

# WORKFORCE HORIZONS

## Planning Tomorrow's Workforce Today

Louisiana Department of Civil Service

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### **ARE YOU SUFFERING FROM MEETINGS OVERLOAD?**

Have you ever wanted to tear your hair out at the prospect of attending another boring, pointless meeting? Does it seem as if you can never get anything accomplished because you are frittering away your time attending one unproductive meeting after another?

Well, you are not alone. A recent survey by NFI Research found that 57% of business leaders spend 21-60% of their time each week on *internal* meetings. Most of these same executives considered at least 50% of these meetings to be unproductive.<sup>1</sup>

It is a truism that one can either meet or work. But having a meeting is not working. Activity is not the same thing as achievement. While some meetings are necessary, many organizations go overboard with internal get-togethers. John Hollon, editor of *Workforce Management*,

### **WORKFORCE PLANNING MAXIM OF THE DAY**

*“People who enjoy meetings should not be in charge of anything.” – Thomas Sowell*

estimated in a recent article that over a period of a little more than eleven years with one former employer, he attended around 13,000 meetings. He considered only ten percent of them to be truly productive.<sup>2</sup>

In his book, *The Effective Executive*<sup>3</sup>, the late Peter Drucker cites an excess of meetings as a primary symptom of a workplace that is organized poorly and in need of a structural adjustment – what he terms *malorganization*.

Drucker’s rule of thumb is that whenever people in an organization, including top executives, find themselves spending more than 25% of their time in meetings, it is a sign that the rot of malorganization is present. As Drucker phrases it “An organization in which everybody meets all the time is an organization in which no one gets anything done.”

According to Drucker, too many meetings are a sign of poor structuring of jobs and organizational components. Work that should be all in one job or component is instead spread out over several jobs or components. Responsibility is too diffused and information is not getting to the persons who need it.

Meetings cannot substitute for actual work or accomplishment. At best they provide a plan and direction for work and a focus of effort and resources to keep activities on track. Too many meetings suck the life out of an organization.

Left unchecked, there is a natural tendency for meetings to proliferate in any organization. Part of this is due to the fact that businesses are social organizations as well as business organizations and people like to talk about things. But an excess of meetings can be a symptom of poor leadership. It can be a delaying tactic, a means of avoiding or postponing making a decision or taking action by having a meeting instead. This gives the appearance of something being done while not actually accomplishing anything.

Sometimes executives use meetings as a means of avoiding personal responsibility and accountability for decisions by delegating decisions to a committee. Although a meeting can be an effective and necessary communication tool, it is not always the most efficient way to communicate.

So how does one avoid the crippling paralysis of meetings cancer? Here are some tips.

1. Top executives should make a conscious effort to reduce the number of meetings and to plan them with specific agendas so as to minimize time-wasting rambling.
2. Limit the list of attendees to those who absolutely need to be there. Avoid the tendency to just invite everyone who might be remotely connected to the subject of the meeting. For example, it might be sufficient for some people to be sent a summary of meeting results or asked for comments by email or other means rather than requiring them to attend the meeting. This does not mean that you leave key people “out of the loop.”
3. Meetings should also be managed to keep participants on task and not let

them go off on irrelevant side issues; someone needs to control the flow during the meeting to make it as productive and efficient as possible.

4. Every meeting should have a definable purpose and a definite goal or product. This should be communicated to attendees at the beginning of or prior to the meeting. When the meeting is over, every attendee should be able to feel that the goal was achieved. If you cannot formulate a definable product before the meeting you should probably not have a meeting since it will undoubtedly be nothing more than a rambling, time-wasting bull-session.
5. Whenever, you as an executive have an impulse to call a meeting, pause and take a moment to ask yourself if it is really necessary. Remember, nobody’s **job** is “attending meetings.” If an employee is attending a meeting, he or she is not working. Think about what you are taking them away from doing and the productivity that is being lost by their attending a meeting and consider whether it is really worth it.

#### **QUOTE OF THE DAY**

*“Meetings are indispensable when you don’t want to do anything.” – John Kenneth Galbraith*

#### **MANAGEMENT TIPS FROM THE U. S. MARINES**

The United States Marine Corps may seem an odd place to look for guidelines on business management. But as David H. Freedman, senior editor at *Forbes* magazine points out in his book *Corps Business: The 30 Management Principles of the U. S. Marines*,<sup>4</sup> the Marines have evolved a set of management principles tested under the most demanding conditions conceivable that

makes them a highly adaptable, flexible organization able to respond rapidly and effectively to complex changing conditions. Based on over a hundred interviews and many days observing the Marines in training and exercises, Freedman has compiled a list of the 30 management principles the Marines operate by that he believes can be used by any organization to achieve the adaptability and responsiveness required in today's ultra-competitive, fast changing business environments.

Here is a sampling of some of the principles:

- Aim for the 70% solution. It is better to use an imperfect plan now rather than wait until it is too late trying to roll out the perfect plan.
- Organize according to the rule of three. In times of stress, most people can handle exactly three key responsibilities.
- Organize by task. The size and composition of groups in an organization should be changed according to the needs of each specific mission (project or task).
- Demand to be questioned. Subordinates should feel free to openly disagree with their managers until it is time to implement or carry out a legitimate decision.
- Cross Train. Although this may seem inefficient, running people through different jobs creates versatile managers that understand all aspects of an organization.
- Reward failure. A person who never fails is probably not pushing the envelope or testing his or her limits. People should be encouraged test their limits. It's okay to fail as long as they learn from it.

- Instill values that support the mission. Success is often determined by shared character and values.

For more on these principles you'll have to read the book. I highly recommend it. It is an enlightening and fun read.

### SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> John Hollon, "Meeting Malaise," Workforce Management, (November 20, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> John Hollon, "Meeting Malaise," Workforce Management, (November 20, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> Peter Drucker, The Effective Executive, (New York: Harper Business, 1993), pp. 44-45.

<sup>4</sup> David H. Freedman, Corps Business: The 30 Management Principles of the U.S. Marine Corps, (New York: Harper Business, 2000).

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Comments and submissions: We welcome questions about workforce planning and suggestions for improvements to the newsletter as well as submissions of articles about what your agency is doing in workforce planning. Questions, comments, and requests to be added to the distribution list for the newsletter should be sent to the editor.

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