VIRTUAL MEETINGS

An investigation into virtual meetings:
A collaboration between Whereby and researchers at UNC, Charlotte

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virtual meetings in the near, and far

In a time when virtual meetings have become a day-to-day occurrence, we need to plan for both the meetings in the near future as well as those further off into the distance. To help achieve this, we surveyed over 1,000 diverse employees to identify evidence-based strategies to make virtual meetings more effective. Additionally, we provide considerations on how to foster a healthy virtual meetings culture to ensure meetings today are making tomorrow's meetings even more optimal.

We identified five strategies for leaders to consider that should help enrich the virtual experience of all attendees:

- Thoughtful preparation

- Attempt to keep it short

- Awareness of virtual meeting technologies

- Incorporate personal connection

- Schedule breaks when necessary

Virtual meetings further off into the future can be enhanced through collective thought and actions today by:

- Setting meeting expectations and norms

- Creating work boundaries

- Normalizing asking for feedback

By implementing these strategies, employees, teams and organizations will be better

equipped to capitalize on the convenience and efficiency of virtual meetings.

Report written by: Liana Kreamer, M.A. & George Stock, M.A.
Research conducted by: Graduate students at UNC, Charlotte
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"A goal without a plan is just a wish."
– Antoine de Saint-Exupery

INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

Importance of Virtual Meetings

Workplace meetings are an everyday aspect of organizational life, with the average employee spending roughly 6 hours of their time in meetings per week.[1] For those in top management or executive positions, they report spending upwards of 23 hours in meetings each week.[1] In fact, leaders report spending more time preparing for and leading meetings than any other work-related activity.[2]

In recent time, many of these meetings have been held remotely. From 2010-2020, there has been a 400% increase[3] in the number of employees who work remotely at least once a week. Zoom reported having over 300 million[4] meeting participants per day in 2020. A Future Workforce Pulse report by UpWork revealed that by 2025, 36.2 million[5] Americans will be working remotely. This is nearly a 90% percent increase from pre-pandemic levels.

These statistics suggest that a significant number of work-related meetings will continue to be remote well into the future. If these meetings are led effectively, they could positively impact employees, teams, and organizations.

Over the past 20 years, meeting science has explored various tactics and behaviors that contribute to positive perceptions of meeting effectiveness - such as having an agenda, starting on time, and keeping meeting minutes.[6]

Despite the clear migration of so many meetings to virtual contexts, little research has considered whether these specific practices transfer to the virtual context.

Our Investigation

The purpose of the present study was to explore employee experiences with virtual meetings from multiple lenses. We did so by collaborating with Whereby and leveraging our personal connections at UNC Charlotte to survey over 1,000 employees. We asked employees to report on their unique experiences with virtual meetings from the various perspectives:

- Experiences leading virtual meetings
- Experiences attending virtual meetings
- Multitasking tendencies during virtual meetings
- Experiences with one-on-one (1:1) virtual meetings
- Perceptions of virtual meeting fatigue
- Virtual meetings influence on work-family interface/conflict

DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics

At the time of the survey:

87% of our sample reported they were working from home

92% of their overall meetings were held remotely

16% of their time was spent on childcare responsibilities during work hours

On average, employees **had 8 meetings per week**
With each meeting lasting approx. **40 minutes**

A majority of the sample were:

- **Senior, executive or top-level management (54%)**
    - Followed by **middle-level management (23%)**
- Between the **ages of 35-55 (62%)**
- From **North America or Europe (88%)**
- **Male (61%)**; **Female (39%)**

Analyzing the data

Our research team analyzed all open-ended responses on the surveys using NVivo coding software. We developed codebooks for each virtual meeting topic and looked for commonalities across responses. Codebooks and anonymous raw data are available upon request (see point of contact information).

This analysis resulted in **five** overall effective virtual meeting strategies that were consistently reported across participants: (1) thoughtfully prepare (2) schedule shorter meetings, (3) know how to use the technology, (4) personally connect with meeting attendees, (5) schedule breaks for longer meetings. Each is discussed in detail below. Quotes from participants are provided as examples.

We also identified three overarching themes that help contribute to a healthy **meeting culture:** (1) establish expectations / meeting norms, (2) create work/life boundaries, (3) normalize asking for feedback from attendees.

