

Kevan Hall & Alan Hall

KILL BAD MEETINGS

CUT 50% OF YOUR MEETINGS



**TRANSFORM YOUR CULTURE,
IMPROVE COLLABORATION,
& ACCELERATE DECISIONS**

This introductory chapter is from our book published by NB books

Find out more about our “Kill Bad Meetings” training, access our free diagnostic and business report on meetings in your organization or order bulk copies of the book at <http://www.killbadmeetings.com/>

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Kill Bad Meetings: Cut 50% of your meetings to transform your culture, improve collaboration and accelerate decisions

By Kevan Hall and Alan Hall

Introduction

How would you like to save a day a week by cutting out completely unnecessary work?

You already suspect that half of what happens in meetings is not relevant or useful. Even the useful meetings are often badly run, do not meet their planned outcomes and lack participation.

Despite this it hard to persuade others to let you escape or to change the way meetings run.

This book will help you identify and disconnect from the 50% of unnecessary topics and meetings and improve the ones that remain to make them more effective, relevant and engaging.

It will only cost you the time you need to read this book and apply some of the practical ideas you will find here. It could be the best investment in your productivity and engagement that you ever make.

Meetings are essential to any organization. They are where we collaborate and make decisions, and where we spend an average of 2 days per week of our time – or over 15 years of our working lives.

Unfortunately, meetings are often unnecessary or badly run.

- Up to half of the content of meetings is either not relevant to participants or could be delivered more simply outside of a meeting
- Up to 20% of meeting participants should not be there
- Up to 40% of meeting time is spent sharing information that could be delivered before the meeting

- The meetings that do need to happen often fail to deliver their outcomes effectively and lack opportunities to participate

We have spent the last 20 years working with increasingly complex teams and organizations. Most were virtual or global, many operating in complex matrix or network organization structures.

Collaboration in these and most other companies has become more widespread and more complex. Work increasingly cuts across the traditional silos to include colleagues from other functions, business units and geographies. We struggle to be effective as members of multiple teams, work for multiple bosses and engage with a diverse network of colleagues and stakeholders.

Yet, as we work with these increasingly complex groups of people, time and again we find that the challenge comes back to meetings. Meetings are where collaboration happens, where decisions get made and where people spend a lot of their least favourite time. People are frustrated with too many boring, irrelevant or badly run meetings.

If we can fix the way we meet, which is a very tangible and achievable goal, we can have a huge impact on effectiveness, collaboration and decision making.

Kevan is an experienced line manager, CEO and consultant whose previous books “Speed lead” and “Making the matrix work” focused on getting things done more effectively in complex organizations. His consulting and training work has given him a broad view of meetings cultures in many of the world leading organizations

Alan also knows about life in large organizations having worked in the packaged goods industry, most recently as a National Account Manager managing the relationship between the world’s largest food company and the UKs largest retailer. He brings the perspective of a Generation Y / millennial working through the challenges of management and meetings and challenging why it needs to be this way.

This book is focused on practical steps you can take to improve meetings. Where we have reduced the number and improved the quality of face-to-face and virtual meetings,

we have seen significant improvements in collaboration, speed of decision-making and employee engagement as well as major reductions in cost.

Today meetings consume about 40% of working time for managers and professional people (our most expensive people).

- Our research shows that managerial and professional people on average spend two days per week in meetings
- Bain and Co studied the time budgets of 17 organizations in detail and found that, on average, senior leaders devote 2 days a week to meetings and 15% of an organization's collective time is spent in meetings
- A 2012 survey by salary.com found "too many meetings" to be the #1 time-waster at the office, with 47% of votes, up from #3 in 2008."

For organizations, this is a huge cost. The typical managerial or professional person in Europe or the USA costs around \$100,000 to employ (at 2017 prices). \$40,000 of this is spent directly in attending meetings. Preparation for meetings is in addition to this, and internal meetings are also a major driver of business travel costs.

Because the salaries and expenses of people who prepare for and travel to meetings are spread across the whole organization the total cost of these meetings are often not visible.

One of our clients with 80,000 people worldwide calculated that the cost of unnecessary meeting attendance alone was \$500 million per year and this drove an additional \$400 million of travel cost. If we add in an assumption for preparation time, then we are looking at over \$1 billion of wasted cost every year for just that one organization.

