

Tip sheet

Meeting or email?

A quick guide to communication at work

'Online meeting fatigue' is one of the most reported issues to come out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of us are now noticing how much of our day is spent in meetings. We are feeling over-tired, and our time to concentrate or think deeply is crunched. So what can we learn from this feeling, and what changes can we make as we gradually return to our offices?

This is what people who are hard of hearing experience every day. It's called 'concentration fatigue' and it is caused by the extra effort of listening for long periods of time, particularly if the sound is intermittent or there is background noise, and when non-verbal cues that assist with our understanding are missing. Some solutions to address this problem are:

- ask participants to turn their video cameras on and to make sure the lighting is adequate, and to put themselves on mute when not participating in the conversation to stop background noise coming through. Having someone heavy breathing, a dog barking or the tapping of a keyboard is captured and amplified through the system;
- use a captioning service or record the meeting and provide a transcript afterwards. This can be done with MS Teams and Stream;
- assess whether you have to meet at all. Here are four examples when using email or collaboration technologies (like Trello, Asana, MS Teams or Slack) are likely to get you a better result, and save you some time:

You need feedback

Share the document or proposal online and give the recipient/s time to review. That way they can decide what is the most appropriate way to respond: by email, phone call, or by meeting if they need to discuss it further.

You need people to consider/reflect on information

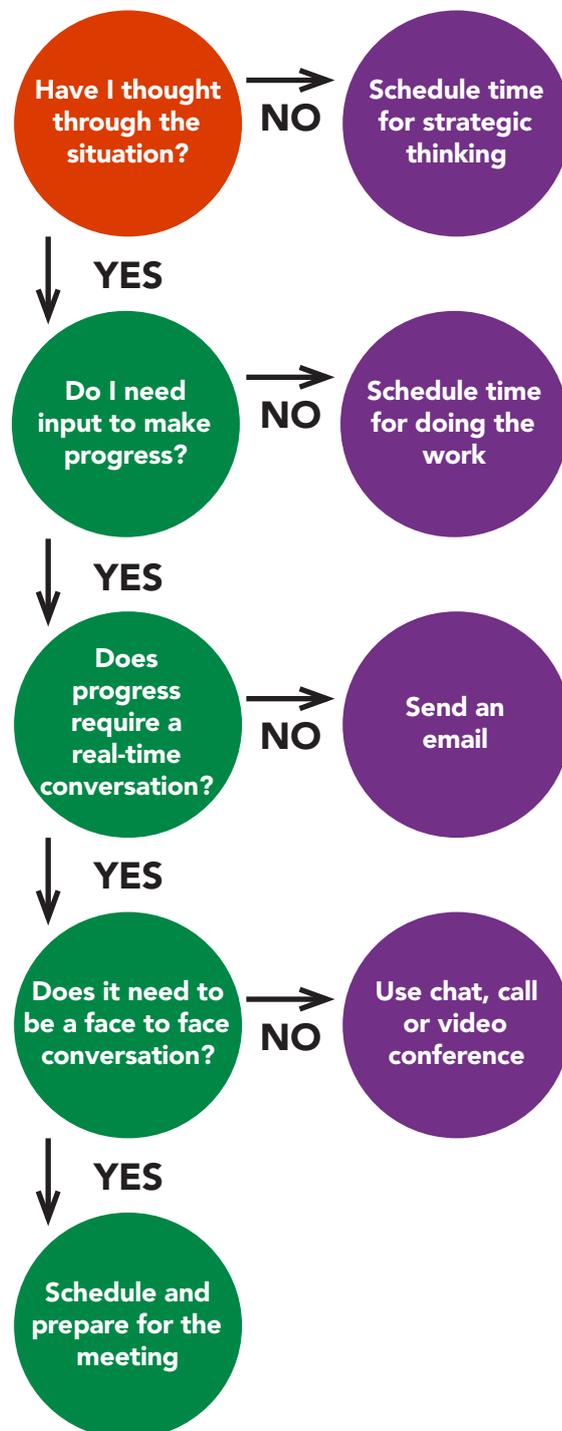
Too many meetings means there's not enough 'desk time' to digest a document, so if you need feedback, give people time to reflect on it, and reply via the online platform you are using (so they can see and build on each other's feedback). If the topic is complex and a meeting would avoid misunderstanding and save time, then convene one.

You need a decision

When you need to collaborate, achieve what you can online by drip feeding information or the questions that are simpler to answer, and combine it later with a face to face or online meeting when you are ready to tackle the harder stuff.

You have questions that need specific answers

Unless your questions have an unclear answer or if the topic is controversial, you can request a response or the data you require by



Elizabeth Grace Saunders - hbr.org/2015/03/do-you-really-need-to-hold-that-meeting

email. Call a meeting if the topic could be misconstrued, or if you need the team to collaborate or to negotiate an outcome. At these times non-verbal cues, tone of voice, context and feedback are crucial for team cohesion.

If you do decide to meet

- Keep it short, structured and engaging by designing the meeting to be interactive and purposeful.
- Do some work, or ask your team to do some work, beforehand so that when you do meet, you already have some strategic thinking and content underway to discuss.
- Ensure that every single person invited has a reason for being there and they know what it is i.e. that they will drive action items or outcome achievement in some way.

What can you change?

If you find you're spending all day in online meetings (and in the past you've spent all day going to meetings), use this time to reflect on the way your work is arranged - are you and your team getting enough time to concentrate on pieces of work that need consideration, perhaps even reflective, deep thought or critical appraisal? Consider what you would like to change and how you can do that.

Can you devolve decision-making in any way to limit the number of meetings? Can you delegate? Work with your team to see what levers you can move, whether online or in person, so your team has the autonomy they need to keep work progressing. Is everyone clear on which decisions needs your input, and which do not?

Trial it

Trial any solutions you and your team come up with for a short time. This communicates that you trust your team to work things out, rather than checking in with you for every move. Put in place an agreed timeframe to check how it is going, and a set of measures such as business, team and individual outcomes, to see if it is working and if your team can work this way permanently with fewer meetings, more productivity and less mistakes.

Meetings on the move

When you are attending webinars or long meetings that involve a lot of listening, consider the possibility of putting the app on your phone and moving – outdoors for a trip around the block or to a park, or whatever makes sense and gets you away from your desk, but still able to safely participate fully and concentrate.

A note on cohesion



Sometimes for the sake of team cohesion, you may decide that a meeting is worthwhile even if it could have been an email. If the team is under stress, if there have been more disagreements than usual, or it just feels like they are a bit out of synch then it could be a good idea to get together. Make it a team building time, or just a social time instead, if that's actually the purpose. It's important to know what will help most, not aggravate the situation further, especially if there are unresolved issues that need to be resolved before they get away from you all and undermine team cohesion permanently.

Works for me.

Works for NSW.

FLEXIBLE WORKING

If you are still unsure about whether or not it should be a meeting, try asking these questions as they could help clarify your decision:

What is the measurable benefit from having a meeting?

What will be different as a result of this meeting?

Does your team want to meet and if so, how often?