



# The Cost of Unnecessary Meeting Attendance

Otter.ai partnered with Dr. Steven G. Rogelberg, Professor of Organizational Science, Management at UNC Charlotte to research how companies can save time and money when it comes to meeting strategy, culture, and tools.

Dr. Rogelberg, an organizational psychologist, holds the title of Chancellor's Professor at UNC Charlotte for distinguished national, international and interdisciplinary contributions. He is an award-winning teacher and recipient of the very prestigious Humboldt Award for his research on meeting. His latest book, "The Surprising Science of Meetings: How You Can Lead Your Team to Peak Performance" (Oxford) was recognized by the Washington Post as the "#1 Leadership Book to Watch for". He and the book were also featured on CBS This Morning Freakonomics, HBR, WSJ, BBC World to name a few. Adam Grant has called Steven the "world's leading expert on how to fix meetings". He was the inaugural winner of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) Humanitarian Award and just finished his term as President of SIOP, the largest professional organization in the world for I-O psychology. Rogelberg was invited and testified to the US Congress (2022) on the topic of being successful and engaging others in very difficult working environments – using organizational psychology to elevate members of congress, their staffs, and the institution.

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# Executive Summary

- On average, organizations invest an estimated \$80,000, and could save an estimated \$25,000 or more per employee per years by reducing “unnecessary” meeting attendance.
- Professionals spend over one-third of their working hours in meetings. Although they report wanting to decline 31% of meetings, they actually only decline 14%, likely due to following organization norms.
- Despite the profound amount of time wasted in meetings, nearly 80% of employees report that their managers have not talked about declining meetings. Employees attending unnecessary meetings report feeling “annoyed” and “frustrated”.
- Reducing unnecessary meeting attendance would not only reduce strain on employees and increase productivity organizationally, it would also help companies drastically cut costs. For companies of 100 people, cutting unnecessary meetings would save nearly \$2.5M each year and for companies of 5,000 that savings rises to over \$100M.

## Survey Sample

**632 employees** voluntarily responded to a survey that was conducted in summer 2022. Respondents represented over **20 different industries**, with **Professional Services (33%)** making up the largest group, followed by **Information Technology (12%)**, and **Health & Human Services (9%)**. Job levels ranged from Assistant to SVP+, and the sample was representative of different work arrangements (**47% fully remote, 12% fully in-office, 40% hybrid.**) The median hours worked was 50 hours per week. The sample was **47% female, 51% male, and 2% other**. Full demographic details can be found in the appendix. Demographic differences, if found, are noted in the results themselves. Otherwise, just overall responses are reported.

