing departments and products that were sold on international markets. Trailing close behind was the meeting, especially the "status meeting," where goals were assessed and progress was marked. Meetings became a part of corporate culture in the early 20th century and were emblematic of the button-down Eisenhower years in the 1950s, when corporations—and many workers—prospered. [27]

In the "Mad Men" era of the 1960s, committees, task forces, conferences and summits proliferated, each spinning off an orbiting constellation of meetings that were held in time-honored ways. The growing importance of meetings, however, began to produce murmurs of dissent: Midcentury sociologists noted the drain on time and drag on productivity that meetings often produced. And Melville Dalton, a University of California, Los Angeles, professor and author of "Men Who Manage," was among the first to detect submerged purposes to supposedly task-oriented meetings. [28]

Bringing Order to Meetings

"Robert's Rules of Order" for meetings—a formal opening, asserting a quorum, asking that motions be made and seconded and then holding votes—set the basic expectations during much of the 20th century for how gatherings should be run, even though few modern companies strictly follow these guidelines in daily meetings. (Corporate annual meetings are a notable exception.)

There really was a Robert—Henry Martyn Robert, an Army engineering officer who was flummoxed when unexpectedly asked to run a public meeting. Determined to never again be caught by surprise, he created a formal template for how he thought meetings should proceed. Robert's Rules of Order was first published in 1876 and has been continually in print ever since. [29]

In effect, Robert's Rules created a default structure for Western meetings in the same way that tribal societies have default structures for their meetings. Many organizations incorporated Robert's Rules as their de facto legal structure. The Midwestern History Association was typical, referencing Robert's Rules in its constitution and bylaws. [30]

The underlying assumption of the traditional meeting was that everybody accepted the social relationships and structure of the meeting—who will come, the governing protocol and the supporting logistics, according to Schwartzman. [31]

While Robert's rules provided a common frame of reference for meeting structure, they also served as a handy weapon for those who either wanted to validate every decision "by the rulebook" or invalidate a decision by claiming that the meeting in question did not follow protocol and thus could not produce a valid result. Many a meeting broke down over the technical application of Robert's rules, to the degree that some public-speaking organizations actually provided cures for Robert's neurosis in the form of specialized training. [32]

Helen Schwartzman: A critic of Robert's Rules.

Robert's Rules created a consistent way to structure meetings for companies and organizations, but it also created the expectation that simply following the rules would result in an orderly, respectful, productive meeting. In 1989, Schwartzman of Northwestern took this notion on, publishing a seminal work proposing that meetings should drive organizational culture, instead of serving the culture.

Schwartzman's breakthrough was to uncouple the Rules backdrop from what she said was the real purpose of meetings: to reaffirm power structures and relationships.

"The meeting is a specific type of focused interaction," wrote Schwartzman in "The Meeting: Gatherings in Organizations and Communities." "More specifically, a meeting is defined as a communicative event involving three or more people who agree to assemble for a purpose ostensibly related to the functioning of an organization or group, for example, to exchange ideas or opinions, to solve a problem, to make a decision or negotiate an agreement, to develop policy and procedures, to formulate recommendations and so forth." [33] The book is an anthropological field study of the meeting dynamics of one nonprofit organization and is considered pivotal to understanding the dynamics and value of Western organizational meetings.

"Meetings, however, may be most important in American society because they generate the *appearance* that reason and logical processes are guiding discussions and decisions, whereas … relationship negotiations, struggles and comments" are, she wrote. "It is this process that can make meetings such frustrating occasions because they appear to be doing one thing whereas, in many ways, they are accomplishing something entirely different." [34]

Reinventing Meetings

While Schwartzman was peeling back the underlying layers of meeting culture, those going to business meetings in the early 1990s started to notice a change: Faster communication, propelled by email and the emerging Internet, was shifting how employees communicated and collaborated.

In their zeal to be No. 1, the initial wave of Internet companies reinvented meetings along with other aspects of corporate culture. They quickly realized the potential of virtual meeting platforms, such as Skype, to solve several problems at once: reducing costly, inefficient travel; minimizing the environmental effects of business transportation; and supporting collaboration among international teams across global time zones. [35] By 2009, consultants and business practitioners debated whether sophisticated meeting platforms could actually replace face-to-face meetings, or whether technology would essentially create a new type of meeting that would co-exist with traditional meeting formats. [36]

Yet, as meeting technology changed, meeting frustration grew, says Schwartzman, now a Northwestern University professor emerita.

