Your meetings aren't working.

How Verizon is laser-focused on meeting less to accomplish more

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Introduction

The pandemic forced companies to embrace remote work for desk-based workers very quickly. This sudden shift—which has now settled into a hybrid work model for many businesses—gave companies an opportunity to reimagine the way work gets done.

Yet many businesses simply replicated their old practices in an online form. Nowhere is this lack of imagination more evident than in the way we meet.

Instead of coming up with better ways for workers to communicate, share ideas and interact efficiently in distributed environments, many companies defaulted to synchronous online meetings.

On any given day, knowledge workers may spend the majority of their time in meetings. Over the last two years of distributed work, the nature of these meetings has barely changed; there are still too many attendees, missing agendas and a lack of follow-up action items. The amount of multitasking done during the average meeting is evidence that the old ways of doing business aren't working.

We can do better. Hybrid working is a great opportunity to take charge of our teams' relationships with meetings and institute new, more efficient and effective ways for people to work together.

Definitions

Synchronous: Existing or occurring at the same time

Asynchronous: Not happening at the same time

But new work practices don't just happen. They take intention, experimentation, reflection and daily usage. In other words, we have to work hard to create new ways of working.

> "The 1980s wants its practices back—welcome to 2022!"
>
> —Sampath Sowmyanarayan, Chief Revenue Officer, Verizon Business

Verizon did just that. With the support of Boston Consulting Group, we conducted a series of experiments to identify how to change meetings for the better.

We started by setting aside one month for a team of about 150 people to routinely experiment with and track the success of various changes to meetings. At the beginning, these experimental practices were devised in collaboration with the team, recognizing the importance of designing new ways from within and not simply imposing them from the outside. Throughout the month, daily and weekly surveys were sent to participants to get continuous feedback, so we could evolve the process in real time. At the end of the month, the new practices were refined and shown to be successful.

We came away with two key learnings:

- Simple actions can make a big difference
- To get traction, you need to identify, implement and support these simple actions in a collaborative and iterative manner with the teams implementing them

> "Every leader today needs to reimagine the path forward for their business in a hybrid world. Verizon Business and BCG partnered to share concrete learnings that enable greater flexibility, connection and collaboration. Because at the heart of it all, we know it takes the right technology infrastructure, security and solutions, along with the right training and resources, to ensure businesses effectively navigate new ways of working."
>
> —Tami Erwin, CEO, Verizon Business

Simple actions that make a big difference

As we began speaking with the Verizon teams that would be testing new practices, it became clear that our goal was twofold:

- Adopt simple, impactful practices to improve meetings
- Identify—and challenge the need for—meetings that can be replaced by asynchronous modes of work (e.g., email, chat, shared documents or offline review)

Through these early discussions and the experimentation that followed, we were able to synthesize a set of simple, yet powerful, insights on how to move toward those goals.

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Table 1 shows the meeting practices that were developed with the help of the test team and proven effective through the experiment.

Table 1. Practices for improving meetings

Meeting practice	Pain point addressed by practice	Outcomes
Schedule 25- or 50-minute meetings with a 5- or 10-minute lagged start time.	Back-to-back meetings leaving little room to clear one's head, prepare for the next meeting or follow up from the prior meeting	• Improvement in productivity and focus • Less tardiness
Clearly state the meeting's purpose and agenda on the meeting invitation.	Meeting invites that do not explain clearly what the meeting is about, which leads to unnecessary meetings or inefficient ones lacking in focus	• Meeting organizer able to discern whether the meeting is necessary before sending out the invite and better able to facilitate the meeting because of its clear focus • Invitees better prepared or better able to challenge the need for their participation based on invite
Invite only required participants. Clarify that "optional" means a staffer should not attend the meeting but should be aware that it is happening and receive meeting notes.	Invitees unable to discern whether their participation is truly required, leading to multitasking at the meeting and time wasted in just "showing face"	• Invitees can prioritize meeting attendance based on invite status and determine whether there is another way to find out what occurred (e.g., reading post-meeting notes)
Reassess the need for regular recurring meetings.	Recurring meetings set up by default for most ongoing projects, often at unnecessarily high frequencies, and not reevaluated over time for whether their frequency should change	• Flexibility to cancel or restructure recurring meetings • Reduction in the number of recurring meetings, freeing up people for other more important tasks
Send out post-meeting notes.	Failure to distribute post-meeting notes, leading to slow or insufficient follow-up on decisions or action points generated during meetings	• Clear communication of takeaways and what should happen next, resulting in greater ownership and smooth execution of subsequent required steps