CONDUCTING BETTER MEETINGS

Meeting Skills Matter

When asked to rate the **effectiveness of their virtual meetings**, employees indicated their meetings were, on average, 70% effective. Interestingly, these ratings were strongly correlated with employee perceptions of the **virtual meeting skills of their supervisor** ($r = 0.36$, $p < .001$).

Such that, those who rated their leaders as having better meeting skills (e.g., 5 = very good) also rated their meetings as more effective, on average.

Figure 1: Leader meeting skills contributes to overall scores of meeting effectiveness
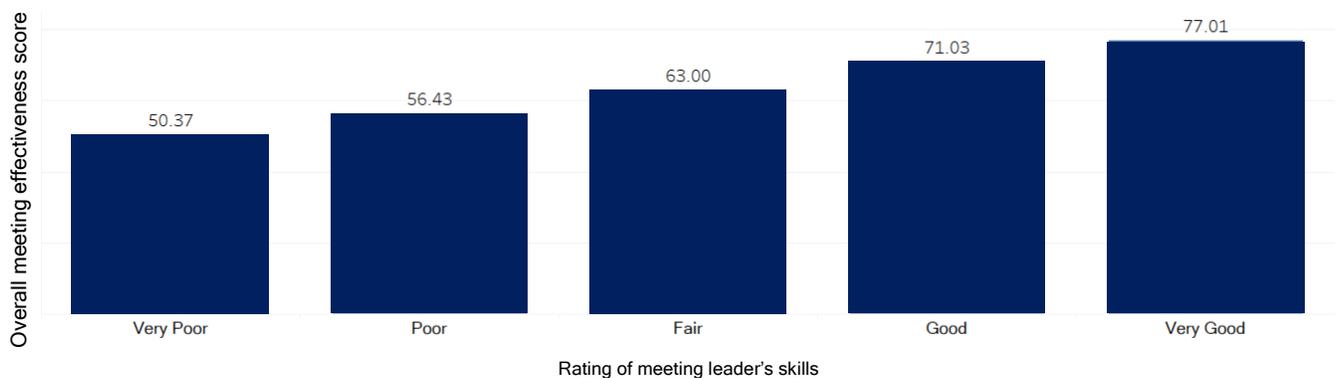
This finding supports the idea that **better leader skills and behaviors may result in more effective meetings**. With this in mind, we sought to uncover the most effective virtual meeting leader tactics and behaviors. Below we report key insights and takeaways from our data collection. Leaders can readily implement these five strategies to facilitate better meetings.

#1: Thoughtfully prepare

Good virtual meetings begin with thoughtful preparation. Among the top reported responses to what makes for an effective virtual meeting were qualities such as preparedness, organization, and conciseness – all of which can be achieved by having an intentional agenda. Those leading a meeting are responsible for setting the meeting up for success by identifying the purpose and goals, distributing the agenda in advance, determining who needs to be there, and considering the necessary duration of the meeting. Doing so ensures that meeting goals are met efficiently, while participants get the most out of their time together.

*"Structure the meetings carefully. Have a start, middle, and end. Have an agenda ahead of time."*

"Have a clear, concise, pre-shared agenda and meeting goal, which is restated at the top of the meeting, and a carefully considered attendee list."

#2: Keep your meetings short

While not every meeting can be shortened, those that are overextended run the risk of increasing attendee fatigue and reducing levels of engagement. Not surprisingly, 84% of employees in our sample reported feeling fatigued during and/or after virtual meetings. Relatedly, over half our sample (53%) found a full day of virtual meetings to be more fatiguing than a full day of in-person meetings. The sedentary nature of most virtual meetings, feelings of being constantly watched on the screen, and leaders/attendees talking for too long are main reasons employees find virtual meetings more fatiguing. If all goals/objectives are met before the meeting is scheduled to end, by all means…end the meeting early.