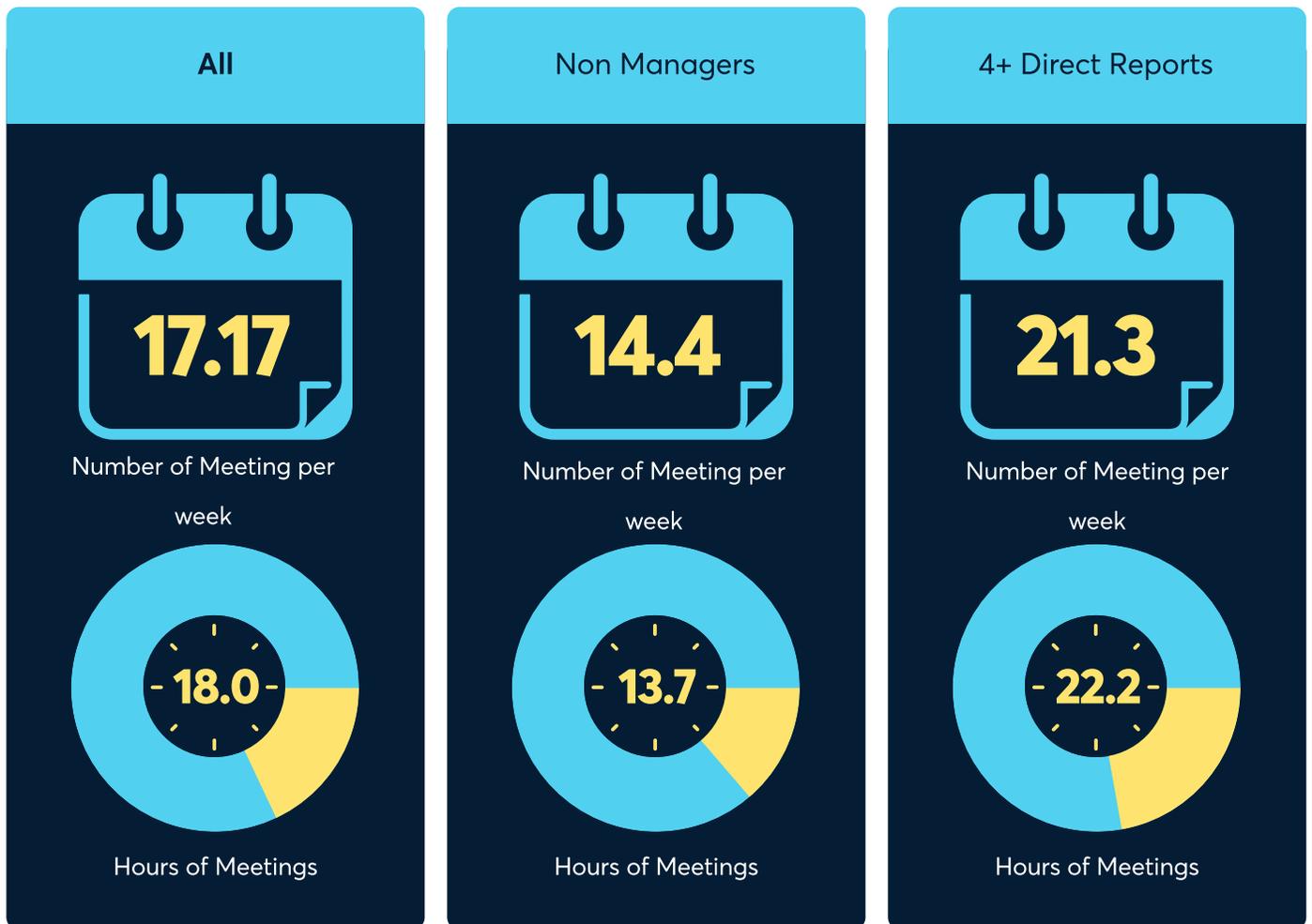
# Meeting Norms

## How much time do employees spend in meetings?

On average, employees have **17.7 meetings** (totaling 18 hours) per week.

Meeting frequency and time spent in meetings increases as management level and number of direct reports increases.<sup>1</sup>

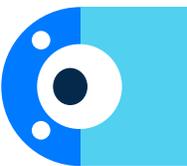
Non-managers average **14.4 meetings** (13.7 hours), and managers of at least 4 direct reports average **21.3 meetings** (22.2 hours) per week.



<sup>1</sup>On average, female employees reported 20 hours of meetings and male employees reported 16 hours per week.

Employees report that only **11.8** meetings (totaling 11.9 hours) per week were critical to attend, while **5.3** meetings (5.7 hours) **could have been skipped, as long as they were kept in the loop.**

Managers of at least 4 direct reports say **13.9** meetings (14.4 hours) were critical, while **6.5** meetings (7.5 hours) **could have been skipped as long as they were kept in the loop.**



<sup>1</sup>On average, female employees reported 20 hours of meetings and male employees reported 16 hours per week.

Employees were asked questions about their perceptions of meetings, based on their current experience. The following percentage of employees agreed with these statements:

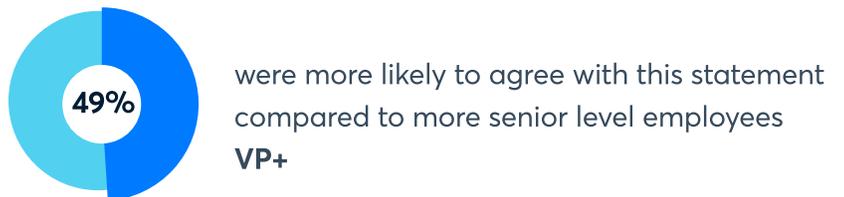
**Nearly half (46%) of employees agreed with this statement:**

I have too many unnecessary meetings on my calendar.<sup>2</sup>



**Over half (53%) of employees agreed with the statement:**

I feel like I need to attend meetings I am invited to, even if I am not critical to the agenda.



**Key Takeaways**

- The average employee spends 18 hours per week in meetings (13.7 hours for non-managers, and 22.2 hours for managers of 4+ direct reports).
- Employees report that about 30% of meetings could have been skipped, as long as they were kept in the loop.