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Table 2 shows the types of meetings that can be replaced with asynchronous modes of work such as instant messaging platforms, email or shared documents, along with the proposed asynchronous replacement.

Table 2. Asynchronous alternatives to meetings

Meeting type	Pain point of synchronous meeting	Asynchronous replacement
Information sharing	Slide reading or relaying information already provided elsewhere (in another meeting or via written communications) leads to daydreaming and multitasking by participants.	• Information relayed via email with short video where relevant • Separate instant messaging chat channel with preset life span (e.g., three days after an email communication) for questions and reactions
Material review	While synchronous review of material lets participants ask questions in real time, these queries and comments often turn out to be time wasters that do little to resolve issues efficiently.	• Material sent via email, ideally with a calendar invite for offline review at the reviewer's convenience • Shared document for everyone to type in comments or questions to allow people to see and respond to each other's input
Status updates	Often result in information overkill for many participants, as every meeting attendee must stay online for the entire group's updates, even those that are irrelevant to them	• Updates shared via instant messaging chat channel, allowing people to concentrate on status changes that are relevant to them
Simple, single-agenda meetings	Usually too elementary for a full-fledged meeting, resulting in wasted time waiting for people to join and wading through irrelevant conversations	• Email correspondence to resolve issues or complete tasks, only resorting to a meeting if correspondence becomes lengthy or convoluted

As you can see, these approaches aren't groundbreaking, novel ideas. Rather, they are a collection of simple yet effective practices, which, ironically, have been overlooked and underused because of their very simplicity.

What we have uncovered is that these simple practices—identified, developed and refined by the team members of the target population for change—can have real impact when practiced with the right level of leader engagement, purpose and support. One good meeting (or avoided meeting, in the case of asynchronous work) leads to real satisfaction among its participants. Make that two, five or seven good meetings on a given day or week, and the change begins to snowball into improved morale and productivity.

The common theme that underpins these different practices is intentionality. All these practices promote intentionality in creating collaboration experiences that are meaningful for those involved. Oftentimes, this intentionality begins even before the actual work does.

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The 4-step process to identifying, implementing and supporting simple actions to change how work gets done

Many good ideas fail to get traction. Being thoughtful about how these actions are surfaced, implemented and supported drives the sustainable impact. Here is how to get the how right:

1 Talk with your people. Ask for their observations about the way communication and collaboration happen today; probe for specifics on what works well. And, more importantly, what doesn't work well and why. These conversations will create a rich set of potential solutions to make meetings better or replace them with an asynchronous alternative

2 Try the ideas out, experimenting with even small changes. These changes can be as simple as establishing clear norms around good meeting invites (e.g., defining what "optional" really means) or introducing time-saving hacks, such as delayed-start meetings of 25 or 50 minutes rather than 30 or 60 minutes. Small changes can go a long way toward chipping away at the problem, especially if done at scale

3 Get frequent feedback during the experiments to identify how to tweak the changes to make sure they stick and identify the next round of changes to experiment with

4 Start scaling the simple but impactful solutions to the rest of the organization, one team, one group, one function or one business unit at a time, with a similar process. That means letting the target groups decide what to try based on their work. Blast emails, mandates or trainings do not change behavior in sustainable ways

This process and the ideas surfaced by it are driving real change at Verizon. Teams that have experimented with these changes have made their meetings more effective and saved time through more asynchronous work. At the same time, these experiments have provided insight into the process organizations need to adopt to build the muscles necessary to make hybrid work really work.