We may have full-time professionals managing budgets or spends of a tiny fraction of this, but anyone can call, run and attend meetings just about whenever they want. The same individual who would need to get approval from three managers for their \$200 flight can happily spend \$40,000 per year of their time in meetings.

Meetings are probably the largest unmanaged cost area in large organizations.

A 2016 Harvard business review article *Collaborative Overload* by Cross, Rebele and Grant claims that over the last 20 years the time spent by people in collaborative activities (meetings, calls, emails etc.) has increased by 50% or more and can take up 80% of the week for many employees – leaving little time for other work.

In this article the authors identify that the collaborative load falls most heavily on a small number of high performers. In most cases 20 to 35% of value added collaborations came from only 3 to 5% of employees.

Worryingly, the study also finds that the people who are the best sources of information and in highest demand as collaborators have the lowest engagement and career satisfaction scores, which can lead to them leaving or becoming apathetic or less effective.

Too much collaboration can drive your best people away. It also makes you wonder what the rest of the people are doing in these meetings.

As products and services become more complex and organizations become increasingly connected, the need for more collaborative work increases. At the same time as we need to be more connected, we also need to be effective and productive – we can't afford to spend our whole time in meetings, conference calls, video or web conferences.

Technology is turning out to be a mixed blessing in our meetings. There is no doubt that virtual meetings reduce costs and make communication with remote colleagues easier. Video and web conferencing tools have reduced the cost of travel and time away from the office.

However, reducing cost and improving ease-of-use has led to more meetings in total. It is much easier for a manager with a virtual or global team to call a quick video or web conference than to arrange a face-to-face meeting – so they do it more often.

Open plan offices mean that it is far easier to walk up and interrupt someone and bring them into an ad hoc discussion or meeting. New office buildings are actively designed to encourage communication and with areas for spontaneous meetings.

Because these types of meetings are more common and more spontaneous they can offer real value, however, they are also usually less well-planned and can be time-consuming.

At the same time as the number of meetings is increasing, there is a great deal of dissatisfaction about the quality and relevance of those meetings.

- 4,000 participants in our training programs tell us that of the two days per week they spend in meetings only half of it is relevant and necessary for them to do their jobs.
- In the Bain study of 17 large corporations, leaders said that half of the meetings they go to are “ineffective” or “very ineffective”

Virtual meetings bring additional challenges in creating participation and engagement. In many cases, people have used these tools to bring boring “page turning” PowerPoint monologues at lower cost to a more distributed and uninterested audience.

Dissatisfaction with meetings is nothing new but, as the number of meetings increases, this becomes a very significant cost.

- At corporate level, it means that our people are spending a day per week in unnecessary meetings – an average of \$20,000 waste per managerial or professional employee every year
- At an individual level, it means busy individuals are frustrated and disengaged at having to spend a day a week doing completely unnecessary work – this adds up to each of us wasting 8 years or more of our working lives

It is hard to imagine any other area of business where we would accept such high levels of waste. Imagine building a new factory where 50% of everything we made was scrap and had to be thrown away. Imagine trying to get approval for a new product that only

worked half of the time. Both these are laughable and we would probably be fired for suggesting them. However, 50% waste is normal and accepted in our meetings.

In a business climate where we all need to do more with less, where people claim to be more and more busy and where productivity improvement remains a challenge for all organizations, the opportunity to win back 20% of the time for our most valuable and expensive people should surely be a priority.

We acknowledge that many meetings are relevant and some are even well-run. There is good evidence that face-to-face meetings with customers, for example, are a good investment. When we are building relationships, collaborating creatively and dealing with sensitive issues, then a meeting makes sense.

We also recognize that individuals attend meetings for many other reasons than just getting the work done. Even the worst meetings can have valuable by-products like learning, networking and visibility. As we cut out unnecessary meetings we will need to find better ways to deliver these valuable outcomes.

We have been looking so far at the rational arguments, the cost and the waste; there is also an emotional argument based around the frustration and stupidity of creating unnecessary work.

We are sure most of you already have experiences of meetings that are just ridiculous. Here is one from Kevan's corporate career in the days before he had the language and the techniques to push back successfully.

