The evolution of remote meetings at work: shorter, smaller and more spontaneous

One of the biggest concerns employers have had about the rise of fully remote and hybrid working is the loss of regular impromptu discussions, which are thought to foster team spirit, embed organisational culture and spark innovation. However, research recently published in the Harvard Business Review suggests that this concern is ever more misplaced.

Researchers from the University of Texas and the software company Vyopta scrutinised how remote meetings (defined as meetings where at least one person is remote from those attending in person) have changed since the start of the pandemic. Despite concerns about Zoom fatigue and disengaged staff who are quietly quitting, the research showed that, in fact, remote meetings are being held more frequently, efficiently and informally than used to be the case.

How has remote collaboration changed between 2020 and 2022?

The researchers gathered metadata from all Zoom, Teams and Webex meetings from ten large global organisations from various sectors including technology, healthcare, energy and financial services. The researchers compared snapshots of a six-week period across April to May 2020, with the same periods in 2021 and 2022. This dataset resulted in a total of more than 48 million meetings attended by more than 500,000 employees.

The researchers discovered that remote meetings have changed in several important ways since the beginning of the pandemic:

- **Remote meetings have become more frequent**: the data showed that there was a 60% increase in the number of remote meetings per employee between 2020 and 2022. In 2020, employees attended five remote meetings per week on average. By 2022, this had risen to eight per employee. This is notable given that in 2020 all meetings would have had to be remote due to the closure of workplaces. You would be forgiven for expecting to see a higher number of remote meetings in 2020 compared to 2022. However, remote meetings have increased, suggesting employers and workers have embraced video conferencing technology and the efficiencies it offers.

- **Remote meetings have become shorter, smaller and more spontaneous:** the data also indicated that workers have become more agile in their approach to remote meetings. Meetings decreased in length by 25% (from 43 minutes on average in 2020 to 33 minutes on average by 2022) and became smaller (dropping from an average of 20 participants in 2020 to 10 participants by 2022). The data also revealed a large increase in the number of one-to-one remote meetings, rising from 17% to 42%. There was also a very significant jump in the number of unplanned one-to-one meetings over this period. In 2020 just 17% of one-to-one meetings were spontaneous, but by 2022 this had grown to 66%.

- **Leavers became disengaged:** perhaps unsurprisingly, the data revealed that employees who went on to leave their organisation attended substantially fewer meetings, suggesting that they had become disengaged for some time

before leaving. Leavers attended 67% fewer spontaneous one-to one-meetings, 22% fewer planned one-to-one meetings and 20% fewer planned group meetings.

What are the key learning points for employers?

Overall, the research supports the view that remote workers are not disengaged hermit-like creatures, but active participants in the workplace. No doubt workers have become more adept at using video conferencing technology over the last two years and this may go some way to explaining the increase in remote meetings. However, the change in the nature of the meetings – shorter, smaller and more spontaneous – suggests a more flexible approach to remote meetings has become embedded within organisations. It seems that workers are willing and able to use remote meetings in a more relaxed way, perhaps replacing the corridor catch up and the watercooler chat.

If the research data is representative of a wider shift in the workplace towards more agile remote meetings, then this should allay some of the concerns employers have about the impact of remote working on collaboration and communication. However, the value of in-person meetings will, to some extent, depend on the sector and type of business.

The researchers suggest three action points for employers to help bolster this trend:

- **Encourage an overlap in working patterns:** in order for

unplanned meetings to happen, there needs to be some degree of shared working time between employees. Where everyone is on the same or similar working pattern and in the same time zone, this should not be a problem. Where there are differences, then securing some overlapping time should be a priority to allow remote meetings to take place,

- **Make it easy for people to meet:** as well as ensuring an overlap in working time, employers should find other ways to make remote meetings as stress-free as possible. Ensuring that staff have easy access to video conferencing technology and understand how to use it is a vital first step. Indeed, in one **recent case** an Employment Tribunal decided that an employer had failed to make reasonable adjustments by not rescheduling a remote meeting for a disabled employee who did not know how to use Teams. Employers can also encourage remote meetings by not requiring participants to have their cameras on all the time. "Zoom fatigue" is real and it is recommended that the default approach should be to have cameras off, and only turn them on when there is a clear benefit to doing so. In other words, "cameras off" meetings take the place of phone calls and conference calls and "cameras on" meetings take the place of face-to-face interactions.

- **Identify disengaged workers and try to reengage them:** the data suggests that where a worker is attending fewer meetings, this is because they are disengaging from work. This may be an indicator that they are planning to do leave. Employers may wish to collect and analyse data regarding attendance at meetings to try to identify staff who are disengaging and think about ways to bring them back on board. Where an employer does not want to collect such data, another way to address the

issue of potential disengagement is to encourage managers to talk openly with staff about the issue of team interaction and seek feedback from team members about how this can be improved.

Harvard Business Review – "No, Remote Employees Aren't Becoming Less Engaged"

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