> "While I can't control everything that I am invited to, this test continues to allow me to focus on whether a meeting is really needed and how to approach it. In that regard, it is proving to make me more productive and efficient."

> "The meetings I schedule (and I can tell the rest of my team as well) are much more focused and efficient, with clear outcomes, action items and easy-to-find conclusions. Getting these tips/techniques has been very helpful and will continue to be so going forward."

The real impact that small changes can drive

Within a month of implementing these practices, we saw substantial gains in the test team's day-to-day productivity and the quality of collaborative work, both during and outside of meetings. In a survey of the test team, 90% of participants said that the new ways of managing meetings helped improve overall meeting effectiveness, and 83% said they feel more comfortable working through asynchronous modes, such as email, instant messaging platforms and shared documents. Moreover, 78% of participants said they feel like they are wasting less time sitting in meetings where their live participation isn't required.

90% Percentage of participants who said that the new ways of managing meetings helped improve overall meeting effectiveness
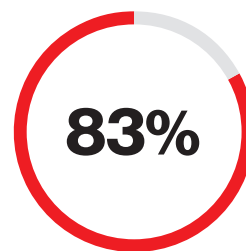
83% Percentage who said they feel more comfortable working through asynchronous modes, such as email, instant messaging platforms and shared documents

78% Percentage who said they feel like they are wasting less time sitting in meetings where their live participation isn't required

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> "This experiment has proven to be successful ... Too many times in business and life, we do the same things over and over, because that is how we have been doing it. ... It would be great for this experiment to be introduced to the larger organization so that even more people are working toward the approaches and practices unveiled during the past month. This would allow all of us to work toward a new standard for meetings, collaboration approaches and asynchronous work."

Why the experiment worked

How did Verizon achieve real impact with seemingly basic ingredients? After all, similar efforts have been tried before by many others, including Verizon, with little success. The key to our success lies in the recognition that old habits are very hard to change. People, even leaders, are often uncomfortable challenging how work usually gets done, and oftentimes do not have the time to step back and think about how to do things differently. But when you take the time to design experiments thoughtfully and collaboratively, and then iterate on the findings, the positive impact can be significant. Four factors that were key to success emerged from these experiments:

1 Walk the talk: Secure support from a respected leader from the start.

A company's culture is revealed through every interaction—whether among customers, partners, employees or others. Meetings, as a hub of interaction, are the best place to show what a culture stands for. Because of the role senior leaders play in meetings, we started the experiments by seeking their support.

As a result, the experiments were proposed and designed with the backing of influential leaders who recognized the potential value that the experiments could unlock.

> Meetings, as a hub of interaction, are the best place to show what a culture stands for.

Moreover, the test team we chose to work with for the initial experiments possessed certain attributes—a high volume of meetings and a large enough number of employees. But more importantly, this team had a strong leader to serve as the face of the effort. This leader could champion change, engage the team to try out different ideas and listen to make sure we were able to shift gears based on real-time learnings and reinforce needed behavioral shifts.

As the experiment progressed, the leader took an active role in driving team involvement by sending out daily positive messages and intermittent progress updates. More importantly, he also visibly practiced the new approaches himself. This gave legitimacy to the experiment and helped mitigate the cultural and social status quo bias. Seeing the team leader proactively restructuring his day with shorter meetings and canceling nonessential ones motivated his team and gave them cover to do the same.

> "As the leader, I knew it was important that I consistently practiced the change that the experiment advocated for, especially when it came to the more difficult practice of challenging the very necessity of certain meetings to begin with. The team's positive response was incredible. In many cases, the impacts were immediate."

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2 **Design from within: Understand pain points and arrive at best practices from within the teams that you are targeting for change. Make it their idea.**

We started these experiments with focus groups of the test team to identify what was wrong with their current meetings and to co-generate a list of ideas to address those issues. Importantly, the focus group participants were selected to reflect the range of responsibilities of the larger test team, and because the team leader identified them as good advocates. This ensured that the final list of new practices directly reflected the needs of the test team. This inside-out approach to designing the experiment also helped seed buy-in among key test team members even before the experiment began.

