

CALENDAR JAM

UNPICKING KEY DILEMMAS AT THE HEART OF
MEETING OVERLOAD

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It's a familiar scenario: senior executives arrive in their workplaces at the beginning of the week to be greeted by a calendar filled wall-to-wall with meetings – often with double-bookings, and regularly with many of the same people moving from one room to the next. Their schedules leave no time to think, to connect with colleagues, or even to hang on to the last remnants of work-life balance. “Calendar-jam” is an increasingly common affliction of business leaders around the world.



It goes without saying that meetings are important and a key vehicle for senior executives to get work done. However the opportunity cost of time spent *unnecessarily* in meetings is huge, as is the impact on levels of executive frustration and stress. It is not surprising, therefore that high performance businesses work actively to ensure that such time is both efficient and effective.

Step 1: Get to the heart of cause-and-effect

A first step is to analyse the process and cultural norms in their organisations associated with meeting scheduling and attendance. We would highlight five common dilemmas faced by executives when planning whether or not to attend a particular meeting:

1. **The Expertise Dilemma:** “I have to attend, because nobody else understands my function/team. Otherwise something might come up that requires our expert perspective.”
2. **The Decision Standards Dilemma:** “I have to attend, because we need to work through the issue properly and take a really good decision. Otherwise they might take shortcuts and make a poor call.”
3. **The Information Dilemma:** “I have to attend, because I need to be aware of what comes out of the discussion. Otherwise I might not find out.”
4. **The Optics/Politics Dilemma:** “I have to attend, because the rest of the team will be there. Otherwise I might look bad, and be perceived as not fully committed.”
5. **The Trust Dilemma:** “I have to attend, because I don’t fully trust all of my colleagues. Otherwise I might get stabbed in the back.”

Each of these is a genuine dilemma and, when faced real-life with “calendar-jam”, often the right thing to do is bite the bullet and attend. However this is not *always* the right choice, but in our experience executives tend to err on the side of caution, turning up at meetings they might otherwise be able to skip. Their choices create inefficiency for themselves and also, most probably, for the meetings and their broader attendances.

Step 2: Engineer out the issues

Our view is that each of these dilemmas can and should be substantially engineered away by addressing the root cause issues of capability, process, information and behaviour that underpin them. Indeed this is an area where a small number of simple, focused changes can deliver huge benefits in increasing executive productivity. Leaders and their teams can “pressurise” the solution by creating a top-down, high-level specification for how they want to spend their time and then “solving” their organisational design solution to fit.

Typically we would set a minimum objective of unlocking 20% of senior executive time to make it available for other purposes contributing to accelerated performance improvement.



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