

Meetings vs. Meaningful Work:

Rethinking Productivity, Time, and the Role of AI in Modern Organizations

Ryan Blumenfeld, MPH Candidate
Public Health Council of the Upper Valley
June 2026



Public Health Council
of the Upper Valley

**Meetings vs. Meaningful Work: Rethinking Productivity, Time &
the Role of AI in Modern Organizations**

Ryan Blumenfeld

A Literature Review prepared for the Public Health Council of the Upper Valley

MPH Internship Project
Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College

June 2026

Developed in collaboration with
Alice Ely
Charles Peoples III

Meetings vs. Meaningful Work: Rethinking Productivity, Time & the Role of AI in Modern Organizations

As organizations increasingly rely on meetings to coordinate work, collaborate across teams, and make decisions, concerns have grown regarding the amount of time employees spend in meetings and whether that time is used effectively. The Public Health Council of the Upper Valley is currently exploring how meetings can better support collaboration and meaningful work across regional partnerships and organizations. This literature review was conducted to examine existing research on meeting effectiveness, productivity, workplace time use, recurring meetings, and the emerging role of artificial intelligence (AI) in meeting management. Specifically, the review explores how meetings influence employee productivity, what characteristics contribute to effective or ineffective meetings, and how organizations can redesign meetings to better support collaboration, decision-making, and focused work.

The literature consistently suggests that meetings are necessary for organizational coordination, but they often become inefficient when they lack clear purpose, structure, or follow-through.¹ Across the studies reviewed, a central theme emerges: meeting effectiveness is shaped not only by the meeting itself, but by the broader systems surrounding preparation, scheduling, participation, workplace structure, and post-meeting action.¹ Additionally, emerging AI technologies may provide organizations with new tools to analyze and improve meeting quality through transcription, behavioral feedback, and workflow integration.

Meetings are a central component of modern organizational life, shaping communication, decision-making, and collaboration across nearly all industries. Research shows that employees spend a substantial portion of their work time in meetings, with estimates suggesting that workers attend multiple meetings per week and that managers may spend over 20 hours weekly in meeting-related activities.¹ Romano and Nunamaker further note that managers may spend between 25% and 80% of their total work time in meetings, while perceived productivity ratings remain relatively low.² These findings highlight the importance of understanding how meetings function and how they impact productivity.

The Importance and Challenges of Workplace Meetings

Despite their importance, meetings are frequently criticized as inefficient, costly, and disruptive to meaningful work.²⁻⁴ Rogelberg, Scott, and Kello argue that meetings often consume organizational resources without producing proportionate value, particularly when meetings are poorly planned or unnecessary.³ Stephens similarly emphasizes that ineffective meetings are often characterized by unclear objectives, excessive attendance, poor facilitation, and lack of preparation.⁴ Together, these studies reveal a paradox within organizational life: meetings are necessary for collaboration and communication, yet they are often viewed as barriers to productivity.

Meeting science research increasingly argues that meetings should not simply be accepted as a normal feature of work, but rather examined critically as organizational systems that can be evaluated and improved.² The literature therefore moves beyond describing meetings as unavoidable workplace activities and instead focuses on identifying the structural and behavioral factors that contribute to effective collaboration.

Characteristics of Effective Meetings

One of the most important developments in meeting research is the recognition that meetings are not isolated events, but part of a larger temporal process. Earlier meeting studies focused almost exclusively on what occurred during meetings themselves, but more recent research emphasizes the importance of activities that occur before and after meetings.

Kral et al. demonstrate that pre-meeting preparation, including agenda setting, coordination among organizers, attendance planning, facilitation preparation, and material development, significantly influences participant involvement and meeting effectiveness.⁵ Their research suggests that employees who receive clear agendas and opportunities for preparation before meetings are more engaged and more likely to contribute meaningfully during discussions.⁵ This finding reframes meetings as processes that begin before participants enter the room.

