

Meeting Management

The Hidden Toll of Meeting Hangovers

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Summary. Over one quarter of workplace meetings leave employees with lingering negative effects such as lowered engagement and productivity that can last hours. This is called a meeting hangover. To avoid the effects of a meeting... [more](#)

Jacob shut his laptop with a heavy sigh, rubbing his temples as the meeting he left almost an hour ago replayed again in his mind. No matter how hard he tried to refocus, his anger at the meeting's disorganization and pointlessness kept distracting him. He had already postponed the one-on-one scheduled immediately afterwards because he knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate—how much more time was he going to lose to this? But the meeting had been so maddening. Certain team members took over the discussion and as a result no decisions had been made—nothing productive had come out of the full hour. And it wasn't the first time. The experience left him disheartened and uninterested in working on the project altogether. It ultimately took hours for him to shake off his frustrations and regain the momentum he'd started with that morning.

Jacob's experience is far from unique. In a recent [study](#), we found that more than one quarter (28%) of workplace meetings left employees with lingering negative effects, such as impaired engagement and productivity. That's a considerable figure given the sheer number of meetings employees attend each week, as well as [our earlier findings](#) that employees' attitudes toward meetings strongly influence their overall job satisfaction (even after accounting for feelings about their pay, their boss, and the nature of their work).

Although some employees recovered from these negative effects within hours, others felt the impact for the rest of the day, demonstrating that bad meetings don't just end when the clock says they do.

We call this a meeting hangover: a period of diminished focus, motivation, or productivity following a bad meeting. As work and organizational researchers at the University of North Carolina and the work management platform Asana, we've combined forces to address the immediate aftermath of bad meetings. Most recently, we collaborated on the Asana Work Innovation Lab's [*State of Work Innovation report*](#), for which we surveyed over 5,000 knowledge workers across the U.S. and U.K to find out how they experience bad meetings and what follows.

Fortunately, our findings indicate that meeting leaders can take proactive steps to prevent meeting hangovers—and those of us who experience bad meetings can take steps to recover more effectively when prevention falls short.

What Do Meeting Hangovers Look Like?

In our survey, more than 90% of respondents said they experienced meeting hangovers at least occasionally. More than half said these hangovers negatively impacted their workflow or productivity, while 47% reported feeling less engaged with their work. These effects often resulted from ruminating, or replaying parts of the meeting in their mind. Nearly half (47%) of respondents noted harmful effects on their interactions with coworkers, such as feeling disconnected from their team or wanting to spend time alone.

For others, the frustration of the meeting often spilled over into conversations with coworkers, resulting in informal meetings after the meeting. More than one-third (36%) of respondents said they sometimes vented their frustrations to coworkers, and more than one-quarter (27%) admitted doing so often or always. While venting about a bad meeting may provide some social support, it can also spread negativity to coworkers, extending and amplifying the hangover effect.

When we asked respondents about the root causes of their frustrations, the most common reasons were:

- Irrelevance of the topics discussed (59%)
- Lack of a clear agenda or objectives (59%)

- Poor time management (53%)
- Lack of actionable outcomes or follow-up (48%)
- Unequal (39%) or low (38%) participation
- Ineffective facilitation (30%)

These frustrations took many forms. For example, an education professional described attending a meeting in which she had no input, sitting silently for over an hour and feeling like she was only there for appearances, which left her frustrated by the wasted time. A marketing professional recounted an event-planning meeting in which the leader arrived unprepared and unable to answer basic questions about the event. When asked why the kick-off meeting was scheduled without these details, the leader admitted, “I just wanted to get this off my list.”

The effects of these frustrations lasted nearly two hours on average, though for some, they persisted for much longer, sometimes until the end of the workday. Several respondents even reported taking these negative feelings home, suggesting that meeting hangovers can extend beyond the workplace, adversely affecting employees’ home and family lives.

How Meeting Leaders Can Prevent Hangovers

Fortunately, these concerns can be addressed by leveraging insights from [meeting science](#). Here are five strategies to prevent meeting hangovers by addressing their root causes head-on:

Don't dominate, facilitate.

Many of the root causes of meeting frustration can be addressed with more active, thoughtful facilitation. For example, many of our study respondents expressed frustration when their input was relevant, but they weren't given an opportunity to contribute to the conversation. One designer described how her manager dominated the discussion in a recent meeting, leaving her feeling “sort of defeated afterwards” and “pretty beat up about it for the rest of the workday.”

Distributing participation through facilitation can take many forms, from having team members lead their assigned agenda items to using interactive polls or quizzes to prompt input from attendees. These approaches are especially valuable in virtual or hybrid settings, where participants can more easily fade into the background.

Cut the guest list ruthlessly.

