



 GET YOUR TIME BACK

# MEETINGS: GOING FROM WASTE OF TIME TO WORTH THE TIME





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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

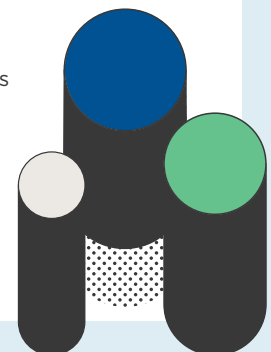
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## ABOUT GFOA

The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) represents over 21,000 public finance officers throughout the United States and Canada. GFOA's mission is to advance excellence in government finance. GFOA views its role as a resource, educator, facilitator, and advocate for both its members and the governments they serve and provides best practice guidance, leadership, professional development, resources and tools, networking opportunities, award programs, and advisory services.

## ABOUT THE RETHINKING BUDGETING PROJECT

Local governments have long relied on incremental, line item budgeting where last year's budget becomes next year's budget with changes around the margin. Though this form of budgeting has its advantages and can be useful under circumstances of stability, it also has important disadvantages. The primary disadvantage is that it causes local governments to be slow to adapt to changing conditions. The premise of the "Rethinking Budgeting" initiative is that the public finance profession has an opportunity to update local government budgeting practices to take advantage of new ways of thinking, new technologies, and to better meet the changing needs of communities. The Rethinking Budgeting initiative will seek out and share unconventional, but promising methods for local governments to improve how they budget.



**The time wasted in meetings is a universal joke of the working world.** Unfortunately, the time lost to meetings is no laughing matter for many GFOA members. A GFOA poll asked members to identify their most annoying source of wasted time. Meetings “won,” with a plurality (one-third) of respondents.<sup>1</sup> GFOA members are not alone in their low regard for meetings. According to one study of senior managers from various industries:<sup>2</sup>

**65%** said meetings keep them from completing their own work.

**71%** said meetings are unproductive and inefficient.



One of the millions of cartoons that have been made about unproductive meetings

Of course, meetings are not all bad. They are needed for collaboration and inclusive decision-making. However, if meetings are mishandled, their cost can outweigh their benefits—as the statistics above show!

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, we have an opportunity to rethink how we work—including taking a new and better approach to meetings, especially as in-person meetings become more practical. To make meetings cost-beneficial, we need to start by understanding how and why meetings waste time. This will allow us to address the root causes of wasted time.

Wasted time from meetings comes in two basic forms.<sup>3</sup> The first form is wasted individual work time. An obvious cause of this waste is when too many meetings crowd out time for individual work. A less obvious but still debilitating source of waste is poorly scheduled meetings that interrupt opportunities to concentrate on complex tasks like developing forecasts and budgets or preparing financial statements.

The second form is wasted group work time. Meetings bring together a group of people to accomplish some task.

Hence, meetings are an opportunity for teamwork, even if the team only lasts for as long as the meeting. If a meeting doesn't result in good teamwork, then it is a waste of time. An obvious cause of this waste is poorly organized meetings. Signs of poorly organized meetings include unclear goals, undefined participant roles, and inadequate participant preparation.



## GET YOUR TIME BACK CHALLENGE

To help GFOA members get time back in their day, we are introducing the *Get Your Time Back Challenge*. The challenge asks participants to try strategies like we describe in this paper and report back the results. Lessons learned will be shared with the GFOA membership, and participants will be recognized for their achievements.

Visit [gfoa.org/get-your-time-back](https://gfoa.org/get-your-time-back) for details on how to participate.

A poorly organized meeting gives rise to a more insidious waste of group work time. Poor organization may convince participants that they won't get anything out of the meeting. In response, they work on their own tasks, like answering emails, during the meeting. As they become disengaged from the meeting, the potential for teamwork decreases.

Now that we know the underlying causes of wasted time in meetings, we are ready to solve the problem. Defining your problem will help you focus on the right solutions. We'll review these solutions in the rest of this paper. The key points have been summarized in this downloadable meeting prep checklist.