<sup>2</sup>Female employees were also more likely to agree they have too many meetings (50% vs 42% of male employees).

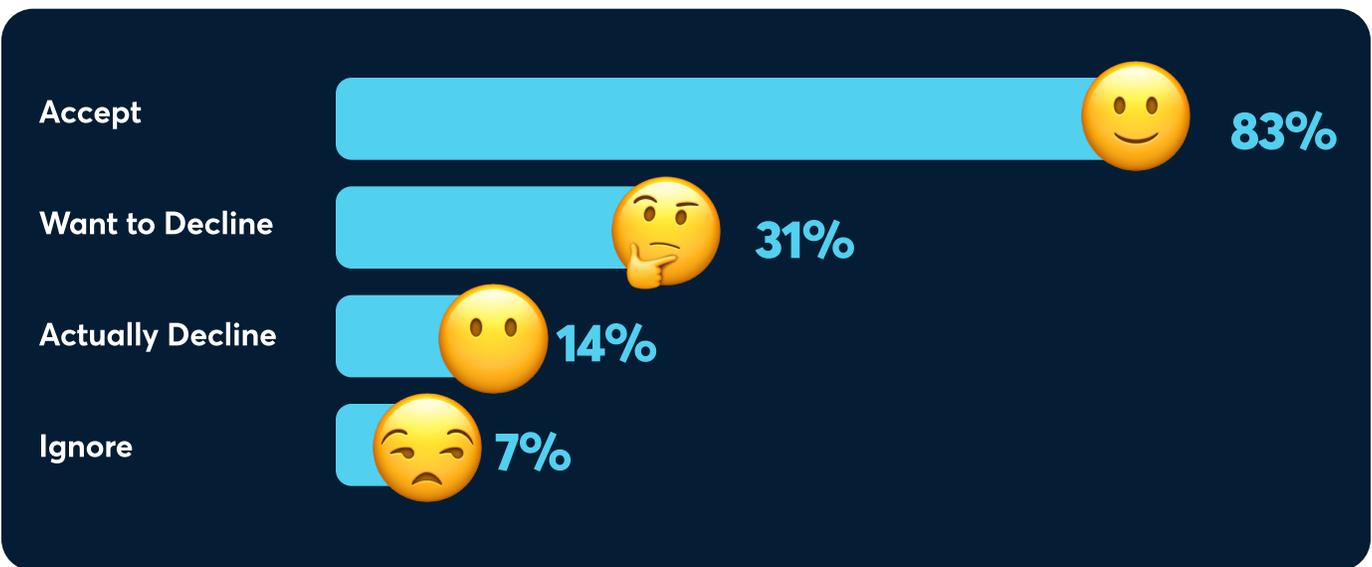
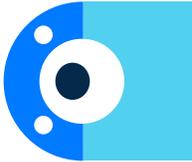
# Reactions to meetings

## How do employees respond to meeting invitations?

Survey respondents were asked to think about the various meeting invitations that are sent to them, and estimate what percentage they accept, want to decline, actually decline, and ignore.

Employees **accept 83%** of meeting invitations that are sent to them.

Employees report they **want to decline 31%**, but **actually decline only 14%** of meetings.



- Survey respondents were also asked to report on how they believe the “average” coworker in their organization responds to meeting invitations.
- Employees reported virtually the same estimates for their coworkers<sup>3</sup>, suggesting that accepting meetings, even when they seem unnecessary, is an **organizational norm** and **that their behavior is consistent with the norm.**

Employees were asked to consider situations in which they attend a meeting, and they feel their presence is not really needed. They were asked to estimate the percentage of those meetings they spend doing the following activities:

566 comments

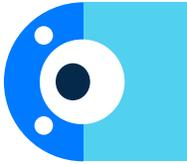
Top responses: Annoyed (75), Frustrated (50), Waste (32), Bored (42)

<sup>3</sup>Employees estimated that coworkers accept 84%, want to decline 36%, actually decline 12%, and ignore 10% of meeting invitations.