I was working on a project in Eastern Europe and reported functionally into human resources. I was really busy, travelling on average to 3 countries a week and living with my family in France.

The European HR head asked me to attend his monthly "team meeting" in the UK. I explained that I had a very high workload already, that the content of the meeting did not really have any relevance to me and that I could do without another international trip. I asked if I could stay out of the meeting.

He responded that he wanted me to be part of the team and, even though I explained that I did not really collaborate with any other of the attendees and did not need to, he insisted I attend.

So, I left home very early in the morning to take a 90-minute drive to the airport for a one-hour flight and another 45-minute taxi journey to the UK office to arrive by 9 a.m.

The first item on the agenda was a compensation and benefits review. If you have never sat through one of these before, they are extremely dull (unless of course it is your own compensation). The topic was not relevant to me at all and it looked like it would take a while, so I quietly started to do my emails.

My boss asked me to step outside the meeting and asked me what I was doing. I explained that I was busy and that I did not think the topic was relevant to me or that I had anything to contribute. I asked if I could step out.

He became quite angry and insisted that I was not showing respect to the team. I tried to explain again that I was not really part of the team because I did not collaborate with anyone there but he insisted I should re-join the meeting and “look interested”.

I tried to look interested but the topic was boring and was not relevant. Soon my face started to hurt.

To keep engaged I started to ask questions. Remember, these are questions that I do not really need to know the answer to. The compensation and benefits specialist now had to waste their time and the time of everybody else in the meeting answering these very basic questions.

Ten minutes later, as an experienced manager, I start to warm to the discussion and start generating ideas. These ideas, based on a full 10 minutes of experience, are not very good ideas. The whole meeting has now to take time to discuss and deal with these ideas. None of them advance the topic noticeably.

After an hour, the compensation and benefits specialist makes a recommendation. At this point, there is one specialist in the room who really knows what they are talking about and 14 generalists, including myself, who generally do not.

When the process for taking a decision on the recommendation is to take a vote, I realize that my opinion, based on one hour of disinterested observation, is just as valuable as a career of specialist experience.

The compensation and benefits specialist is not very happy with the outcome of the vote. He knows that the recommendation is wrong and, as he is responsible for implementing it, he will have to find a way to change the decision after the meeting.

The meeting continued in similar style for a full day. I was invited to continue to attend that meeting every month for the following 18 months. I managed to find urgent business reasons for missing as many as possible but it was still two weeks of my life I will never get back.

When we tell this story to participants on our training programs, they laugh. Then we ask, when was the last time you were in a meeting just like this one? Most answer – in the last week!

Later in the book we will unpick many of the issues in this meeting from finding unnecessary participants and topics to improve the relevance and decision processes.

There is a saying in marketing, *“Half my advertising is wasted, I just do not know which half.”* (attributed to John Wannamaker among others) The good news about meetings is that we **do** know which half is wasted and in this book, we will show you how to cut out the unnecessary meetings, topics and participants that make many meetings irrelevant.

Once we cut out these completely unnecessary meetings and topics, we will move on to focus on improving the planning and running of the remaining 50% of meetings that do need to happen. Even relevant meetings often suffer from poor design, lack of participation, unclear outcomes, too much information sharing, and slow decision-making.

If we are new to running meetings virtually or globally we may also need to develop some new skills and techniques. If we are running large events and conferences, the costs and opportunities are even larger.

Many organizations have tried to improve their meetings by focusing solely on improving facilitation and the conduct of their meetings. This does help, but an essential first step is to cut out the meetings that do not need to happen in the first place – otherwise we are just training people to be more efficient at managing work that does not need to be done.

Meetings training also tends to focus on the individual facilitator or chairperson. These are important roles but they are the minority of attendees at the meeting. We will also focus on the role of the participants. If we have one chairperson and 12 participants, then the participant experience and the relevance of the content to them is a major factor in both the cost of, and satisfaction with the meeting.

Improving meetings is more than just giving people new knowledge or skills. If we ask people in focus groups and interviews to tell us how to run the perfect meeting most of them can already give a good answer. They already know how to run a good meeting, but they tell us they rarely attend meetings that are run this way.