The literature also emphasizes the importance of post-meeting integration and follow-through. Kral et al. found that meetings are perceived as more effective when

meeting outcomes are integrated into employees' subsequent work and when action items are clearly implemented afterward.⁵ In other words, meetings derive value not simply from discussion, but from their ability to produce meaningful action and shared understanding.

This lifecycle perspective aligns with broader research within meeting science. The Cambridge Handbook of Meeting Science describes meetings as dynamic organizational processes that influence individual attitudes, group coordination, and organizational outcomes over time.¹ From this perspective, meetings should be evaluated not only by what occurs during discussion, but also by how effectively organizations prepare for meetings and implement meeting outcomes afterward.

A consistent finding across the literature is that meeting structure strongly influences meeting effectiveness. Meetings that lack clear objectives, agendas, and facilitation are significantly more likely to become unfocused and unproductive. Romano and Nunamaker report that a large percentage of meetings occur without written agendas, contributing to topic drift and inefficient use of time.² Similarly, Rogelberg et al. emphasize that meetings should only occur when a compelling purpose exists that requires group interaction and collaborative input.³

Research on meeting design further demonstrates that structured meetings produce better outcomes than unstructured discussions. Designing Productive Meetings highlights that clear agendas, time allocations, and role definition improve both the quantity and quality of ideas generated during meetings.⁶ Stephens also argues that organizations should evaluate who truly needs to attend a meeting and whether the meeting is necessary at all before scheduling it.⁴ These findings reinforce the idea that meeting effectiveness depends heavily on intentional planning and design.

The literature also suggests that meeting structure affects participant engagement. When attendees understand the goals of a meeting and the expected outcomes, they are more likely to remain focused and contribute meaningfully. Conversely, meetings with unclear purpose often lead to disengagement, multitasking, side conversations, and inefficient discussion.^{3,4,6} This indicates that meeting agendas serve not only as organizational tools, but also as mechanisms for maintaining attention and accountability.

While structure is important, meeting effectiveness also depends heavily on the quality of interaction within meetings. Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock analyzed workplace meetings and found that constructive behaviors such as problem-solving, action planning, and focused discussion were positively associated with meeting satisfaction and team productivity.⁸ In contrast, dysfunctional behaviors including complaining, criticizing, and repeated off-topic discussion had strong negative effects on outcomes and often outweighed the benefits of productive interaction.⁸

Research on meeting interaction also highlights the importance of participation balance and communication flow. *Meetings and Meeting Modeling in Smart Environments* describes meetings as complex interactions involving shared cognitive focus, communication, and collaboration toward common goals.¹⁴ The authors argue that meeting effectiveness should not be evaluated solely based on outcomes, but also based on the quality of participation, decision-making processes, and discussion structure.

This interaction-based perspective shifts attention away from simply asking whether meetings result in decisions and instead focuses on how those decisions are reached. Effective meetings involve balanced participation, organized discussion, and active engagement from attendees, while ineffective meetings are often characterized by dominance by a small number of participants, uneven contribution, and disorganized communication patterns.¹⁴ These findings suggest that communication quality is a critical component of meeting productivity.

Meetings, Productivity, and Workplace Time

Although meetings can facilitate collaboration, the literature also demonstrates that they can significantly disrupt focused work. Perlow's concept of "time famine" describes how employees experience constant interruptions that prevent them from completing meaningful individual work.⁹ Meetings contribute heavily to this fragmentation by breaking the workday into smaller segments that reduce opportunities for sustained concentration.

Perlow argues that employees often struggle to find uninterrupted periods of time necessary for cognitively demanding tasks, leading to increased stress, inefficiency, and feelings of overload.⁹ These findings support broader concerns regarding deep work, or the ability to engage in sustained, focused effort on complex tasks. Although

many of the articles reviewed do not explicitly use the phrase “deep work,” the concept is strongly supported throughout the literature.

Frequent meetings, recurring interruptions, and constant transitions between collaborative and individual tasks reduce employees’ ability to maintain cognitive flow.⁹ Recurring Meetings further demonstrates that recurring meetings often involve multitasking, side conversations, and disengagement, all of which reduce productivity and weaken attention.¹⁰ These findings suggest that organizations must balance collaboration with the protection of uninterrupted work time if they hope to maintain employee productivity.