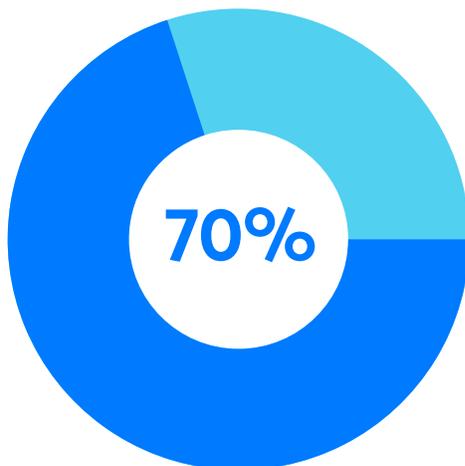




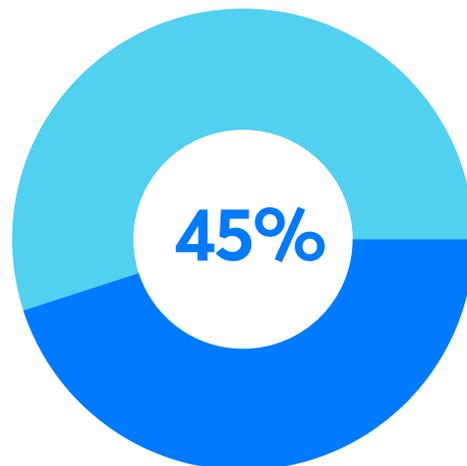
Employees were asked to consider situations in which they attend a meeting, and they feel their presence is not really needed. They were asked to estimate the percentage of those meetings they spend doing the following activities:



**Time spent multitasking:**



**Time spent with video / audio turned off:**



*When asked why they turn audio/video off, the primary reason was so that they could multitask.*

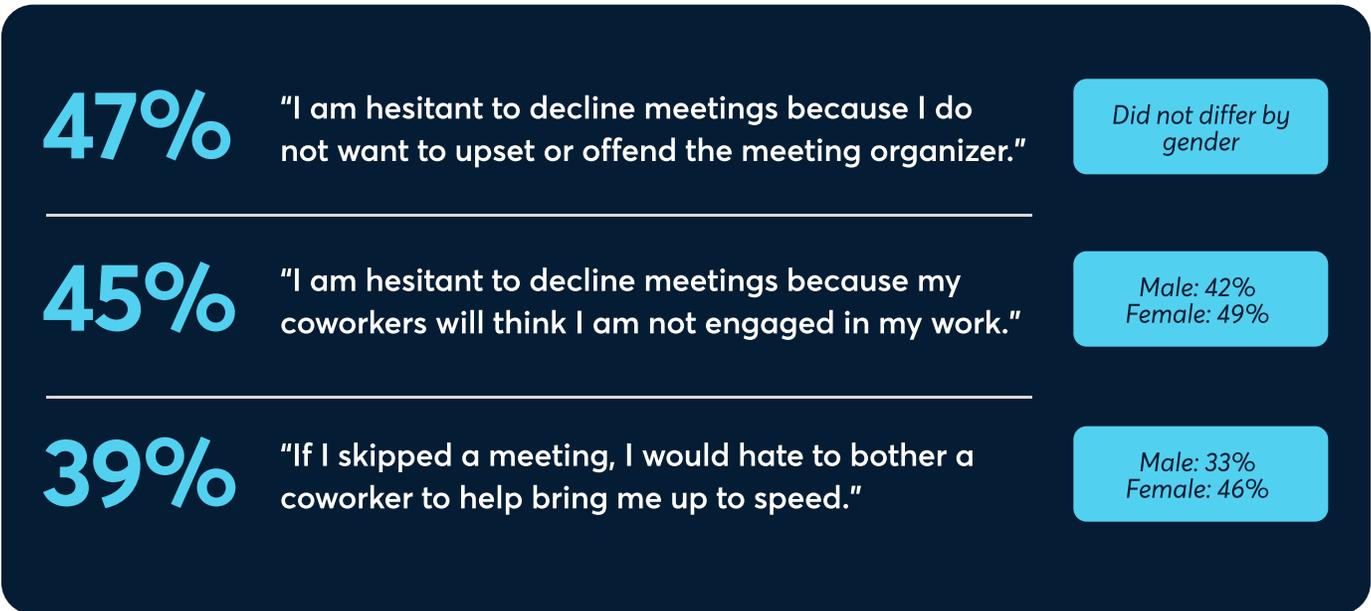
### Key Takeaways

- Employees accept 83% of meetings. They want to decline 31%, but only decline 14% of meeting invitations. Accepting meetings is an organizational norm.
- If employees were kept in the loop, they feel they could skip 41% of meetings led by a leader not in their department or team, 33% of meetings led by a peer, and 33% of meetings led by a direct report.
- When attending "unnecessary" meetings, employees spend 45% of their time with their video/audio off, and 70% of their time multitasking.

