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Chairmen of the bored

Survey reveals workers' gripes about meetings



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The Courier-Journal

Say the words, "office meeting," and some workers dive for cover. Eyelids flutter. An uncontrollable urge to yawn develops.

Nobody keeps track of how many useless business meetings the average person is going to suffer through in 2004.

Here's one guess: Plenty.

A longer answer to the same question: More than enough to go around.

A survey of 1,216 U.S. employees commissioned by Interactive Meeting Solutions, a meeting company in California, found that 29 percent of workers attend three or more meetings per week. One every other day ... your mileage may vary.

Now, a multiple-choice quiz. The company found by randomly calling those workers that they judged about one-third of those meetings each week as:

- A. Pointless.
- B. Annoying.
- C. Soporific.
- D. All the above.

A surprise finding of the survey, which is accurate to plus or minus 3 percentage points, was that half the workers at large companies have attended meetings where somebody actually drifted off to sleep.

At meetings at small companies, only one in four workers have seen somebody doze off to the dulcet voice of a supervisor reading from an agenda, or because a co-worker just droned on and on and on about customer imperatives and market initiatives.

The doze-off difference between workers at big and small companies is due to two factors,



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said Chuck McPherson, president of IMS.

"There is more accountability at a small company. They also tend to have fewer meetings," McPherson said.

At larger companies, 37 percent of the workers attend three or more work-related meetings each week, compared with 21 percent of the workers at small companies.

Sixty-seven percent of workers at large companies, compared with 52 percent at small companies, said their meetings could benefit from more honesty.

Additionally, 35 percent of the workers at big companies said that if people were really truthful at a meeting, they would probably get fired. Only 24 percent of the workers at small companies said they'd get the ax for being honest.

The random survey was conducted by Opinion Research Corp. of Princeton, N.J.

Diversions sometimes help. The survey found that some workers bring their Palm Pilots or other handheld computing devices and their cell phones to meetings, to liven up or escape a dull gathering.

In all, 8 percent of the workers polled said they played electronic games at meetings; 14 percent of those workers were 18 to 24 years old, IMS said. To escape a boring meeting, 5 percent of workers have had a friend or coworker give them a bogus page or cell-phone call.

According to McPherson: "Handled incorrectly, the modern meeting has to rank as one of America's most excruciating and masochistic workplace experiences around. And, a bad meeting only creates yet another bad meeting."

The survey does offer some good news: Meetings at small companies tend to be more effective than those at bigger companies.

Are there any alternatives?

Some workers would rather meet via computer or phone than in person, according to Cisco Systems, the Internet networking company.

In its survey of 1,057 people, the company found that 15 percent prefer meeting from the comfort of their own desk and nearly 60 percent said using the telephone or a computer to conduct a meeting saves time. Thirty-three percent said they can better focus their thoughts while attending a phone or Web meeting. Other workers said they prefer Web or teleconferences because they don't have to worry about their personal appearance.

What bothers people most about a conventional meeting? In this survey, 28 percent said office meetings and corporate gatherings made them nervous, and 27 percent said they were easily distracted by the side conversations that take place at big meetings. Additionally, 13 percent said they become too absorbed in what other meeting participants are doing. And 12 percent disliked office meetings because they tend to worry that they are not dressed correctly.

But the overwhelming factor is time: 70 percent said office meetings should be limited to no more than 30 minutes.

Compiled from stories by The Cincinnati Enquirer and The Boston Globe.

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