■ Find virtual meetings more fatiguing
■ Find in-person meetings more fatiguing
■ No preference
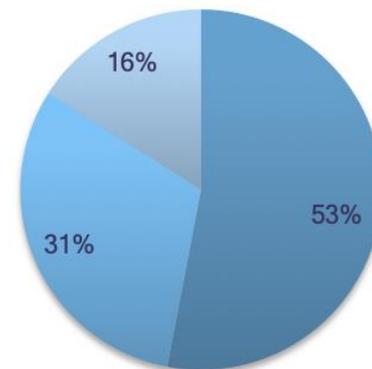
"I've learned that it's better to keep virtual meetings short and frequent…Meetings that take up the full amount of time just because it was scheduled are infuriating."

"Schedule shorter meetings - only schedule a meeting for 25 min or 50 min instead of defaulting to 30 min or 1 hour."

#3: Know your technology

One of the most common themes that emerged from responses was the need to be tech-savvy when leading (or attending) virtual meetings. This involves both being aware of what meeting tools are out there as well as taking the time to practice and learn how to use them. There are many virtual meeting resources that can be utilized to enhance communication and creativity among remote workers. The most fundamental of these tools include leveraging breakout rooms, the chat function, whiteboards, and polling. However, more novel strategies such as shared Google Documents and Jamboards can be utilized to spark creative energy and brainstorming. Once a leader is well aware of the resources at their disposal, it's crucial that they familiarize themselves with these tools prior to the meeting. When used properly, these tools can bring new life to virtual meetings, making them both more engaging and effective.

"I definitely like the shared Google Doc effect, such that a list of attendee names are provided on the Google Doc, presenter asks a question, everyone answers on the Google Doc."

"Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse… make sure all transitions are smooth and other presenters are familiar with their tooling and devices."

#4: Incorporate personal connection

When asked about the main differences between virtual meetings and in person meetings, the top response was consistently meeting efficiency. While this efficiency certainly comes as a benefit to employees, teams, and organizations, it's important to also consider the costs. Virtual meetings tend to be more task-focused, which increases productivity but decreases personal connection. Importantly, this tendency may leave employees feeling unsupported and disconnected. Leaders can mitigate these side effects of virtual meetings by allocating time for 'warmup chatter' and check-ins. While there's certainly a balance to making sure the meeting doesn't become derailed or unnecessarily long, allocating time for personal connection can instill feelings of intimacy which can be easily lost in remote settings.

"Invite people 5 minutes early for a quick get together / social. This happens naturally in in-person meetings but is missing from remote. Objective is to keep everyone feeling that they're part of a team - but not having it cut into meeting productivity"

"Spend some time just talking to employees as people - ask how they're doing and try to understand their challenges and struggles."

#5: Schedule breaks

Going on year two of virtual meetings and remote work, employee's attention spans are dwindling. Long meetings make it challenging to keep attendees engaged and present throughout the entirety of the meeting. Multitasking is arguably easier to do (and more tempting) in a virtual meeting, with **66%** of our sample indicating they multitask more in virtual meetings compared to in-person meetings. However, some meetings require a longer duration to accomplish all goals and objectives. When shortening the meeting is not an option, the leader should schedule short breaks

Most Common Multitasking Activities

Activity	Percentage
Email	68%
Text/Messaging	25%
Other	14%

throughout. During these breaks, attendees can respond to any emails, use the bathroom, grab a snack, stretch, take a walk, and decompress. The most commonly reported multitasking activities (e.g., checking email (68%), text/messaging (25%)) can be accomplished during these breaks.
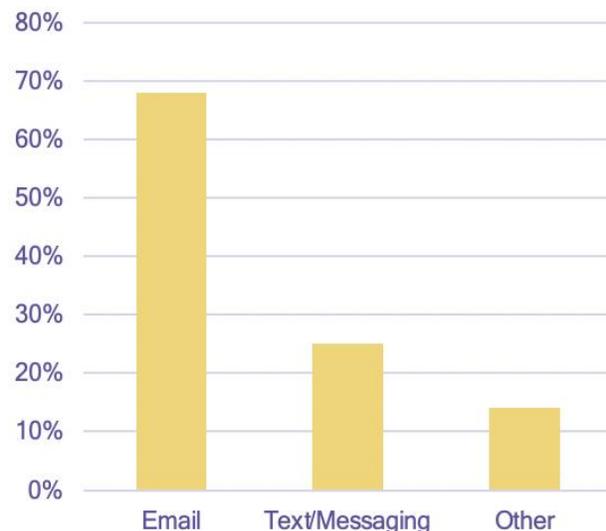
"Encourage employees to take stretch breaks or time to walk around."