# Declining Meetings

## Why are employees hesitant to decline or skip meetings?

Employees were asked questions about their perceptions of meetings, based on their current experience. The following percentage of employees agreed with these statements:



## Employees generally do not feel comfortable declining meetings if it is up to their discretion.

I feel like I need to attend meetings I am invited to, even if I am not critical to the agenda.

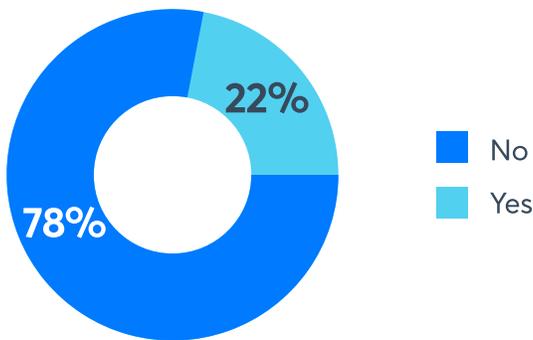
- **90%** agreed they feel comfortable declining if they have a **schedule conflict**.
- **88%** of employees agreed that they could decline a meeting if their **manager explicitly told them it is OK**.

- On the other hand, only **51%** feel they can decline if they are **too busy**.
- Even if they don't think the meeting will be a , only **54%** feel comfortable declining.

|                                                                                                                 | Disagree % | Neutral % | Agree % |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------|---------|
| <i>I feel comfortable declining a meeting if I have a schedule conflict.</i>                                    | 7%         | 3%        | 90%     |
| <i>I feel comfortable declining a meeting when my manager explicitly tells me it is OK to do so.</i>            | 3%         | 9%        | 88%     |
| <i>I feel comfortable declining a meeting if I am too busy with other work.</i>                                 | 34%        | 15%       | 51%     |
| <i>I feel comfortable declining when meetings are informational only (i.e., one-way communication).</i>         | 22%        | 24%       | 54%     |
| <i>I feel comfortable declining a meeting if I know I am not participating in the discussion.</i>               | 24%        | 18%       | 58%     |
| <i>I feel comfortable declining a meeting if I can rely on someone else to take notes for me.</i>               | 24%        | 19%       | 54%     |
| <i>I feel comfortable declining a meeting if I don't think the meeting will be a productive use of my time.</i> | 29%        | 17%       | 54%     |

## Do managers talk about declining meetings?

Employees were asked, "Has your manager or leader explicitly talked about declining meetings (e.g., when to do it)?" If answered yes, they were asked, "What have they said?"



**78%** of employees reported that their managers have not talked about declining meetings.

There were 121 comments in response to this question (for those who answered "Yes"), and the comments were analyzed for themes. Illustrative examples are provided to summarize the ways that managers talk to employees about declining meetings.

Q: Has your manager or leader explicitly talked about declining meetings? (If yes, what have they said)?

*"Use your judgement about which meetings are important to you and/or to which you add significant value."*

For those employees whose managers have talked to them about declining meetings, the most common theme was managers encouraged employees to use their judgment to determine if the meeting will be a good use of their time and decide whether or not to attend accordingly.

The other top themes employees reported were:

- They can decline meetings if they are too busy.

*"If you are behind on your work, and the meeting will have limited benefit to you, please focus on your own work first."*

- They can decline if the meeting is not directly related to their work.

*"There have been a few specific instances where I was told that I didn't need to join a meeting because the topic was irrelevant to me. In general, the norm is to accept everything you are invited to unless you have a conflict."*

- They can decline if someone else from the team can attend the meeting to take notes.

*"If a peer or direct report can attend, we try to avoid having too many teammates in meetings and just keep each other updated"*

**Employee responses suggest that only a handful of managers (<5% of comments) explicitly defined essential and non-essential meetings for employees.**

### Key Takeaways

- Employees are more likely to decline meetings if they have a schedule conflict (90%), but not if they are too busy (51%) or if they do not think the meeting will be a productive use of time (54%).
- Female employees are more concerned about coworkers' perceptions. Specifically, that others will think they are not engaged if they decline meetings, and they would not want to bother a coworker to be brought up to speed.
- Only 22% of employees say their managers have talked about declining meetings.

# Solutions to attending fewer meetings

## How can organizations reduce unnecessary meeting attendance?

Employees were asked, "if you are not comfortable declining meetings, what would it take to change that?" There were 472 comments in response to this question, and the comments were analyzed for themes. Illustrative examples are provided to summarize how employees feel about declining meetings, and what it would take to change their beliefs.