Another important theme within the literature is the relationship between meeting timing and productivity. Research on employee engagement suggests that the first few hours of the workday are particularly important for productivity and focus. The Daily Engagement and Productivity study found that the speed at which employees become mentally engaged in their work at the beginning of the day strongly predicts daily productivity.¹¹ Employees who transition quickly into focused work are more productive overall, while those whose engagement is delayed are less effective throughout the day.¹¹

These findings have important implications for meeting scheduling. If meetings are scheduled during periods when employees are most cognitively prepared for focused work, meetings may unintentionally reduce productivity by displacing high-value individual work.¹¹ The literature therefore suggests that meeting scheduling should be considered strategically rather than simply based on convenience.

The studies reviewed also indicate that productivity depends not only on the amount of time available, but on the continuity and quality of attention. Interruptions early in the day may delay cognitive engagement and make it more difficult for employees to transition into productive work states.¹¹ This reinforces the argument that organizations should carefully consider when meetings occur within the workday and how they affect employees’ ability to perform focused work.

Recurring meetings represent a unique category of organizational interaction because they create routine and predictability while also carrying significant risks of inefficiency. The recurring meetings literature suggests that repeated meetings help establish shared expectations, coordination patterns, and organizational rhythm.¹⁰

However, these same routines can also lead meetings to become habitual and disconnected from their original purpose.

Over time, recurring meetings may continue simply because they are scheduled rather than because they remain necessary.¹⁰ This can result in repetitive discussion, declining engagement, unnecessary attendance, and reduced productivity.¹⁰ Recurring meetings also frequently involve multitasking and side conversations, indicating that participants may disengage when meetings no longer feel purposeful.¹⁰

The literature therefore emphasizes the need for ongoing evaluation of recurring meetings. Rather than treating recurring meetings as permanent organizational structures, organizations should regularly assess whether meetings remain aligned with current goals and whether their format, participants, and frequency still support effective collaboration.

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Meeting Management

Recent advances in artificial intelligence and smart technologies have introduced new possibilities for improving meeting effectiveness. Research on smart meeting environments demonstrates that AI systems can capture and analyze multimodal meeting data, including speech, participation patterns, gestures, and communication behaviors.¹⁴ These systems provide organizations with tools for understanding how meetings function and identifying inefficiencies in discussion flow, participation, and decision-making.

AI technologies also allow meetings to be documented and analyzed more effectively than traditional note-taking methods. AI Agents for More Productive Meetings argues that intelligent systems can act as meeting facilitators by tracking decisions, generating summaries, assigning action items, and supporting coordination throughout the meeting process.¹³ Rather than functioning solely as passive transcription tools, these systems actively structure and organize meeting information.

MeetingCoach provides another example of AI-supported meeting improvement.¹² The system analyzes meeting dynamics and provides participants with dashboards summarizing participation balance, turn-taking behavior, and communication sentiment.¹² Research on MeetingCoach found that participants who reviewed meeting feedback became more aware of communication dynamics and demonstrated improved inclusivity and engagement in future meetings.¹²

Importantly, the literature on AI meeting systems emphasizes that technology should support, rather than replace, human collaboration. AI tools are most effective when used to reduce cognitive burden, improve documentation, and provide feedback that helps participants recognize inefficient meeting behaviors.¹²⁻¹⁴ These findings suggest that AI may help organizations transition toward more intentional, data-driven meeting practices.

Several studies also emphasize the importance of analyzing meetings over time rather than evaluating them as isolated events. Temporal interaction research demonstrates that meeting dynamics evolve across repeated interactions and that patterns of communication, participation, and decision-making can become embedded within organizational culture.¹⁵

Temporal Interaction Dynamics research highlights how repeated behavioral patterns, such as excessive complaining or unequal participation, can shape meeting effectiveness over time.¹⁵ By examining interaction sequences and participation trends, researchers can identify behaviors associated with productive or unproductive meetings.¹⁵ This approach provides organizations with a more nuanced understanding of collaboration and supports continuous improvement.

