

WORKPLACE MEETINGS MEAN BUSINESS

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The challenge of runaway meetings in the workplace has plagued business executives, supervisors, managers and team leaders since the first time a boss looked at his staff and said, "Let's have a meeting to discuss that."

The problem with workplace meetings is that some participants feel the gatherings are a waste of time, or that at the very least ineffective.

A job candidate with meetings skills consequently has an advantage over those that don't.

So how does one get those skills?

Lack of advance planning is a primary cause of unproductive workplace meetings, according to business consultant Dana May Casperson, of the Power Etiquette Group in Santa Rosa.

"I just attended a board meeting where people traveled great distances to be there and there was virtually no agenda," said Casperson. "It became almost mutinous." Bottom line, she said, "There has to be a purpose for the meeting, and the meeting has to meet that purpose."

Easier said than done at some workplace meetings. Personalities can come into conflict. The office bully, the know-it-all, the wisecrack artist, the I-hate-all-change whiner, the outspoken and the meek are gathered into one room. They're expected to listen politely and comment respectfully.

In some companies, workplace meetings disintegrate into a sarcastic debate before the conference room door is closed. "Sarcasm is hostility in disguise," said Jon Magoon, a business consultant who teaches courses in meeting management. Hostile participants don't usually achieve meeting objectives, he said. Also, participants who show up armed with hidden agendas can sabotage a meeting from the get-go. Magoon said one of the biggest barriers to successful workplace meetings stems from office norms and organizational culture. "Ground rules and norms have to be established and enforced," Magoon said. "As the group evolves, norms can change. How people conduct themselves in meetings often is related to the organizational culture of the company. Is it formal? Is it casual? Do people raise their hands or simply speak out?" The worst thing that can happen, Magoon warned, is lack of "buy-in" by participants.

“Ideally,” Magoon said, “everyone at the meeting has a buy-in for each topic on the agenda. That means they care about the outcome. They have a vested interest in it. Failing to get that buy-in dooms the meeting.” “All workplace meetings should contribute to the mission and overall vision of the company,” Magoon said. Unproductive meetings often are the result of not adhering to this policy, he warned.

In an effort to assist business executives with the workplace meeting dilemma, several companies have come up with software that keeps meeting participants focused and productive.

One such enterprise, Interactive Meeting Solutions (www.interactivemeetingsolutions.com), was launched a year ago in Santa Rosa by former Agilent Technologies employees Chuck **McPherson** and Greg Stone. The partners provide a mobile meeting service wherein an IMS TrackMeet representative facilitates meetings using software on a networked system of laptop computers.

“This software takes bad meetings and turns them into good meetings,” said **McPherson**. “It keeps the team on track. The system is simple and intuitive. It changes the way companies conduct their meetings.” It’s a high tech-high talk system that requires full participation. A laptop is placed in front of each participant sitting at the conference table. Input is anonymous, allowing even shy employees to float an idea.

“People think they’ll spend the whole meeting on a computer, but that’s not the case,” said **McPherson**. “Using the computer is only about 25 percent of the meeting.” At certain times, the facilitator will say, “Lids up,” meaning it’s time to use the computers. When the facilitator says, “Lids down,” lively discussion takes place. The software is customized for the meeting.

“What this does is motivate people,” said **McPherson**. “Everyone contributes. Nobody can be just an observer. The company’s key goal doesn’t get lost in the meeting because the software keeps everything on track.”

At the end of the meeting, all participants leave with a verbatim print-out of what took place at the meeting. Follow-up actions are outlined and deadlines are given.

“This levels the playing field,” **McPherson** said. “The office bully can’t take over the meeting with this system.”

National Bank of the Redwoods, REACH, Sonoma National Bank and Gloria Ferrer Winery are among the local companies that have used the IMS system and found it to be key in turning previously dull meetings into productive planning sessions.

“It brings a sense of teamwork and accomplishment to the group,” said **McPherson**. The Interactive Meeting Solutions system is best used for company retreats, weekend planning sessions, and two- to three-day conferences, **McPherson** said. It’s not designed for the daily or weekly staff meeting.

Businesses pay \$2,000 to \$7,000 to use the system, which covers the cost of customizing the software, interviewing, consulting, understanding objectives, creating a plan to reach the objectives, facilitation, recording and equipment.

Other meeting software programs are available from online companies.

FileMaker Meetings (\$49 at <http://store/filemaker.com/applications>) is a meetings management application developed by FileMaker Inc., in Santa Clara, and built on the popular FileMaker Pro 6 database software. Unlike the software introduced by Interactive Meeting Solutions, FileMaker Meetings does not involve having an outside facilitator on hand to conduct the meetings.

Instead, businesses merely purchase the software and have key personnel learn to use it. The application has several task-specific features that develop detailed agendas defining meeting goals for each team member. Users track the agenda during the meeting and pull up archival information on past meetings and related communication.

CyberMatrix Meeting Manager (\$100 at www.versiontracker.com) doesn't address the pitfalls of conducting or participating in a meeting. However, the software from CyberMatrix Corporation's Version Tracker Pro, is a multi-user application for scheduling and booking meetings and meeting rooms.

Meeting Manager Enterprise (\$995.95 at www.tucows.com) is a SmartWorks Plugin that can be used to schedule and keep track of meetings and resources within a company. It helps the user organize meetings, inform participants and track post-meeting action. You can reach Staff Writer Sheri Graves at 527-9078 or sgraves@pressdemocrat.com.

PHOTO: 1 by JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

Chuck **McPherson**, President and CEO of Interactive Meeting Solutions, works with the staff of Accountable Solutions on improving efficiency in their Santa Rosa office.