An analysis of employee comments, in addition to the survey results in aggregate, yielded three different strategies for reducing the number of unnecessary meetings that employees attend:



**1** Shift culture by disrupting meeting norms.



**2** Distribute high quality meeting notes in a timely manner.



**3** Invite employees to only parts of meetings that are relevant to them.

Each strategy is described below, along with comments from employees and tips for leaders to implement these changes.

### 1 Shift culture by disrupting meeting norms

- The most prevalent theme was that it would take a **shift in organizational culture** to change employee's behaviors around declining meetings.

About 30% of employees referenced the culture around meeting acceptance.

*Q: If you don't feel comfortable declining meeting invitations (even when you think your attendance is not necessary), what would it take to change that?*

*"It would require a culture shift away from always being available"*

*"I think it's considered rude in our culture to decline a meeting if you have been invited"*

*"A work environment that supports more autonomy in decision making vs consensus"*

Below are three actionable ways that leaders can start to shift the organizational culture and disrupt pre-existing meeting norms, along with quotes from employees to support these strategies:

| Encourage open conversations between managers and employees                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Provide formal policies, guidance, or permission                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Encourage leaders to "model the way"                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><i>"I would need to have a discussion with my supervisor"</i></p> <p><i>"Advance discussion with my manager to set expectations regarding meeting attendance"</i></p> <p><i>"Having explicit conversations around decision rules for attending or declining meetings"</i></p> | <p><i>My boss telling me explicitly that I can decline if the meeting is not the best use of my time"</i></p> <p><i>"Direct leader awareness/ approval"</i></p> <p><i>"A note from the organizer reinforcing that my attendance is not needed"</i></p> | <p><i>"Modeling of meeting decline behavior by manager/peers at a similar level as me within the organization"</i></p> <p><i>Management reducing its expectations that people attend</i></p> |

While most employees reported that their leaders have not talked about declining meetings, they suggest that these of conversations would help change their perceptions.

## 2 Distribute high quality meeting notes in a timely manner

Meeting notes can make employees feel more comfortable skipping meetings. 71% of employees agreed with the statement:

*"If I knew I was going to receive high quality meeting notes, I would feel more comfortable skipping non-critical meetings."*



**Q:** *If you don't feel comfortable declining meeting invitations (even when you think your attendance is not necessary), what would it take to change that?*

*"Having good follow up notes from the meeting including any action items and discussion points"*

*"Meeting notes being sent out after each meeting where information is provided or discovered"*



Employees would prefer a **summary of key decisions, dates, and action items**, over a transcript or recording of the full meeting.

*Survey respondents were told to consider a situation where they do not attend a meeting, but need to be kept in the loop via meeting notes. They were asked to rate how important the following items are in those meeting notes.*

The top **MUST HAVES** in meeting notes...

- Decisions made
- Dates and deadlines
- Action items & owners

The top **NICE TO HAVES**...

- Purpose of the meeting
- Key acronyms/terms used
- High level summary of meeting

Items **NOT** needed in meeting notes...

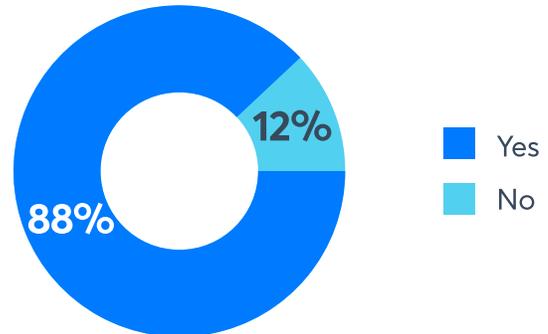
- Meeting transcript
- Video recording
- Audio recording

The majority of employees (77%) believe meeting notes should be shared no later than 1 day after the meeting.

### 3 Invite employees to only parts of meetings that are relevant to them

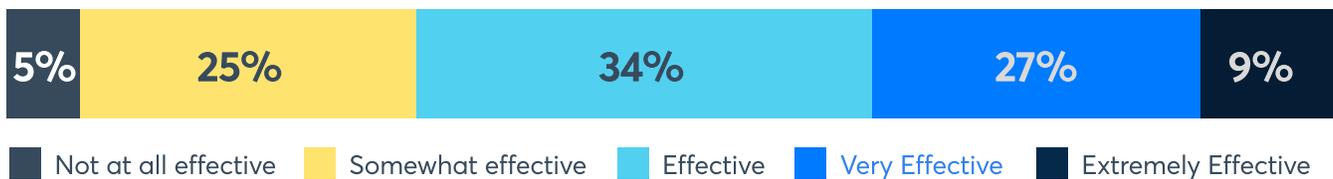
- Most employees (88%) have been invited to attend just part of a meeting.