The emphasis on temporal analysis also connects closely to the broader literature on recurring meetings and workplace structure. Meetings influence organizational behavior not simply through individual conversations, but through repeated interaction patterns that shape communication norms, productivity expectations, and collaboration styles over time.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that meetings are both a critical and problematic aspect of organizational life. While meetings remain essential for communication, collaboration, and decision-making, they frequently consume large amounts of employee time without producing proportional value. Research consistently identifies several factors that influence meeting effectiveness, including preparation, structure, communication quality, scheduling, participation balance, and follow-through.

The literature also reveals that meetings cannot be understood as isolated events. Instead, they are embedded within larger organizational systems that shape how employees use time, engage with work, and collaborate with others. Poorly designed meetings contribute to workplace fragmentation, disrupt focused work, and reduce

productivity, while effective meetings support coordination, decision-making, and meaningful collaboration.

Importantly, emerging technologies such as AI and smart meeting systems may provide organizations with new opportunities to improve meetings through data analysis, transcription, behavioral feedback, and workflow integration. At the same time, the literature emphasizes that technology alone cannot solve meeting inefficiency without broader organizational attention to meeting purpose, structure, and workplace design.

Overall, the research suggests that improving meeting effectiveness requires a comprehensive and intentional approach that considers the full meeting lifecycle, protects meaningful work time, supports balanced participation, and continuously evaluates organizational meeting practices. By redesigning meetings with these principles in mind, organizations may be able to transform meetings from sources of inefficiency into more productive and collaborative organizational tools.

References

1. Allen JA, Lehmann-Willenbrock N, Rogelberg SG, eds. The Cambridge Handbook of Meeting Science. Cambridge University Press; 2015.
2. Romano NC Jr, Nunamaker JF Jr. Meeting analysis: findings from research and practice. In: Proceedings of the 34th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences. IEEE; 2001.
3. Rogelberg SG, Scott CW, Kello JE. The science and fiction of meetings. MIT Sloan Manage Rev. 2007;48(2):18-21.
4. Stephens KK. On the job: how to make meetings effective and productive. Commun Curr. 2022;7(4).
5. Král P, Králová V, Šimáček P. The impact of interactions before, during, and after meetings on meeting effectiveness: a coordination theory perspective. Group Decis Negot. 2023;32(5):1017-1041.
6. Designing productive meetings. Harv Bus Rev. Published online.
7. Stephens KK. Practical meeting design and facilitation. Published online.
8. Kauffeld S, Lehmann-Willenbrock N. Meetings matter: effects of team meetings on team and organizational success. Small Group Res. 2012;43(2):130-158.
9. Perlow LA. The time famine: toward a sociology of work time. Adm Sci Q. 1999;44(1):57-81.
10. Allen JA, Beck T, Scott C, Rogelberg SG. Understanding workplace meetings: a qualitative taxonomy of meeting purposes. Manage Res Rev. 2014;37(9):791-814.
11. Sonnentag S, Binnewies C, Mojza EJ. Daily performance at work: feeling recovered in the morning as a predictor of day-level job performance. J Organ Behav. 2010;31(1):67-93.
12. Kim T, Chang A, Holland L, Pentland A. Meeting Mediator: enhancing group collaboration using sociometric feedback. In: Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work. ACM; 2008.
13. AI agents for more productive meetings. Published online.
14. McCowan I, Gatica-Perez D, Bengio S, et al. Automatic analysis of multimodal group actions in meetings. IEEE Trans Pattern Anal Mach Intell. 2005;27(3):305-317.
15. Lehmann-Willenbrock N, Allen JA. Modeling temporal interaction dynamics in organizational meetings. Organ Psychol Rev. 2018;8(2-3):126-148.



Public Health Council of the Upper Valley

June 2026