We have learned that improving meetings is about more than just training. Training tends to give an individual the skills and motivation to make a change, but it is hard for them to systematically change the meeting culture of their organization.

We need something more systematic across the whole organization which addresses not only the symptoms of too many meetings but the underlying corporate cultural causes and the resistance to change in ways of working.

In this book and in our training

- **We will show you how to put together a business case to build commitment to change and gain resources to support the introduction of new ways of meeting**
- **We will help you understand and deal with the underlying corporate cultural drivers of your meetings culture**
- **We will introduce some practical actions and steps to significantly reduce the number of your meetings by cutting out unnecessary meetings, topics and participants**
- **We will show you how to design more effective virtual and face-to-face meetings using our OPPT framework, including how to improve participation, speed up decision-making and reduce the amount of information sharing**
- **We will look specifically at the added challenges of running virtual and international meetings and large events more effectively**
- **We will show you how to make your meeting flow better, through improved facilitation and continuous improvement**
- **We will help you embed the change and overcome resistance to introducing new ways of working**

A Millennial perspective

Most researchers define millennials as people born between the early 1980s until the late 1990s or early 2000's. They have distinct preferences that are already influencing how we will need to meet in the future.

Millennials are no longer just the new kids on the block or the latest consumer marketing segment. They are now our professionals, first line managers, and increasingly our middle managers. By 2020 they will be more than 50% of the global workforce.

It is always dangerous to stereotype, for example it is clear that the life experiences and priorities of an 18-year-old student in rural China are rather different from those of a 30-year-old manager with a mortgage and a family to support in London.

We believe that, despite the host of articles and blogs detailing the uniqueness of Generation Y or Millennials, a lot of the differences are largely attributable to the normal progression of life stages and the variety of life experiences.

Life stages create common perspectives

- Young people, quite properly undervalue experience and hierarchy (because they do not have it) and older people typically undervalue youth and energy (because they may have lost it)
- People early in their careers are inevitably frustrated with the pace of development, the hierarchies they are not part of and the speed of personal and professional progress
- Mobility is higher in younger people who often have fewer commitments and this may be reflected in lower organizational loyalty
- More established managers who have earned their position through long experience and hard work may be frustrated as younger people want to leapfrog above them

These are nothing new.

Life experiences differ, including

- Whether you first moved into work during a relative boom or during a recession.
- Which culture or economic group you were brought up in
- Your educational background

These factors can vary widely for individuals within the millennial generation and the other generations before them.

They are nothing new either.

In a book targeted at a global audience we should recognize that there will be tremendous variety in people born within any arbitrary set of dates.

At worst, some of the writing about millennials sounds like the age-old complaints about “the youth of today” not being “like us”. This has led to reports claiming that millennials are over-entitled, self-focused and even narcissistic.

Even if it were possible to stereotype half of the working population of the world it would not be particularly helpful so we shall avoid over-generalizing.

We do, however, intend to reflect the energy and positive force for change that youth can bring. We look to develop new ways of working that will make things better for all the generations currently at work – and for the next ones coming through including generations Z, Alpha and beyond.

So what is really different?

1. Technology

Millennials do have a fundamentally different attitude towards the use of technology and we will reflect that in this book.

People who have always known the Internet and the easy availability of communication and social collaboration tools expect fast access to information; they naturally reach out to an extended network to reinforce their learning and to gather information and support.

They are used to instantly downloading effective communication and collaboration tools on a free app, rather than waiting for 2 years for corporate IT to evaluate a secure and supportable new tool.

The idea of needing to wait for a week to book time in a videoconference suite to connect with colleagues seems bizarre to those brought up with FaceTime and Skype.

Why would you wait for a month until the next meeting when you can IM the relevant person with the expertise and get a response straightaway?

More than 40% of over 4,000 graduates across 75 countries in research by Opinion Research for PWC in 2011 felt that “their use of technology was not always understood”, and 65% felt held back by rigid hierarchies and outdated management and working styles. Millennials in Africa were the most likely to feel this way

Learning to integrate new technologies into the way we work gives fantastic opportunities for improving productivity and engagement. Social tools will help support remote working and build a sense of community in distributed organizations. Communication and collaboration technologies can help us work more effectively, particularly when we are working with colleagues in different locations.