*Q: Have you ever been invited to attend just part of a meeting (e.g., through a timed agenda), but not all of it?*



For those who responded 'Yes', most employees believe this is an effective approach:

#### How effective was this approach?



To successfully implement this strategy, meeting organizers need to establish a clear agenda to ensure attendees can evaluate whether their presence is needed.

*Q: If you don't feel comfortable declining meeting invitations (even when you think your attendance is not necessary), what would it take to change that?*

*"Having more info up front about agenda, content and expected outcomes"*

*"Clear agenda so I can evaluate if my attendance would be better served elsewhere."*

#### Key Takeaways

- Employees say that a change in organizational culture would be needed to make them feel differently about declining meetings.
- Three ways to change organizational culture include: open conversations with managers, formal policies or guidance, and encouraging leaders to model new behaviors.
- To stay in the loop, employees would prefer a summary of key decisions, dates, and action items, over a transcript or recording of the full meeting.

# Benefits & Cost Savings

## What are the benefits of attending fewer unnecessary meetings?

- 86% of employees believe they work more effectively with, longer, uninterrupted periods of time.
- The majority of employees report that their productivity, job satisfaction, and engagement would improve (see responses in table below).

|                                                                                          | Disagree % | Neutral % | Agree % |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------|---------|
| <i>I work more effectively when I have longer periods of time without interruptions.</i> | 5%         | 9%        | 86%     |
| <i>If I could skip unnecessary meetings, my productivity would improve.</i>              | 3%         | 13%       | 84%     |
| <i>If I could skip unnecessary meetings, my job satisfaction would improve.</i>          | 7%         | 24%       | 70%     |
| <i>If I could skip unnecessary meetings, my engagement at work would improve.</i>        | 8%         | 26%       | 66%     |

*These responses were consistent across management levels and demographic variables.*

## What is the potential cost savings of reducing meeting attendance?

Based on data from the research sample collected, the average organization invests over \$80,000 in meetings per employee, per year.<sup>4</sup> This investment is substantially higher for managers of 4+ direct reports, compared to non-managers (see table below).

Considering the number of meetings that employees report they could skip (as long as they were kept in the loop), there is a potential "wasted" investment<sup>5</sup> of over \$25,000 per employee, per year. This number is substantially higher for managers of 4+ direct reports compared to non-managers.

|                                | Median Salary    | Weekly Hours Spent in all Meetings | Annual Investment in Meetings | Weekly Hours in "Wasted" Meetings | Annual "Wasted" Investment |
|--------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Ind. Contributors (< \$90k)    | \$72,000         | 9.5                                | \$15,800                      | 2.1                               | \$3,500                    |
| Ind. Contributors (\$90k+)     | \$175,000        | 15.2                               | \$49,000                      | 5.0                               | \$16,100                   |
| Managers of 1-3 Direct Reports | \$160,000        | 14.2                               | \$49,400                      | 3.7                               | \$12,800                   |
| Managers of 4+ Direct Reports  | \$227,500        | 22.2                               | 124,600                       | 7.5                               | \$42,000                   |
| <b>All</b>                     | <b>\$185,000</b> | <b>18.0</b>                        | <b>\$80,300</b>               | <b>5.7</b>                        | <b>\$25,400</b>            |

Note: Analysis includes full-time employees only (> 40 hours/week).

<sup>4</sup>Investment in meetings = self-reported hours spent in meetings each week × employee's hourly rate (derived from self-reported annual salary).

<sup>5</sup>"Wasted" investment = self-reported time spent in meetings each week that could be skipped × employee's hourly rate.



To estimate the average investment and potential wasted investment for an average organization, these rates were extrapolated to represent a 5,000-person firm. Assuming the employee makeup was 50% non-managers, 25% managers of 1-3 direct reports, and 25% managers of 4+ direct reports, the cost savings are as follows:

In an organization with 5,000 employees, the total investment in meetings is estimated to be approximately **\$320 million** per year, with a potential wasted investment of **\$101 million** per year.

