

GLI EVIDENCE CHECK™ / ISSUE 01

Do Meetings Crowd Out the Work?

What research suggests about meeting overload, fragmented attention, and whether meetings earn the time they consume.

SUPPORTED WITH QUALIFICATIONS

THE EVIDENCE-BASED ANSWER

Yes. Excessive and poorly designed meeting patterns can crowd out focused work and increase fatigue.

The Short Answer

Yes, they can. Research supports taking meeting load seriously. Meetings can create coordination, participation, learning, and connection. Their effects also depend on purpose, quality, placement, and cumulative demands.

A calendar saturated with recurring, scattered, or low-value meetings can consume time, add transitions, and leave too little usable capacity for the work those meetings are meant to support.

THE BETTER QUESTION

Does this meeting, and the larger pattern of meetings around it, support the work people are expected to accomplish?

What Research Suggests

Meeting quality matters

Meetings can support coordination, collective judgment, problem-solving, learning, relationship-building, and creative work. Research connects productive and counterproductive meeting behaviors with different experiences of engagement, exhaustion, effectiveness, and satisfaction.

Meeting load is cumulative

A five-day diary study found that meeting frequency was positively associated with daily fatigue and subjective workload. Newer work describes a meeting-load paradox: meetings may support participation, engagement, and creativity up to a point, while benefits decline as load becomes excessive.

A meeting system, not only a meeting

The burden of meetings is not captured by the length of a single invitation. Leaders should consider frequency, density, placement, preparation, follow-up, transition demands, and whether the interaction produces an outcome that required real-time participation.

Meeting design is more than an agenda

Rogelberg's research and his WorkLife conversation with Adam Grant reinforce that creating an agenda is not enough. What matters is what the agenda asks people to do, whether participants had a voice in shaping it, and how the discussion is facilitated. Framing agenda items as questions can clarify why interaction is needed and help participants prepare.

Dimension	Question for leaders
Necessity	What outcome requires people to interact in real time?
Frequency	Does this recur more often than its purpose requires?
Placement	Does it divide otherwise usable concentration time?
Transitions	What preparation, switching, follow-up, and recovery does it add?
Quality	Does it produce coordination, learning, sound decisions, connection, or clarity?

Time Confetti and Fragmented Attention

Journalist Brigid Schulte introduced time confetti to describe time fragmented into small pieces by competing demands and interruptions. It was not developed as a validated scientific construct or formal meeting measure. It remains a useful metaphor for a workday that contains open minutes but few substantial, usable blocks.

Meeting pattern	Total time	What duration misses
Three consecutive 30-minute meetings	90 minutes	Preserves another part of the day, but may create fatigue.
Three scattered 30-minute meetings	90 minutes	Creates more transitions and smaller work intervals.
One focused 60-minute meeting	60 minutes	May replace several fragmented interactions.
Four scattered 15-minute check-ins	60 minutes	Short individually, but potentially high in switching demands.

Available time and cognitively usable time are not identical. An opening between meetings may be consumed by finishing notes, acting on decisions, preparing for the next conversation, reopening files, reconstructing an earlier task, or taking a necessary break.

Attention residue and flow

Sophie Leroy's research suggests that when people leave an unfinished task, part of their attention may remain attached to it and interfere with performance on the next task. Meetings create transitions in both directions: employees pause unfinished work to attend, then return while still processing decisions or concerns from the meeting.

Rogelberg uses the term meeting recovery syndrome for the way a bad meeting can continue to consume attention through stress, rumination, and post-meeting conversations. Some meetings end on the schedule before they end psychologically.

Flow is a state of deep absorption in a demanding activity. For roles that depend on analysis, synthesis, writing, creative production, coding, research, or complex judgment, protected time for deep work is part of doing the job well. A calendar filled with frequent or scattered meetings can break task immersion, create repeated restarts, and make flow difficult to reach or maintain, even when individual meetings are brief.

When Meetings Create Value

Some work genuinely benefits from real-time interaction. Meetings may be warranted for consequential decisions, complex information, substantive disagreement, creative development, difficult learning, trust repair, or multidisciplinary understanding.

The standard is whether bringing these people together, in this format, at this time, produces value that justifies the full demand placed on their attention.

What the evidence does not show

- Every meeting functions as a harmful interruption.
- Eliminating meetings automatically improves well-being.
- One meeting pattern is optimal across purposes and settings.
- All employees need the same amount of uninterrupted time.
- Clustering meetings is always preferable.
- Released meeting time necessarily becomes productive time.

Questions leaders should consider

- What outcome requires people to interact in real time?
- Does the meeting currently produce that outcome?
- Could it be removed, consolidated, redesigned, or handled asynchronously?
- Which questions require collective judgment, discussion, or decision-making?
- Who has relevant expertise, information, or authority, and who can be updated afterward?
- How many transitions does it add to the workday?
- What uninterrupted work periods remain after all meetings are placed?
- If it recurs, when will its necessity, frequency, and attendance be reconsidered?

THE BOTTOM LINE

Meetings should earn their place on the calendar.

Leaders should examine whether each meeting is necessary, what value it produces, how it interacts with the larger calendar, and whether people retain enough usable time and attention to do the work.

Key Evidence

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

GLI Evidence Checks examine common workplace claims and translate current research into questions leaders can use. Classifications are editorial summaries, not formal evidence grades. This resource is educational and is not medical, psychological, or legal advice.

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