## Optimizing Individual Work Time Versus Meetings

The first and most important step for optimizing individual work time is deciding if a meeting is necessary. The workplace joke of “this could have been handled over email” is widely known because it's true. Everyone benefits from reducing the burden meetings place on individual work time. This can be done by eliminating meetings or limiting the time devoted to them.

The prime candidate for elimination is the dreaded status meeting. Status meetings are often one-way presentations of information. If the primary goal is to share information and participants don't need to be in the same place at the same time to share, consider if the meeting can be canceled and replaced with an email, video blog, or some other medium that recipients can consume when it suits their schedule.

If it is important to have a status meeting, perhaps it can be a “stand up meeting.” Participants stand, which encourages people to move through the agenda quickly, not talk too much, etc. The goal of a stand up meeting is to be done in about 15 minutes. If you get people the information ahead of time, then the 15 minutes can be used to ask questions about the materials and for the leader of the meeting to address issues that can't be solved over email. If a stand up meeting is not practical, look for other opportunities to cut the length of the meeting.

### STATUS MEETING STATS<sup>4</sup>



**Just under 50%** of employed adults would rather go to the DMV or watch paint dry than attend a status meeting.

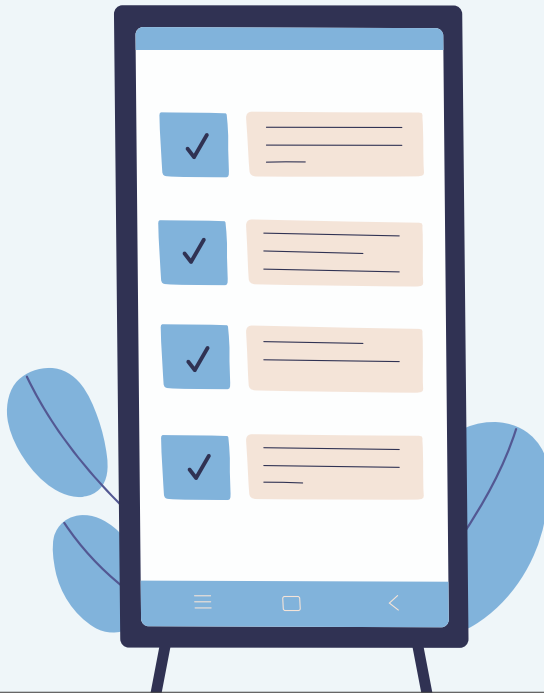


**Three out of five** multitask during status meetings.



**35%** of employed adults called status meetings a waste of time.





If participants know that the times on the agenda are firm, they are likely to self-regulate excess talking.

Meetings are typically best for tasks involving complex coordination and negotiation. Even for these meetings, there is potential to economize the time required. Include clear start and stop times for the items on the agenda. Make every effort to stick to them—especially the scheduled end time for the meeting. If participants know that the times on the agenda are firm, they are likely to self-regulate excess talking, sidebar conversations, etc. This strategy can be made more effective by agreeing on a set of “ground rules.” One of those rules should be to respect scheduled start and stop times and to commit meeting leaders to ask the participants’ permission to go late (and to stop the meeting if participants can’t oblige).

#### Sample Meeting Ground Rules

**Respect the discussion and the facilitators.** Listen to participants when they speak.

**Share the air and encourage others.** Step up to encourage those who have not participated. Step back to make sure you are not dominating the conversation.

**Practice good faith.** We cannot know the reasons why a person expresses an idea. Assume the best of your participants’ intentions in case of disagreement.

**Consider your position.** Think consciously of our social positions, allowing us to work across our race, gender, sexuality and social differences in ways that are supportive.

**Make “I” statements.** We all make mistakes, and however upset another participant’s mistake makes you, you have a responsibility to deal with it as empathetically as you can.

You might find that some participants have a limited role in the meeting. If so, identify a specific time for them to be a part of the meeting so they can skip the rest. Or consider having them “on call” so they can come to the meeting if or when needed.

