

Short and sweet

A workplace productivity expert says the best meeting is a succinct meeting, in which the time spent attending it is wielded with laser-like focus.

By Chris Thurmott

Meetings, be they face-to-face, via a conference call or an online webinar, serve a valuable role in transferring information to multiple people in one go and have the potential to reduce confusion, save time and improve workplace productivity and efficiency.

That is if they are used correctly, something that eludes many Australian organisations, according to workplace productivity expert and author Donna McGeorge.

Ms McGeorge has spent years researching, analysing and implementing new workplace productivity measures to help corporate Australia make the best use of its time.

“A worrying trend I noticed was meetings were considered by most people to be the most wasteful use of their time in the workday,” she said. “I find that just abhorrent to think they spend most of their day in something they consider wasteful.”

On the back of her findings, Ms McGeorge released her book *The 25 Minute Meeting*, which details the psychology around effective meetings and strongly encourages the reader to consider implementing a 25-minute meeting structure.



Ms McGeorge said once you removed the superfluous aspects of a meeting, such as waiting for latecomers, allowing people to leave early, general chit-chat and people being unprepared, most meetings only involved 25 minutes of productivity.

“With this in mind, it made me wonder what would happen if we said we’ll just do 25-minute meetings,” she said.

“There are a number of really cool psychological elements that kick in when you set such strict and, what people perceive to be short, timeframes.

“As per Parkinson’s Law, whatever time you give people, that is the time they will use. If you give people an hour they will lazily use an hour, but if you only give them 10 minutes, it’s amazing what they can get done in that time.”

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While the practice might seem daunting, Ms McGeorge said 25-minute meetings could be incredibly effective.

“I haven’t had a meeting for probably the last seven years that hasn’t been 25 minutes or pretty close to that and it has definitely helped me,” she said.

Ms McGeorge said the trick to implementing these shorter, more time-restrictive meetings was to create a set of rules everybody had to abide by.

A good example of this routine is Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, who has implemented three simple rules for his meetings.

The first is the two-pizza rule – meetings should only be attended by the number of people who can be fed by two pizzas. A cap on the number of people limits the confusion that may arise from having too many voices in the mix. Being more selective of participants also means employees who do not need to be there are not.

Donna McGeorge.

Ms McGeorge refers to this rule in her book, referencing the Ringelmann effect whereby diminishing returns happen when too many people are involved.

“With more people you get things like social loafing, non-participation or people hiding,” she said. “Ringelmann said individuals become increasingly less productive as the size of the group increases.”

Mr Bezos’ second rule is to remove PowerPoint and replace it with greatly detailed, narratively structured six-page memos.

Mr Bezos said the memos were more than just bullet points and were written, rewritten and continually edited in preparation for the meetings.

The third rule results naturally from these detailed memos and is that meetings start with silence in order to allow the participants to read, ingest and analyse the meeting’s aims and proposed outcomes.

Although having 20 minutes of silence at the start of the meeting is incongruent with Ms McGeorge’s idea of quick 25-minute meetings, she said the dedicated reading time allowed for a good and productive discussion to take place once the actual meeting began.

“There are plenty of things we can do around what rules we want to set,” she said.

“Whether we’re only going to meet for 25 minutes or we only allow seven people in the meeting or we do pre-reading for 20 minutes beforehand, whatever rules you want to put in place have to be agreeable and enforceable by everyone involved.

“I am typically not a fan of punitive measures, but I am a fan of accountability. I know managers who say once the meeting starts the door is locked and any decisions that are made are final, and others who implement yellow and red cards, but it’s about setting agreements.

“It’s just starting small and allowing the ripple effect to happen, setting whatever you want your ground rules to be, agreeing on them up front and agreeing on the consequences of a breach of protocol.”

Ms McGeorge’s new book, *The First 2 Hours*, contends the most productive way of meeting the day’s challenges is to divide it into two hour blocks to match the level of intensity required.