25%

Our observation: At least 25% of meetings didn't need to happen.

3 **Make it easy: Create and recreate supporting tools to drive implementation and measure success.**

To encourage best practices, Boston Consulting Group and Verizon created a set of easy-to-use guidelines that were distributed at the beginning of the experiment. These included a simple checklist for meeting organizers and attendees to assess each meeting they attended and a decision tree to match the type of work to the appropriate mode of collaboration (synchronous or asynchronous).

We made two important observations. First, at least 25% of meetings could be covered using an asynchronous note or memo rather than a face-to-face meeting. Second, these asynchronous meetings help "democratize" collaboration, preventing the loudest voice in the (virtual) room from dominating the conversation and giving an equal weight to everyone's input.

To measure the impact of the experiment, we conducted a survey of the test team's perceptions of meetings before any new ideas were implemented. This baseline survey let us track how these perceptions changed as the new meeting practices were rolled out.

4 **Iterate as you go: Create regular and frequent feedback cycles to support continued adaptation of new meeting modes and supporting tools.**

Daily and weekly surveys were sent to the team asking for measurable data points, such as satisfaction scores, and qualitative insights on what was going well and what could be improved. We used this to course-correct and create additional resources to address problems. For example, based on these surveys, we learned that people were having a hard time pushing back on meetings that originated from outside of the experiment team. We quickly developed language guidelines for how to discourage unnecessary meetings that came from colleagues outside of the team.

Based on feedback, we also developed a template for meeting invites and post-meeting notes, and a guide for setting up clear expectations for optional attendees. ("Optional" means a person should know about the meeting and read the meeting notes but should not attend.) These additional resources were particularly effective in boosting satisfaction among participants by providing them with easy-to-use support, as well as showing them how valuable their feedback was.

In addition, the daily survey emails provided a way for the team leader to show engagement and support. He celebrated the big and small wins along the way and reinforced his overall support through the cover email that included the survey link.

> **"We made critical changes to how we approach meetings, boosting effectiveness and piloting these best practices within my team. These practices improved collaboration, and we are now working to scale these changes across the organization."**
>
> — Sampath Sowmyanarayan, Chief Revenue Officer, Verizon Business

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> **"When work from home started overnight in March 2020, the underlying 'how work gets done' did not change. At our current crossroads, with more and more employees and companies embracing a hybrid model, we owe it to ourselves to rise to the occasion and harness the great potential that comes with hybrid work."**
>
> – Sampath Sowmyanarayan, Chief Revenue Officer, Verizon Business

What comes next: A process to scale impact across the organization

The experiment showed us that investing time and resources into improving hybrid collaboration experiences can lead to real impact. The next step lies in spreading and recreating the impact we made beyond the immediate test team and into the broader organization's work culture.

To do so, we will share the practices and guidelines that proved most effective in the first experiment (in our case, Tables 1 and 2). We could bolster this by including success stories from the test team to inspire other teams to try these practices out.

But more important will be recreating the conditions of success: leadership support, design by the team for the team, impact measurement, support through the process, and iteration and refinement of new practices. The ideas of what to do differently aren't the key to having impact. The key is having leaders and their teams discuss, discover and customize what works for them. Giving teams the vision, the motivation, the resources and the support is how organizations will implement the optimal changes in how their teams work in this new hybrid world.

The pandemic and the sudden prevalence of hybrid and distributed work models has shown us that we cannot let ways of working adapt organically. It takes intentional thinking, trying and learning to not only instill new habits, but to also ensure our new work reality is truly a better one. This is about dedicating the time, resources and space to make the changes that eventually will evolve the organization's culture.

Small changes can have real impact. Verizon's experience shows the importance of building a process that gives those changes a chance to play out and stick, and for the people enacting those changes to see for themselves the real impact that they are making.

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