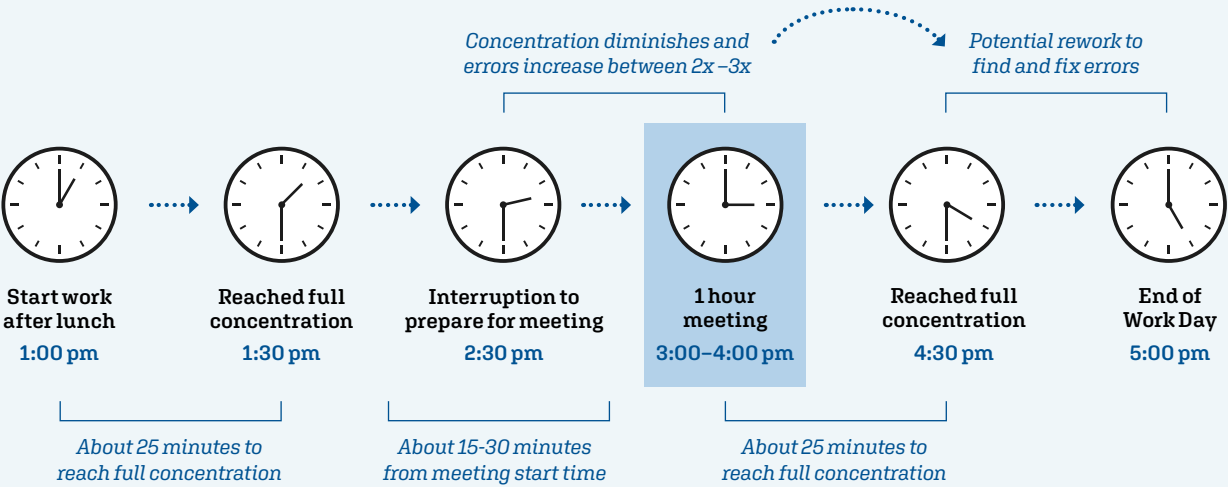
Finally, consider making attendance optional for participants. Let people self-select out of meetings they don't have time for. If many people self-select out, this could be valuable feedback that you have too many meetings, that you are inviting the wrong people, or that meetings are not effective at achieving the goals set.

Some meetings are necessary, so some interruption to individual work time is unavoidable. Understanding the “manager’s schedule” versus the “maker’s schedule” can help mitigate the impact of interruption.<sup>5</sup>

The manager’s schedule is divided into one-hour intervals, with frequent switching between tasks, including going to different meetings. Meetings interspersed throughout the day are not a big problem because the manager is always switching tasks. However, a maker’s schedule doesn’t work this way. The complicated work that makers do requires long periods of concentration. Programmers and professional writers are examples of white-collar makers. Much of the finance office’s work is maker work. Creating a forecast, developing a budget, and year-end close are all maker work; they require sustained periods of concentration for the best results.

Maker work is best scheduled in half-day blocks because it takes time to ramp up to full concentration and get in the flow of the task. Once in the flow, the maker wants to stay in it as long as possible. A meeting in the middle of the block ruins productivity. Exhibit 1 illustrates this problem with a one-hour meeting in the afternoon block. First, the maker must reach full concentration. Research shows this can take about 25 minutes.<sup>6</sup> In Exhibit 1, the meeting is at 3:00 p.m. Our maker is interrupted at 2:30 p.m. by a meeting reminder. Even if the maker just has to gather a few documents and a notepad to prepare for the meeting, she has broken concentration and will be distracted until the meeting starts. For example, perhaps she tries to resume her task but is also watching the clock at the same time to avoid being late for the meeting. In a distracted state, the maker will commit two to three times more errors than usual.<sup>7</sup> After the meeting, the maker must spend another 25 minutes to reach full concentration. So in a four-hour work period, the maker gets a total of one and a half hours of full concentration, and some of that time might be spent fixing errors made during periods of distraction.

EXHIBIT 1: The Impact of a One-Hour Meeting on the Maker’s Schedule



Hence, the maker's problem is that meetings are usually based on the manager's schedule. First and most obvious, managers are usually the ones setting meetings. Second, our personal productivity systems defer to the manager's schedule. For instance, calendaring applications typically emphasize one-hour or 30-minute blocks of time, thereby inviting others to schedule a meeting without regard to how it might interrupt maker work.

