

Flip Your Company!

We don't mean flip it off or sell it, we mean flip it in ways that makes work more engaging and ultimately improves business results. In this white paper we discuss recent trends in the workplace, how much time meetings eat up during the regular workweek, and how lessons from the flipped classroom can be used to increase productivity and job satisfaction.

The End of Telecommuting

In February 2013, shortly after her appointment as Yahoo's CEO, Marissa Mayer required all employees to head into work at a Yahoo office¹, reversing years of flexible work and telecommuting policies. Other companies, such as Intel, have followed suit. While telecommuting is at worst an opportunity for every Ferris Bueller to take a career of days off, it can also make people very productive, mostly because they are not driving miles to sit in meetings. But it seems likely that working from home will become more rare in the future and that means more meetings in the office.

Now That You're in the Office

Meetings account for between 18 and 23 hours of employee time during the working week and the trend seems to be increasing.^{2,3} That's almost 50% of the week. How can companies ensure that the time spent in the office is productive? With half the working week taken up in meetings, starting with the single biggest time sink seems appropriate.

Good advice for making meetings more productive is easy to find: keep meetings short, have an agenda, make an action plan with clear owners. These are basic, but essential practices for making meetings work. Nonetheless, as the economist John Kenneth Galbraith once said, "Meetings are indispensable when you don't want to do anything." The question is how do you hold fewer meetings that are more productive and that people actually want to attend? One

¹ The Washington Post, There's nothing wrong with Mayer asking Yahoos to work at the office, by Joann Weiner, February 28, 2013

² MIT Sloan Review Management Review, Winter 2007

³ The Wall Street Journal, Where's the Boss? Trapped in a Meeting, Rachel Silverman, February 14, 2012

approach is to head back to high school for a lesson on flipping classrooms.



What is a Flipped Classroom?

Clintondale Township in Michigan has flipped its high school on its head. According to a recent New York Times article⁴ the traditional teaching model where a teacher stands at a blackboard, lectures students, then assigns homework has, at Clintondale, been reversed. Now homework includes watching YouTube videos and listening to podcasts. Instead of sitting at desks dutifully listening, students now spend time in school working with their peers and teachers on solving problems they used to tackle alone.

The flipped approach has a number of advantages. For starters students can review a lecture or podcast several times to grasp basic concepts. Furthermore, the teacher's time is freed up during lessons for more one-on-one work, as well as keeping the whole class moving forward.

Innovation in Education

Clintondale is on the leading edge of a massive trend in teaching that is enabled by new technology. Flipping the classroom is a more productive, collaborative form of learning that puts the responsibility for success as much in the hands of the student as the school. And it seems to be working. The NYT article mentions that schools in the district have seen grade averages improve, while simultaneously reducing dropout and class failure rates. These are still early days, but the technique is garnering positive attention and support.

Flipping Meetings

Back in office there are any number of good ideas for making meetings better. In addition to the basic principles alluded to earlier, people have proposed that meetings 22 minutes long will make them more manageable.⁵ Proponents of Agile development are popularizing stand-up meetings. At between 5 and 15 minutes in length, a 'stand-up' is designed to keep people focused and the meeting short.⁶ Curbing meeting length is one approach, but in reality simply sharing information lecture-style is almost always a

⁴ New York Times Opinionator, Turning Education Upside Down, By Tina Rosenbery, October 9, 2013

⁵ <http://scottberkun.com/2010/the-22-minute-meeting/>

⁶ <http://lifehacker.com/>



Who wants to flip their meetings?

waste of people's time together. The worst part of almost any meeting, from our decades of experience as both participants and facilitators, is the frenzy of slides at the start that are supposed to 'get everyone on the same page.' Too often the slides themselves are incomprehensible, the presenter incapable of making their point, and the presentations pitched either too high or too low, miring the audience in unproductive question and answer sessions. Unfortunately, almost no one writes reports these days, preferring instead to use the shorthand of PowerPoint. Yet, PowerPoint slides by themselves are almost useless at providing a complete understanding of an issue.⁷

What's So Flipping Different?

In a flipped meeting, background information in the form of narrated presentations is prepared and distributed at least three working days ahead of the meeting.

Narrated presentations help overcome some big productivity hurdles by:

- Effectively communicating what was presented in a meeting to those who weren't present
- Better presentations thanks to the 'dress rehearsal' of requiring narration
- Like the Flipped Classroom, the Flipped Meeting allows participants to review and understand background information as their schedule allows and as often as they need to understand it
- For organizations distributed over several sites and time zones flipping is particularly valuable. Teams can review content when they are at their cognitive best, rather than late at night or early in the morning
- Better archival of information and context around critical decisions

Flipped meetings shorten the time to results. By removing the 'lecture' portion some meetings will be eliminated all together, but more typically they can be shortened by 30-50%. Time saved can then be used for active problem solving, decision making, and assigning actions, thus making the best use of people's time at the office.

⁷ <http://www.edwardtuft.com/tufts/powerpoint>

As employees and managers work together they learn each other's strengths and weaknesses, build trust and ultimately become more engaged with the company. Greater employee engagement leads to all kinds of benefits including higher customer satisfaction, lower turnover and increased productivity.⁸

The Flipping Process

The first step is to prepare your content for the other meeting participants. The following is a brief outline of the steps:

1. Finish your work. This means complete the presentation you would normally give in the room, notes, slides, and all.
2. Record your presentation using your favorite program. Both PowerPoint and Keynote allow you to record narration and save the presentation as a slideshow, so you already have the tools. There are details on how to do this can be found at both Microsoft: [PowerPoint Record Narration](#) and Apple: [Keynote Record Narration](#).
3. Three working days before the meeting distribute the presentations to your participants. If you have more than one presenter and it's your meeting, you'll have to chase the others and get them to do their part. Presentations can be sent directly as an email attachment, or via a link to a shared drive, web site, etc.
4. One day ahead of the meeting send a reminder to people to review the slide shows prior to the meeting.
5. On the day of your meeting:
 - a. Create and review an agenda
 - b. Check in with participants and ensure they have done their homework
 - c. Frame up the decision(s) to be made
 - d. Open the floor for discussions for a limited time
 - e. Close discussion and move to decision-making or next steps

Flipped meetings are self-regulating, by which we mean if people haven't done their homework it will be obvious, at which point the leader has to decide how much remedial education is required.

⁸ State of the American Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for U.S. Business Leaders Gallup 2013 - [Download Report](#)

The Discipline of Flipping

There are good reasons why bad presenters are bad. Often speakers are ill prepared, rushed into making things up at the last minute and generally dancing around topics they know too little about. Flipped meetings require people to not only prepare their presentations ahead of time, but to narrate the slides and digitally distribute the content. The total time required isn't necessarily any greater, but it takes discipline to meet deadlines and create a good presentation. With fewer, but more productive meetings, along with broader, more comprehensible distribution of content, employees should have no trouble finding the time they need for preparation.

Caveats

The limitations of flipping are apparent.

- Both presenters and attendees must come prepared to work, not merely listen
- Leaders no longer direct from the front of the room, rather they become facilitators in a collaborative decision-making process and agendas must be redesigned with that in mind
- If your business has a tops-down, directive culture, moving towards a flipped approach may prove more challenging

Conclusion

Flipping isn't the solution for every bad meeting, but it will improve the quality of your discussions, the preparedness of your teams, and the results of your business. The technology needed is effectively free; all that's required is the discipline to use it.

Spearfish Innovation

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Spearfish Innovation has offices in the Silicon Valley, CA and Portland, OR. Send us an email at: info@spearfishinnovation.com, or contact Mike Northcott directly on +1 (503) 804-7309.