There is mixed research about millennials’ preferences for face-to-face versus virtual communication. Some researchers claim that they prefer a more collegiate, face-to-face way of working and others that they are much more comfortable with communicating through technology.

We believe that these views are not incompatible. Indeed, people who have grown up with access to the Internet, social media and easy online communication are much more comfortable with transactional or “shallow” social contact. However, at an early stage in their career they understand deeply the need for networking, visibility and learning through face-to-face interactions.

2. Expectations of participation

The Internet means that millennials are used to a richer, multimedia way of learning and working. If you want to find out something you can rapidly find a YouTube video about it, browse several articles, join a conversation and get immediate access to people with a point of view. Unsurprisingly they are not as accepting of one-way lectures and boring presentations.

Millennials in many parts of the world have been brought up in a more a participative way than previous generations, they have been more involved in family decisions and according to some researchers are more supported and more connected to parents than previous generations.

They are used to joining conversations and having their opinions heard and responded to.

They bring this perspective to business meetings, expecting to be involved and engaged. This energy, we hope, will improve meetings for everybody and we will make some recommendations on how to make meetings much more participative and engaging.

As they move into work, people who have been used to instant responses, likes and tweets bring a preference for very regular feedback, mentoring and working with experienced people who they can learn from. These are all good practices in developing and motivating people, irrespective of age.

Some organizations are now using reverse mentoring, where a younger manager is paired with a more experienced one. The younger person learns more about management, the older more about technology – everybody wins.

3. Interest in the wider world

71% of millennials in the PwC survey were keen to have an international move at some stage during their career.

Even those who do not go to live and work in another culture will find that international collaboration becomes the norm as organizations become more integrated, virtual, matrixed and global. The content of this book explicitly deals with the international and virtual dimensions of meetings

During the rest of the book we are not going to comment constantly on millennial perspectives as separate and different; instead we are going to marry good practice from leading organizations with the stimulus and perspective of a technology enabled,

participative and internationally connected generation to develop new meeting practices that are even better for everyone and for the businesses we all work in.

There were, however, a couple of areas where we disagreed quite strongly and had to work hard to find ways to reconcile our different views, these will become evident later.

The practical tools and techniques you will find in the following chapters come from our experiences training tens of thousands of participants from major organizations around the world. We develop new ideas based on our own and external research, we test them with participants and we regularly attend business meetings to observe and improve the way these meetings work. What survives this process are real-world techniques that can make a significant difference to the number and quality of your meetings.

If you follow the actions and targets in this book you should be able to save yourself at least a day per week of unnecessary meetings and radically improve the ones that remain.

If you need more help with implementing this approach in your organization, you can find out more about how we can help through consulting, training and online learning at the end of the book.

Good luck

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About Global Integration



We inspire and enable people to succeed in increasingly connected matrix, virtual and global organizations.

We do this in three key areas

1. Consulting and support for Senior Leaders driving organizational transformation
2. Building the capabilities and confidence needed to lead, cooperate and succeed in a complex, matrix, virtual and global environment – training programs
3. Driving sustainable change in ways of working and people practices (such as the way we meet, decide and travel) to create a truly connected organization

This book gives you an introduction into our approach in just one topic area in the third area – fundamentally changing the way we meet.

In this specific area, we can help you kill bad meetings through consulting, training workshops or providing skilled observers and coaches to work with your most important meetings and leaders.

We can also train and license your in-house facilitators to use this approach.

Since 1994 we have trained over 100,000 people in the skills required to succeed in complex organizations in over 300 of the world's leading companies in more than 40 countries.

We deliver our services globally either face-to-face, by webinar, through online learning or with blended solutions incorporating elements of all three.

You can engage with us in your own region through our offices in Europe, the Americas and Asia.

Read our other books *Making the Matrix Work – how matrix managers engage people and cut through complexity* and *Speed Lead – faster, simpler ways to manage people, projects and teams in complex companies*, both by Kevan Hall.

Find out more or contact us at www.global-integration.com where you can also sign up to receive our monthly insights.

Connect with our Global Integration page or our Matrix Management group on LinkedIn or follow us on Twitter @GlobalInteg or @killbadmeetings