Hence, finance officers need to look for ways to accommodate the maker's schedule by creating large blocks of time with no meetings. For example, some organizations have designated days of the week (or half-days) as meeting-free zones.

Or you could use your calendar app to schedule large blocks of time for maker work, just as you'd schedule time for a half-day meeting. Some keys to making this strategy work are:

- **Reach an understanding with your co-workers about the consequences interruptions have for maker work.** Reach an agreement to find a better way to handle meetings. Many people may be unaware of the potential for lost productivity from poorly scheduled meetings and interruptions.
- **On shared calendars, be specific about what you are working on during your “maker time.”** If colleagues can understand that the task is critical and time-sensitive, they are likely to respect your calendar.
- **Don't overuse the strategy; otherwise, a “boy who cried wolf” situation may develop.** If large portions of your calendar are consistently blocked out, colleagues may stop taking it seriously.

Finally, try to schedule meetings for the beginning or end of the day or some other point that minimizes disruptions to time blocks. Flexible scheduling might complicate this strategy, as the definition of the end or beginning of the day may not be the same for everyone in the office, but the strategy still can work. Here is a policy from a software development firm—a profession that values maker time and flextime:<sup>8</sup>

*“Our policy for software developers is that you should plan to be on-site most afternoons. We tend to schedule meetings right after lunch to avoid interrupting work, and we get a lot of value out of having people overlap at work for at least the afternoon. Other than that, you can design your own schedule.”*

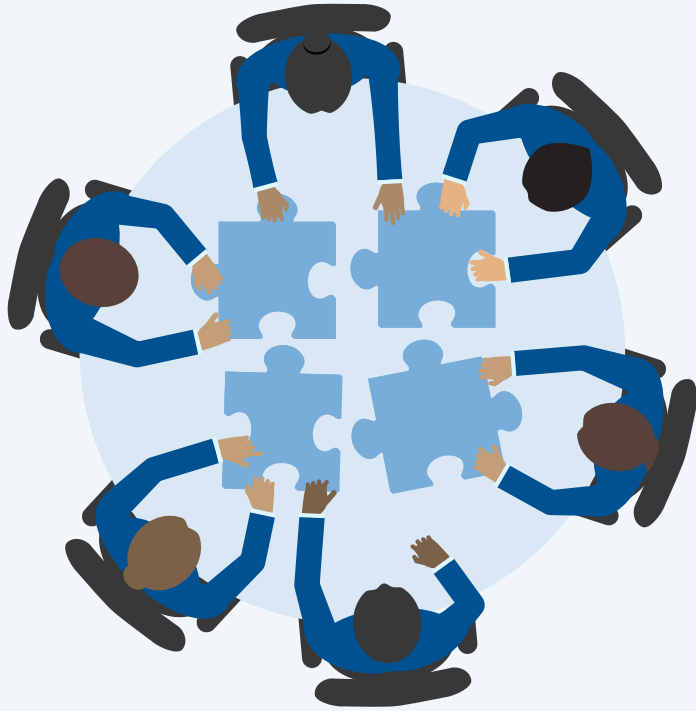


Try to schedule meetings at a point that minimizes disruptions to time blocks.

Finance officers often have managerial responsibilities. There are opportunities to optimally schedule meetings from the managerial perspective. For example, meetings are often scheduled for a full hour by default. This means the manager may have back-to-back commitments with no downtime in between. Perhaps limiting meetings to 45 minutes will provide that downtime, allowing the manager to be more focused in the meeting and saving participants some time.



Successful teamwork and successful meetings have a lot in common.



## Optimizing Group Work Time in Meetings

If a meeting is an opportunity for group work, then think of the meeting participants as a team. Successful teamwork and successful meetings have a lot in common.

