

Meeting Overload

WHEN TOO MANY MEETINGS LEAVE TOO LITTLE CAPACITY TO ACTUALLY WORK

A calendar can be full while the work remains untouched

Meetings can be useful. They help people share information, make decisions, solve problems and stay connected. But when meetings begin filling most of the working day, employees can find themselves spending hours talking about work while losing the uninterrupted time needed to actually do it.

The difficulty is not measured only by the number of hours in meetings. There is preparation beforehand, the mental transition into the meeting, note-taking, social and sensory processing during it, actions created afterwards and the effort of returning to the task that was interrupted. A thirty-minute meeting can occupy far more than thirty minutes of cognitive capacity.

For employees with ADHD, autism, anxiety, auditory-processing differences or high levels of masking, repeated meetings may require particularly intense concentration and regulation. By late afternoon, there may be very little capacity left for detailed or creative work.

A diary full of meetings can create the appearance of productivity while quietly removing the conditions that productive work needs.

Back-to-back means no processing space

When one meeting ends at 10:00 and the next begins at 10:00, there is no meaningful transition. There is no time to write down the important thought, use the toilet, get a drink, regulate, respond to the urgent message or mentally close one subject before another begins.

The employee carries unfinished cognitive material from one conversation into the next. After several meetings, details can blur and actions become harder to remember.

Meeting fatigue is more than boredom

Listening closely, interpreting tone, deciding when to speak, tracking several speakers, processing slides and remembering actions are cognitively demanding. Online meetings can add screen fatigue and self-monitoring. In-person meetings may add travel between rooms, sensory demands and the pressure of sustained social presence.

Why the real work moves outside working hours

If the day is repeatedly divided into meetings, employees may begin completing concentrated work early in the morning, late in the evening or during breaks. The organisation has not reduced the workload; it has simply occupied the time that workload was supposed to fit into.

Does This Need to Be a Meeting?

One of the simplest ways to reduce meeting overload is to stop treating meetings as the default form of communication. Before scheduling one, ask what needs to happen. Is a decision required? Is discussion genuinely necessary? Does everybody invited need to contribute? Could the information be shared clearly in writing instead?

A meeting with no clear purpose can consume the concentrated working time of several people at once.

Shorter can be better

A calendar does not need to operate only in thirty- and sixty-minute blocks. A focused twenty-minute meeting with a clear purpose may achieve more than an hour of loosely structured discussion. Ending early should be treated as successful rather than as an invitation to fill the remaining time.

Protect the spaces between

Where possible, avoid back-to-back scheduling. Even ten or fifteen minutes can allow somebody to process actions, move their body, get a drink, regulate and prepare for the next demand. For neurodivergent employees, that transition time may be particularly important.

Agendas reduce cognitive uncertainty

An agenda helps people know what they are expected to discuss and whether preparation is needed. Sending key questions in advance can also support employees who process more effectively with thinking time. Clear actions at the end reduce the need to hold everything in working memory.

Who actually needs to attend?

Being copied into every meeting 'just in case' can create hours of unnecessary demand. Consider whether someone needs to attend the whole meeting, one section, or simply receive the decision afterwards. Give people appropriate permission to decline meetings where their presence is not needed.

Meeting-free focus time

Teams may benefit from protected periods where meetings are not scheduled. This is not empty diary space waiting to be filled. It is working time for analysis, writing, planning, problem-solving and other tasks that require sustained thought.

The space between meetings is not wasted time. It is often where thinking, processing and actual delivery happen.

Creating a More Balanced Working Day

Meeting overload is sometimes framed as an employee needing better time management. But an individual cannot organise their way out of a calendar that other people continually fill. Organisations and managers have a role in protecting enough time for the work they expect employees to deliver.

Managers: compare the diary with the workload

If an employee has six hours of meetings and eight hours of task work expected on the same day, something does not fit. Look at the actual capacity available rather than assuming the task work will somehow happen around the edges.

Also consider whether meetings are being used to compensate for unclear systems. Repeated update meetings may indicate that project information is difficult to find. Frequent check-ins may reflect uncertainty about priorities. Better written communication or shared systems can sometimes remove the need for another meeting.

For the employee: identify the meetings that cost the most

Notice what makes particular meetings exhausting. Is it length, number of people, lack of agenda, sensory environment, camera use, rapid discussion, uncertainty about your role or the absence of breaks? Specific information makes it easier to identify what might help.

Possible changes may include clearer agendas, written questions in advance, shorter attendance, protected focus blocks, breaks between meetings, written follow-up or adjustments appropriate to individual needs and the role.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

There is a strange experience in finishing a day exhausted and still feeling as though you have not done your work — even though you have been working continuously. Meeting overload can create exactly that feeling.

I would encourage both employees and workplaces to count meetings as work, not as something that happens before the 'real work' begins. They use attention, language, regulation, memory and social energy. Those resources are not unlimited.

We need time to communicate with one another. We also need time to think, concentrate, process and produce. A healthier workplace protects both.

A meeting check-in: Which meetings genuinely help me do my work? Which repeatedly leave me depleted? How much uninterrupted time remains after my meetings? Could any meeting be shorter, less frequent, written instead, or attended by fewer people? What transition time would help?

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not replace individual medical, psychological, occupational-health, safety or employment advice.