Have you ever found yourself in a meeting wondering, “Why am I even here?” Many study respondents felt the meetings they attended were irrelevant to them and that they shouldn't have

been invited in the first place. While larger meetings may seem beneficial for gathering diverse perspectives, research [shows](#) that meeting effectiveness generally declines as group size increases—and attendees often feel [less included](#).

To address this, align your meeting invite list tightly with the meeting's purpose. Prioritize “must-have” participants and provide “nice-to-have” attendees with alternative ways to contribute, such as submitting input beforehand or updating them via email afterward. Companies like Dropbox have [embraced this approach](#) by encouraging meeting leaders to invite only key stakeholders, not “spectators.”

Turn agendas into action plans.

Study respondents weren't just frustrated by the lack of agendas—they were also frustrated by agendas that were vague, recycled, or didn't include objectives.

Make your agendas more effective by building them [around specific questions](#) that matter to your team. For example, instead of “Product Launch Update,” ask, “What are the critical risks to our product launch timeline, and how can we mitigate them?” [These questions](#) can also inform other meeting decisions, such as how long to meet and who should be in the room.

Make every minute count—and don't run over.

Poor time management didn't just frustrate respondents—it often caused ripple effects. One researcher shared how her boss frequently caused meetings to run over, making it difficult for her to sustain focus and requiring her to follow up with other attendees afterward to fill in the gaps. As a result, the meeting upended her schedule in two ways: It ate into her work time and forced her to spend additional time gathering missed information.

To avoid these issues, let the agenda dictate the meeting's length and keep it as tight as possible. Most meetings are scheduled to last an hour, regardless of the agenda, but [Parkinson's Law](#) reminds us that work expands to fill the time available. Scheduling the meeting for half an hour or 45 minutes can add a bit of time pressure and boost both effort and efficiency.

Demand accountability, every time.

Respondents' lingering frustrations often stemmed from uncertainty about a meeting's next steps, including their roles and action items.

To counteract this, assign every agenda item an owner. This creates accountability and demonstrates shared leadership, which can [enhance](#) team effectiveness. For example, Apple

designates a directly responsible individual (DRI) for every action item in its meetings. AI and work management platforms can further support this process by summarizing action items and routing them to the appropriate DRI, ensuring they don't stall after the meeting is over.

These strategies can help prevent meeting hangovers, but even the best-planned meetings can sometimes get derailed. How can you get them back on track? Since rumination and venting tended to prolong respondents' hangovers, consider a proactive approach. Take time during the meeting to acknowledge attendees' concerns and, if needed, adjust the agenda by postponing less critical items to create space for meaningful discussions. If the agenda cannot be changed or time is running short, provide opportunities for follow-up, whether through one-on-one conversations or dedicating time in the next meeting to revisit any unresolved concerns.

How to Recover from a Bad Meeting

We also asked respondents about approaches that helped them and their coworkers recover more effectively from meeting hangovers. Unsurprisingly, their strategies largely aligned with findings from workplace stress research:

Press pause, then reset.

Taking a short mental break helped many respondents regain focus after a bad meeting. This technique, known as psychological detachment, involves mentally disconnecting from work and [helps](#) by disrupting negative thought patterns like rumination. After a bad meeting, pause for a few minutes to clear your mind. Simple [mindfulness exercises](#), such as deep breathing, can also help you process immediate reactions before restoring focus.

Walk it off.

Recovery efforts were even more effective when respondents put physical distance between themselves and a bad meeting. This included [taking a walk](#) outside, grabbing coffee, or simply visiting another part of the office. Beyond the many [other benefits](#) of physical activity, stepping away for a few minutes can boost the impact of a mental break, helping you return to work refreshed.

Find clarity in conversation.

Talking with coworkers was another common recovery strategy, but not all conversations had the same effect. We observed two distinct approaches with very different outcomes.

Conversations comprised purely to let off steam were not effective—and sometimes even counterproductive. While these interactions occasionally offered short-term emotional relief, this approach also often prolonged hangover effects.

In contrast, conversations aimed at [making sense of the meeting](#) were constructive. By discussing what went wrong and exploring possible root causes, you can process your thoughts, gain perspective, and move forward more effectively. So if you find yourself venting after a bad meeting, reframe the discussions as an opportunity for problem-solving. By doing so, you can disrupt the negative thought patterns that often lead to rumination and get back to your work more quickly.

Our findings underscore how bad meetings can leave lasting, harmful effects on employees like Jacob, whose productivity was derailed for most of the day. But some meetings can have the opposite effect — leaving employees feeling energized and excited to get back to their work. By implementing the strategies outlined here, organizations can foster a meeting culture in which employees like Jacob can leave meetings feeling motivated, focused, and ready to tackle their next tasks with renewed enthusiasm.

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