The first common feature is clearly defined goals. A meeting goal provides the basis for organizing the agenda, evaluating the effectiveness of the meeting, and deciding if you should have a meeting in the first place! To set your meeting goals, ask yourself: Why am I holding the meeting? Why am I going to participate? What do I want to achieve at the meeting and after it is over? At the end of the meeting, the participants can evaluate their progress against the meeting goal. If the goal was achieved, people will feel good about being part of the meeting and will be more willing to attend and engage in future meetings.

Common types of goals a meeting might have include defining a shared problem, developing ideas to solve the problem, agreeing on a course of action, or clarifying roles and responsibilities. It should be easy to tell at the end of the meeting if the participants agree on the nature of the problem they came to discuss, if they have a list of ideas to solve the problem, if they agree on a course of action, etc.

The second feature common to successful teamwork and meetings is clearly defined participants and their roles. As a starting point, every meeting should have a leader. The leader controls the meeting, including:

- Reeling in and tabling sidetracked/irrelevant conversation
- Stopping repetitious comments
- Bringing to a close conversations that have gone on too long

Sometimes these tasks can be uncomfortable to perform but can be made easier if the leader asks permission from the participants at the beginning of the meeting to perform them. Few will object!



The greater the number of participants, the greater potential for a phenomena called “social loafing.”



For larger meetings, it can be helpful to have separate people play the roles of recorder and coordinator. The recorder records decisions made, follow-ups, etc. The coordinator handles meeting logistics. A coordinator is important for meetings that need significant IT support, where meals or refreshments are provided, where the participants need access to special materials they are not expected to bring themselves, etc.

The leader of the meeting should work with the participants to set ground rules. Respecting times on the agenda, sticking to the topics, and not interrupting others are basic ground rules. Also, consider establishing ground rules to minimize the use of electronics in meetings. When people multitask with smartphones, tablets, etc., it not only reduces their engagement but also is distracting to others.

For everyone else at the meeting, they need to know what they are expected to do and contribute at the meeting. Make sure participants are aware of any pre-meeting preparation, such as reading or bringing something to the meeting. If participants have the right background and context, they will be better prepared to contribute to the meeting. Any materials participants are asked to review should be made available at least 24 hours before the meeting. The materials should also be succinct. Too much and it is more likely that the participants will read none of it than some of it.

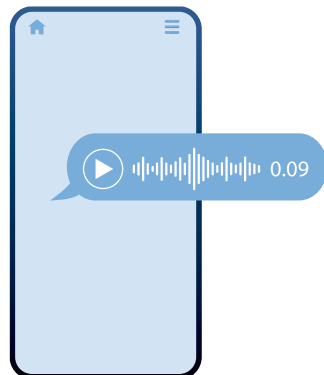
If a participant has a specific role in the meeting, such as explaining a forecast, make sure he or she is prepared to do so and knows the time limit. This hints at another, potentially counterintuitive, way to optimize teamwork: Limit the number of participants to those who are truly necessary. The greater the number of participants, the greater potential for a phenomena called “social loafing,” where people feel they can reduce the effort they put forth in the meeting because others will pick up the slack. If you need a larger number of people to attend, consider if participants can break into smaller groups to perform some tasks. Teamwork tends to break down in groups larger than six or seven people.

The final common feature of a successful meeting and teamwork is that people accomplish the task that the team sets out to do! Often, meeting participants simply talk for a while and perhaps identify some action items that people (who may not be in the room) are expected to do on their own after the meeting. Thus, at the end of the meeting, no actual progress toward the meeting's goal has been made. A meeting that is focused on doing the “real” work collaboratively, rather than talking about it and deferring the real work until later, is known as a “flipped meeting.” Though there are many resources online to help plan flipped meetings, the concept is simple:

- 1. Develop concise, purposeful background material and distribute at least 24 hours before the meeting.** A concise, written memo or report is fine for many meetings. However, flipped meeting practitioners often recommend recording background materials in a short audio or video file, if possible. Participants might be more likely to listen to an audio file than read a memo. Also, when making a recording, the presenter tends to get straight to the point and is less prone to going on tangents compared to a live presentation.
- 2. Participants read/watch/listen to the materials before collaborating.** You want everyone on the same page before the teamwork starts. Participants could be asked to review the materials before the meeting. If you feel participants are unlikely to review the materials ahead of time, you can designate the first part of the meeting as quiet time for people to review the materials individually. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) uses the quiet study time approach. According to Jeff Bezos: “We read in the room. Just like high school kids, executives will bluff their way through the meeting as if they’ve read the memo.”
- 3. There is no presentation of the background materials.** This saves a lot of time because participants can review the background information more quickly on their own than the presenter can talk.
- 4. Participants dive right into collaborative work.** With everyone on the same page, participants are ready to work on the goal of the meeting.