Survey: 'Keeping Focused' Is Most Common Challenge

What are the most common challenges in meetings you attend?
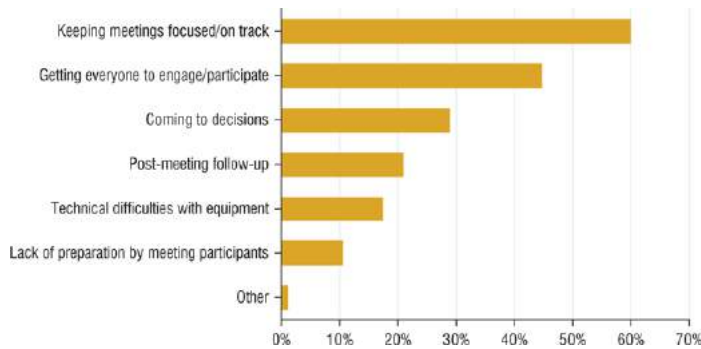
Download Excel (/file/xlsx/SBR0206-MainReport-Table2.xlsx)

Notes: Based on survey of 499 workers from Feb. 5–19, 2015. Respondents included workers from customer service, engineering, human resources, information technology, logistics, marketing and sales industries, among others.

Source: "The Truth about Meeting Culture," Mersive, April 2015, p. 4, http://tinyurl.com/pcqy6fs (http://tinyurl.com/pcqy6fs)

Three in five employees say their most common meeting-related challenge is keeping them focused and on-track, while 45 percent highlight participant engagement as the most common challenge, according to a survey by Mersive, a Denver-based collaboration software company.

Long Description (/file/images/SBR0206-MainReport-Graphic2-longdesc.html)

She says there was a profound disconnect between the Robert's-steeped assumptions many people still held about how meetings should operate and what constituted a successful meeting.

Formalities such as Robert's Rules, along with defaults for meeting settings (coffee, pastries, a generic room) and courtesies (a bland greeting and bullet-pointed agenda), implied that meetings were a blank slate, an empty stage, that participants animated with personality, conflict, relationships and debate.

"People get frustrated because there's not a recognition that other things are actually happening in meetings," Schwartzman says. "These other things are speaking to issues that are relevant to what the group is doing, but that may not be recognized."

"Say people come together to make a hiring decision, but by talking in a meeting about that decision, they also are talking and enacting, and sometimes commenting on, their own set of relationships with each other," she says. "They may be jockeying, or negotiating, or renewing or underlining what their relationships are. The meeting becomes so important in so many different contexts because so many things are happening. There are a variety of things besides the agenda that are baked into the structure of the meeting."

Current Situation

Meeting Spaces Evolve

Office-space planners currently allot about one meeting space for every four to six people, according to Gretchen Gscheidle, director of insight and exploration for Herman Miller, an office design and furnishings manufacturer. "And the spaces are smaller, both enclosed and open. That speaks to how business is done and how fluid collaboration can be," she says.

Smaller spaces, and more of them, indicate how meetings are evolving. They tend to involve fewer people, who are meeting more often. Designers at Herman Miller began seeing this change about 16 years ago. As the 20th century closed, the proportion of meeting rooms to employees started shifting rapidly. Before 2000, the standard was one meeting space for every 20 employees, says Gscheidle. Around 2003, clients started planning more meeting spaces—one for every 10 people—and arranging them throughout each floor of a building.

The office at Demand Media in Santa Monica, Calif., features an open layout, representative of 21st-century design trends, and meeting spaces are following suit. (Lawrence K. Ho/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

It's easier to track meeting activity and the space that meetings occupy than it is to monitor the effectiveness of meetings themselves. In fact, meetings are so much the wallpaper of corporate life that they are rarely studied in isolation. One study about meeting effectiveness, widely quoted in blogs, articles and infographics, is "Meetings in America," sponsored by Verizon and published in 1998. [37] A popular study with the same title was published in 2003, a year after the company that sponsored it, WorldCom, filed for what was then the largest bankruptcy in America. [38]

Meeting metrics are slippery. Academics and consultants debate time lost, productivity eroded and morale dampened, yet they have not designed a metric for meeting effectiveness. [39] Meeting participants know a successful meeting when they experience it: a purposeful, inclusive process, focused on a meaningful topic, yielding breakthroughs that individuals could not have reached on their own, and, in many cases, applicable results.