*(Additional simulations of varying size and manager/non-manager populations are below):*

| Organization Size | Breakdown of % Non-manager - % Manager of 1-3 - % Manager of 4+ |                   |                 |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
|                   | 30% - 30% - 40%                                                 | 40% - 30% - 30%   | 50% - 25% - 25% |
| 100 employees     | \$7.7m / \$2.5m                                                 | \$6.8m / \$2.2m   | \$6.4m / \$2m   |
| 500 employees     | \$38.5m / \$12.2m                                               | \$34.4m / \$10.8m | \$32m / \$10.1m |
| 5,000 employees   | \$385m / \$123m                                                 | \$344m / \$108m   | \$320m / \$101m |

*Total Annual Investment / Wasted Investment*

### Key Takeaways

- Organizations invest a significant amount of money in their employees, and thus, in the meetings they attend (\$80,000 per employee per year, on average).
- There is potential for massive cost-savings (\$25,000 per employee per year, on average) by reducing unnecessary meeting attendance.
- For a 5,000-person organization, eliminating unnecessary meetings could recapture an estimated \$10 million each year.

# APPENDIX: Sample Demographics

| Survey Progress<br>(Questions completed) | #          | %   |
|------------------------------------------|------------|-----|
| 15-44%                                   | 58         | 9%  |
| 52-74%                                   | 58         | 9%  |
| 100%                                     | 516        | 82% |
| <b>Total</b>                             | <b>632</b> |     |

| Gender       | #          | %   |
|--------------|------------|-----|
| Female       | 241        | 47% |
| Male         | 263        | 51% |
| Other        | 9          | 2%  |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>513</b> |     |

| Direct Reports     | #          | %   |
|--------------------|------------|-----|
| Non-Manager        | 140        | 27% |
| 1-3 Direct Reports | 123        | 24% |
| 4+ Direct Reports  | 248        | 49% |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>511</b> |     |

| Work Arrangement        | #          | %   |
|-------------------------|------------|-----|
| Fully in-office (5days) | 64         | 12% |
| 3-4 days in-office      | 82         | 16% |
| 1-2 days in office      | 124        | 24% |
| Fully remote (0 days)   | 245        | 48% |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>515</b> |     |

| Job Level             | #          | %   | Median Annual Salary | Median Hours Worked per Week | Avg # Direct Reports |
|-----------------------|------------|-----|----------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Asst, Prof/Sr. Prof   | 97         | 19% | \$120,000            | 41                           | 0.5                  |
| Manager/Sr. Manager   | 75         | 15% | \$132,500            | 45                           | 1.8                  |
| Director/Sr. Director | 103        | 20% | \$180,000            | 50                           | 2.1                  |
| Vice President        | 66         | 13% | \$230,000            | 50                           | 2.6                  |
| SVP+                  | 172        | 34% | \$250,000            | 50                           | 3.1                  |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>513</b> |     | <b>\$180,000</b>     | <b>50</b>                    | <b>1.9</b>           |

\*Top "Other" industries included Non-Profit (15), Retail (7), Consulting (5), Real Estate (3), Consumer Goods (3), Hospitality (3). Note: Demographic questions were at the end of the survey, thus the total number of responses is lower for these values.

| Industry                                  | #          | %   |
|-------------------------------------------|------------|-----|
| Professional and Business Services        | 169        | 33% |
| Other*                                    | 96         | 19% |
| Information Technology                    | 63         | 12% |
| Health and Human Services                 | 45         | 9%  |
| Financial Services                        | 35         | 7%  |
| Government & Public Administration        | 34         | 7%  |
| Manufacturing                             | 33         | 6%  |
| Education                                 | 31         | 6%  |
| Transportation, Distribution, & Logistics | 8          | 2%  |
| <b>Total</b>                              | <b>514</b> |     |



No matter how big or small your company is, one easy way to streamline and reduce unnecessary meeting attendance is by using Otter. **Otter automatically takes notes for any discussion.** These notes can be **shared with anyone**, including those who did not join the discussion. Skip meetings that do not require your participation and use Otter to stay in the loop.

Beyond that, **Otter provides automated insights including an outline summary of each call.** The Otter notes are **stored, accessible, and searchable** all in one central place and employees can even tag their colleagues, comment, and ask questions directly within the notes.

To see Otter in action and facilitate meeting productivity across teams and projects, try Otter Business by visiting [otter.ai/business](https://otter.ai/business).