For example, if you wanted to hold a meeting to develop a forecast, you would distribute background information like revenue trends, an economist’s report, etc., before the meeting. Participants would have time to read in the room; there would be no presentation of the materials at the meeting. Then participants would get to work jointly developing the forecast after the individual reading time.

Participants might be more likely to listen to an audio file than read a memo.



Finally, a range of applications has been developed to facilitate meetings.<sup>11</sup> This includes applications you might expect, like scheduling a meeting and planning an agenda (including checklists like the one featured in this paper). There are also some novel ideas to keep participants focused, like odometer-style readouts of the cost of the meeting based on the average compensation of the participants in the room.

Managed well,  
meetings are  
an opportunity  
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teamwork.



## Conclusion

Though meetings are often reviled as a waste of time, they don't have to be. Mismanaged meetings can waste both individual work time and group work time. Knowing which type of time is being wasted in your organization opens up the possibility to manage meetings differently. Managed well, meetings are an opportunity for effective teamwork. Also, meetings can be scheduled to accommodate the individual time needed to perform the complex work required of the public finance office.

As your next step, consider sharing this paper and [checklist](#) with your colleagues. Then, hold a meeting (that conforms to the checklist) to discuss the paper, where the goal of the meeting is to identify meeting practices that everyone could commit to abide by going forward. Participants might even add ideas we didn't cover here. Update the checklist to reflect what was agreed upon in your meeting. Use that checklist for all meetings going forward. This team approach to deciding how to run future meetings can pay long-term dividends. Finally, consider joining GFOA's [Get Your Time Back Challenge](#) to share your experiences with other people.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This was a poll open to all readers of the weekly GFOA newsletter.
- <sup>2</sup> Perlow, Leslie A.; Noonan Hadley, Constance; Eun, Eunice. "Stop the meeting madness." *Harvard Business Review*. July-August 2017: 62-69. <https://hbr.org/2017/07/stop-the-meeting-madness>
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid
- <sup>4</sup> Howard, Jen. "Clarizen Survey: Workers consider status meetings a productivity-killing waste of time." January 22, 2015. <https://www.clarizen.com/press-release/clarizen-survey-workers-consider-status-meetings-a-productivity-killing-waste-of-time/>
- <sup>5</sup> Weinberg, Gabriel; McCann, Lauren. "Super Thinking: The big book of mental models." Portfolio/Penguin. 2019. Weinberg and McCann reference a July 2009 blog post by Paul Graham.
- <sup>6</sup> Neiger, Petra. "6 jaw-dropping facts about workplace interruptions and what you can do." November 20, 2017. <https://trainingmag.com/6-jaw-dropping-facts-about-workplace-interruptions-and-what-you-can-do/>
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid
- <sup>8</sup> Allred, Jude. "Flextime & work schedules." June 22, 2017. <https://medium.com/@judeallred/flextime-work-schedules-4e39b90338a4>
- <sup>9</sup> *Running meetings*. Harvard Business School Press, Pocket Mentor Series. 2006.
- <sup>10</sup> "No PowerPoint, no problem: Amazon doubles down on banning presentations in meetings." A blog post at <https://www.panopto.com/blog/amazon-doubles-down-powerpoint-ban-in-flipped-meetings/>.
- <sup>11</sup> Frost, Aja. "Run more efficient meetings: 14 tools for shared agendas, minutes, and scheduling." September 27, 2016. <https://zapier.com/blog/best-meeting-tools/#meetings>



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