Randel, the consultant who specializes in facilitating meetings, says there is no "overarching method" of measuring meeting effectiveness. "In a simple sense," he says, "a measure of success is, do the sponsors and participants feel that it achieved its objectives? But: Do they share those objectives? It comes back to whether there is an appropriate view of the mission of the meeting." Look no further than the "Dilbert" comic strip for the popular perception of unsuccessful meetings—dispirited, unengaged attendees manipulating what process there is for mutual sabotage, resulting in wasted time, eroded morale and undermined goals.

Part of the problem, says Lane at consulting firm ProductWorks, is that few companies bother to analyze why their meetings work, or don't work. Unlike the military and hospitals, businesses usually don't do postmortems of the underlying drivers of their meetings. Post-meeting discussions "tend to be about blaming, not learning," Lane says. Companies would do well instead to "take a deeper dive, structured as a learning meeting: 'How do we become smarter and better?' "

The chronic tension over the value of meetings is driving both a desire to move routine, repetitive communications to virtual platforms and to make more of the meetings that do need to occur, says Krystal D'Costa, an anthropologist who writes the "Anthropology in Practice" blog for Scientific American. [40]

Most workers, she says, want to be in on meetings, even if they claim otherwise. "You want to be an actor at some point. If you're not, you become ancillary, and they'll look to replace you," D'Costa says. This explains the persistence of status meetings, during which "a leader is rattling off milestones and deliverables. If you don't show up, there's no confirmation that you are fulfilling your role."

Having many meetings to complain about is in some ways a status symbol—especially at the C-level, where executives must meet with their teams and with each other. In 2009, an "Executive Time Use Project" tracked how executives of global companies spent and managed meeting time. It found that the most effective managers spent the most time in meetings with other executives and with clients. [41]

Still, employees and managers often struggle to control their time, especially when they feel they spend more time meeting than they do actually working at specific independent tasks D'Costa says. Power struggles erupt over planting meetings on others' schedules through online scheduling programs. Gscheidle, the Herman Miller executive, says that many meetings are doomed before they happen when the meeting request barnacles itself on participants' calendars. "People think, 'This is a block of time that has been added to my calendar, thanks to scheduling technology.' And we can't override the tools. So, the default is a tension that you can't control your own time."

Schwartzman says the fact that meetings are so loathed, and thus have become a rich target for satire, parody and platoons of consultants and technologies, only proves that they are not what they seem to be. Modern meetings are in a constant state of reinvention because "we believe that what meetings do or shouldn't do isn't what they actually do or should do," she says.

The more that consultants claim to quantify the ineffectiveness of meetings, the more attention and resources are devoted to transforming something that isn't what most people think it is, Schwartzman says. In fact, she says, those consultants and technology companies on a mission to reinvent meetings have a vested interest in perpetuating the notion that meetings are so bad that they deserve greater investment. Technology is not a solution, she says, if it simply adds layers of meetings in the absence of awareness about why an organization's staffers are chronically frustrated with its meetings.

Space for Thought

Gscheidle says corporate clients still need large, technically equipped rooms for scheduled "show and tell" activity. But her clients also want informal spaces for spontaneous meetings, such as living room-like conversation pits and internal coffeehouses. Many clients specify multiple gathering places for stand-up meetings: a cluster of bar tables (but no bar stools) or slanted, waist-high counters perfect for resting a note-taking tablet.

Managers are paying more attention to how decisions pile up in anticipation of a decision-making meeting, while work coasts in the meanwhile, Gscheidle says. Some of this is inevitable: "Batching happens," she says. But tolerating bottlenecks and the resulting rush of work is, according to Herman Miller research, giving way to the expectation of ongoing collaboration. "Collaborative events," in Herman Miller parlance, take under 30 minutes, involve two or three people and occur at workstations or in casual settings. [42]

"Meetings are sort of the language of the company. Some companies say, 'We're only going to have 15 minute stand-ups,' or 'It's all open and collaborative.' It's an indication of what they want their culture to be," D'Costa says. "But at the end of the day, that need for face-to-face hasn't been removed. It's still a fundamental part of how we do business. You have to confirm that you belong to the company and to the team."