"Have breaks in long meetings so we can check email or respond to urgent Slack messages."

CREATING A HEALTHY MEETING CULTURE

While the five strategies above are quick, easy-to-implement ways to run more effective virtual meetings in the short-term, we also identified three themes that can foster effective meetings in the long-term. Over time, these three practices will help build a healthy meeting culture within the organization.

#1: Set expectations/norms

Establishing appropriate expectations and meeting norms is essential for creating a culture of effective virtual meetings. The meeting leader can set expectations at the onset by specifying how participants can best contribute to the meeting. For instance, the leader may instruct participants to use the raise hand function, direct their questions to the chat-box, or unmute themselves when they would like to contribute. This creates a shared understanding of how best to participate in virtual meetings. For team meetings where attendees are generally the same each meeting, these practices will likely become normal behaviors. Establishing these expectations and allowing them to become norms help participants read the [virtual] room and communicate in ways that are more productive.

"Often a need to set-up some norms on the front-end of the meeting, especially if the group is larger (e.g., please use the chat to ask questions or feel free to stop the conversation for your questions throughout)."

"…it is important that the leader sets guidelines and expectations that will achieve an interaction that is effective and productive."

#2: Create work boundaries

Working from home brings with it the comfort of house slippers and sweatpants - as well as the discomfort of separating work time from happy hour. Virtual meetings play a sizeable role in this, as respondents reported **over one third** of their virtual one-on-one meetings are impromptu. While work emergencies and quick questions are certainly natural business occurrences, creating clear boundaries around non-essential meetings allow for employees to gain greater predictability over their day. Organizations can establish norms such as designating meeting-less time when no meetings can take place (e.g., meeting-less Mondays, or Work-it Wednesdays). Or reserving time on employees calendars where no meetings can be scheduled (e.g., mornings blocked off). Relatedly, leaders could set a hard stop at 5:00pm on workdays, where employees are not expected to attend meetings or respond to emails after that point.

34% of 1-on-1 meetings are scheduled impromptu

"Identify time slots during the day where no meetings should be scheduled to allow working time."

#3: Normalize asking for feedback

There is no one-size-fits all approach when it comes to leading virtual meetings. In our data, we inevitably found contradictory responses where attendees preferences differ. Jim may miss personal interaction and want more social support in his meetings – while Sarah may think meeting chit-chat is a huge derailer. While sharing a Google document may be the perfect tool for a brainstorming meeting, it may be inappropriate for a one-on-one meeting. The bottom line is this: **good meeting leaders ask for and implement feedback from their team**. They adapt their strategies depending on the objective/s of the meeting, while taking into consideration attendees' personal preferences. They see how they are doing, and constantly strive to improve. Asking for feedback is as simple as sending out an anonymous poll or 3-item survey to meeting attendees; asking what went well, where they can improve, and seeking suggestions for future meetings. Never get too comfortable leading virtual meetings…there is always room for improvement.

"Make sure to have repeated opportunities to receive thoughts and feedback from others on how good you are at running meetings."

"It is frustrating when leaders constantly ask for feedback, but then do not take the time to receive the feedback (lack time, managing who talks when, etc.). Wanting a good meeting and having a good meeting are not the same thing."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Virtual meetings contain an undeniable convenience that will likely contribute to their expansion. While some effective meeting strategies transfer from in-person to virtual, we sought to identify those that were most critical to the success of virtual meetings. By leveraging the tactics and skills above, meeting leaders and attendees alike can make their virtual meeting experiences more productive and enjoyable both in the near and more distant future.

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Graduate Research Team

- Ashleigh Dickson
- Jack Flinchum
- Katie Kavanagh
- Liana Kreamer
- Andrew McBride
- George Stock
- Nicole Voss

Undergraduate Coding Team

- Asia Harrison
- Magali Lavina
- Savannah Leslie
- Jeremy Lewis
- Evelyn Palafox
- Derek Rowe
- Makai Ruffin

Endnotes

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Point of Contact

For access to supplemental materials (e.g., surveys, anonymous raw data, codebooks) please contact **Liana Kreamer** at lkreamer@uncc.edu