Looking Ahead

Drilling Down

"I meet. Therefore, I am." That's the existential essence of unnecessary meetings, says Sturm, the video and digital marketing content creator.

But, he says, the hidebound notion of meeting to meet is on a collision course with startup culture. In fast-paced, resource-thin startup organizations, meetings must be worth the time and attention they take away from productive work. Every minute spent in a meeting is a minute lost in getting a product to market.
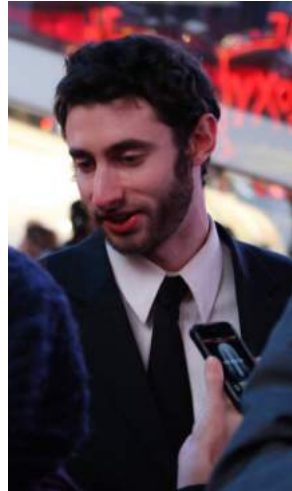
Established organizations tend to view time as a commodity that they don't want to waste. Startups, in contrast, view time as a resource to be invested, he explains. Startups with such a philosophy find that they must struggle to retain it as they grow and as pressure mounts from within and without to default to the norm.

Sturm experienced this as he started his own company, and he deals with the dynamic daily as he works with clients that are startups. He thinks the startup philosophy of meetings will prevail because other companies want to be like startups.

Paul Graham, a serial entrepreneur, programmer and co-founder of tech investment firm Y Combinator, crystallized the startup philosophy of meetings in his seminal essay "Maker's Schedule, Manager's Schedule." [43] In it, he outlines the difference between "makers"—programmers, writers, designers and other creative or "making" jobs—and "managers," who translate daily operations into short-term and long-term results. Makers and managers have opposite requirements for time and meetings, Graham wrote. Makers need long stretches of uninterrupted "flow" time to stay in their creative grooves. Managers go from one conversation to another. When managers, who usually outrank makers, schedule meetings for their own convenience, it disrupts the creative flow of makers.

Edward Sturm: The startup philosophy of meetings will likely prevail.

In traditional companies, that's just too bad for makers. Job titles such as "individual contributors" or "team members" barely disguise makers' lack of power to protect their most creative periods from meetings that not only take time but also make it difficult to be efficient with the time they do get.

Startup culture, posited Graham, puts makers and managers on the same plane in terms of respect for their process and time. If the makers can't make, the managers don't have much to sell (and investors certainly won't reap returns).

"Each type of schedule works fine by itself. Problems arise when they meet. Since most powerful people operate on the manager's schedule, they're in a position to make everyone resonate at their frequency if they want to. But the smarter ones restrain themselves, if they know that some of the people working for them need long chunks of time to work in," Graham wrote. [44]

In his businesses, he reconciled the maker-versus-manager meeting culture by scheduling meetings in advance so that makers could plan accordingly. Graham also cross-pollinated his meeting approach through the startups that he backed and to other investors and startups through his voluminous network.

Paul Graham: Meetings should be structured differently for creative types and managers. (David Paul Morris/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

Key aspects of Graham's approach include: inviting only employees who must be in the meeting; setting and sticking to a clear, short agenda; and holding brainstorming sessions as separate meetings so free-flowing discussions do not hijack routine meetings.

Startups that grew into large companies, such as Google, have consciously tried to scale Graham-inspired scheduling even as they gain more makers and more managers. Mature organizations attempting to adopt aspects of startup culture are exploring the approach, although it's not easy to retroactively integrate it into settled cultures. "Meetings are still the cockroaches that all companies think they are, but they're slowly dying," Sturm says.

Meanwhile, new technologies have put wheels onto Graham's concept. Sturm doesn't meet with clients face-to-face nearly as often as he used to. Instead, he's constantly in an endless meeting slowly scrolling across a window he keeps open on his computer screen. Virtual collaboration, project management and

knowledge-sharing tools have created a new dimension. As with always-on social media, workers are physically in their own space, but virtually together (even if they physically are in adjacent offices).

Project management platforms—such as Slack, Asana, Igloo and Podio—enable workers to check off tasks as they are completed, find experts within their teams for troubleshooting and have quick online "huddles" to change plans or discuss a problem. [45] These are all functions that replace the standard status meeting, say the companies. And, popular virtual meeting platforms, such as Skype and Citrix GotoMeeting, let workers see each others' screens and support webinars and similar forms of virtual meetings.

"It's a constant stream of dialogue," Sturm says of the tools. It's quick and easy to review discussions and decisions, and such tools can be an introvert's best friend, enabling makers (especially) to develop relationships and trust before meeting face-to-face. "You feel smarter," he says. "If you're in a [face-to-face] meeting and you look something up on your phone, it looks like you're not paying attention. But through these tools, you have more resources … to look things up. It takes more time, but over the project, it takes less time," he says.

As they adopt technologies that redefine meetings, companies find that work and communication flow differently, forcing a sweeping revision of how work gets done, says Joe Staples, chief marketing officer of Workfront, in Lehi, Utah. Workfront designs, produces and supports cloud-based collaboration tools. And as it has used its own collaboration tool for its own projects, Workfront's own corporate meeting culture has changed, says Staples.

"Eliminating status meetings has allowed us to focus on other types of meetings," he says. For instance, "we'll bring a creative team together to work on a campaign. We'll do some things to structure the meeting, but it wouldn't be reliant on technology. We'd decide on goals and resources, kick around ideas, decide on an idea, and then we'd go into Workfront to assign resources to the campaign."

When everyone knows that the meeting's last phase is slotting work into a new project in the system, the meeting itself is organized around that goal, says Staples. "Now we're thinking about the deliverables that go into the Workfront," he says. "It helps us know what we need to identify, what's the timing, what creative resources do we need. Knowing that we have to define those things sets a structure for what the project looks like. Now, we ask the right questions in the meeting."

About the Author

Since 1981, Joanne Cleaver has covered businesses and business leaders for numerous publications, including Crain's Chicago Business, Crain's New York Business, Working Mother, Inc., the Chicago Tribune and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. She also has written for consumer and trade publications.

Chronology

1600s–1870s	**Formal and informal meetings gain a foothold in American society.**
1630s–1800s	New England towns hold public forums where residents gather to debate tax rates, land policy and other municipal matters—the beginning of so-called town hall meetings.
1787	Influential American landowners, lawyers and merchants convene for the Constitutional Convention (https://history.state.gov/milestones/1784-1800/convention-and-ratification) in Philadelphia, where, in contentious meetings that last three and a half months, they reach the compromises necessary to frame a constitution for the new nation.
1876	Army engineering officer Henry Martyn Robert (http://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Martyn-Robert) writes and publishes "Robert's Rules of Order," a formal guide for meetings that becomes a generally

	accepted template in American culture.
1880s–1960s	**Industrialization gives rise to modern corporate structures.**
1880s–1920s	As a growing U.S. economy continues to industrialize, corporations featuring boards of directors, chief executives and other departments institutionalize a staple of modern life: the meeting.
1944	Delegates from 44 countries meet in Bretton Woods (https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/209/42675.html), N.H., to regulate international financial affairs in preparation for a post-World War II economy.
1950s	U.S. economy thrives and corporations prosper during the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, further cementing the importance of meetings in American corporate culture.
1960s	A variety of new and more formal meeting types, including summits, conferences and task forces, emerge during an era typified by the male-dominated "Mad Men" of Madison Avenue.
1970s–Present	**New technologies transform American office culture, enabling workers and teams to meet virtually.**
1970s	Researchers invent word-processing software (http://internationalprogrammersday.org/the-history-of-word-processing-software/) and laser printers and introduce new computer technologies to offices.
1983	Tandy and RadioShack introduce one of the first notebook-style portable laptop computers, the Tandy Radio Shack TRS-80 Model 100 (http://www.oldcomputers.net/trs100.html)—a development that will soon enable employees to work from home or on the road.
1988	Microsoft releases first version of Microsoft Mail (http://windows.microsoft.com/en-us/windows/history#T1=era0).
1989	Northwestern University anthropology professor Helen B. Schwartzman publishes a study of Western meeting culture (http://www.worldcat.org/title/meeting-gatherings-in-organizations-and-communities/oclc/19458471&referer=brief_results), proposing that meetings should emphasize organizational communication and decision-making instead of following existing norms and traditional rules from Robert's Rules.
1989	Computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee invents the World Wide Web (http://webfoundation.org/about/sir-tim-berners-lee/), which permits users to connect and meet virtually over the Internet.… Email becomes popular during the 1990s, led by America Online and other Internet pioneers; the explosive growth of email helps revolutionize the way workers communicate and meet.
1998	Verizon publishes "Meetings in America (https://e-meetings.verizonbusiness.com/global/en/meetingsinamerica/uswhitepaper.php)," a study that proposes ways for companies to reduce meeting costs and improve meeting efficiency.
2001	9/11 terrorist attacks halt international travel, requiring some multinational corporations to forgo face-to-face meetings with their foreign-based employees in favor of virtual ones.
2003	Swedish and Danish entrepreneurs create Skype (http://www.itbusiness.ca/blog/a-brief-history-of-skype/20750), one of the first popularized videoconferencing software

companies.… Meeting spaces begin to grow in number (http://www.hermanmiller.com/research/research-summaries/what-it-takes-to-collaborate.html?utm_source=pepperjam&utm_medium=affiliate&utm_campaign=43737&ad_content=8-10717) and become smaller, according to designers at Herman Miller, an office design and furnishings manufacturer; the average office goes from one meeting space for every 20 employees before 2000 to one for every 10 beginning around 2003.

2009   A study by Oxford Economics, a global research firm, concludes that face-to-face meetings are making a comeback despite the popularity of videoconferencing and says every dollar invested in business travel adds $12.50 in revenue.… Paul Graham, co-founder of tech investment firm Y Combinator, publishes "Maker's Schedule, Manager's Schedule (http://www.paulgraham.com/makersschedule.html)," which calls for a startup approach to meetings in which meetings are structured differently for creative "makers" and managers.

2014–15   A Harris Poll survey (https://www.workfront.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2015/10/workfront-state-of-enterprise-work-report-2015-final-1.pdf) finds that more than half of U.S. office workers see "wasteful" meetings as the greatest obstacle to work productivity.… Globally, almost 3 billion people have Internet access, as electronic business communication continues to grow and evolve.

Resources

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Books

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Business school professors outline cultural and international differences and similarities in formal business meetings, communication and etiquette.

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Organizations

American Anthropological Association

2300 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 1301, Arlington, VA 22201

703-528-1902

www.americananthro.org (http://www.americananthro.org)

Professional association for academic and practicing anthropologists, including business anthropologists, who study group dynamics and cultural history and evolution.

American Society of Association Executives

1575 I St., N.W., Washington, DC 20005

202-626-2723

www.asaecenter.org (http://www.asaecenter.org)

Professional association for paid managers of trade, nonprofit and professional associations; provides training and advice on meeting logistics.

International Facilitators Association

15050 Cedar Ave. South, #116-353, Apple Valley, MN 55124

952-891-3541

www.iaf-world.org (http://www.iaf-world.org)

Professional association for meeting facilitators.

International Society of Protocol and Etiquette Professionals

13116 Hutchinson Way, Suite 200, Silver Spring, MD 20906-5947

301-946-5265

www.ispep.org (http://www.ispep.org)

Professional association for experts, trainers and coaches in meeting etiquette, business etiquette, international and cross-cultural etiquette and customs, among other communication and interpersonal dynamics.

Meeting Professionals International

2711 Lyndon B. Johnson Freeway, Suite 600, Dallas, TX 75234-7349

972-702-3000

www.mpiweb.org (http://www.mpiweb.org)

Professional association for those responsible for organizing, planning and managing meetings, including nonprofit, business and academic gatherings.

National Speakers Organization

1500 S. Priest Drive, Tempe, AZ 85281

480-968-2552

www.nsaspeaker.org/ (http://www.nsaspeaker.org/)

Professional association for current and aspiring professional speakers.

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