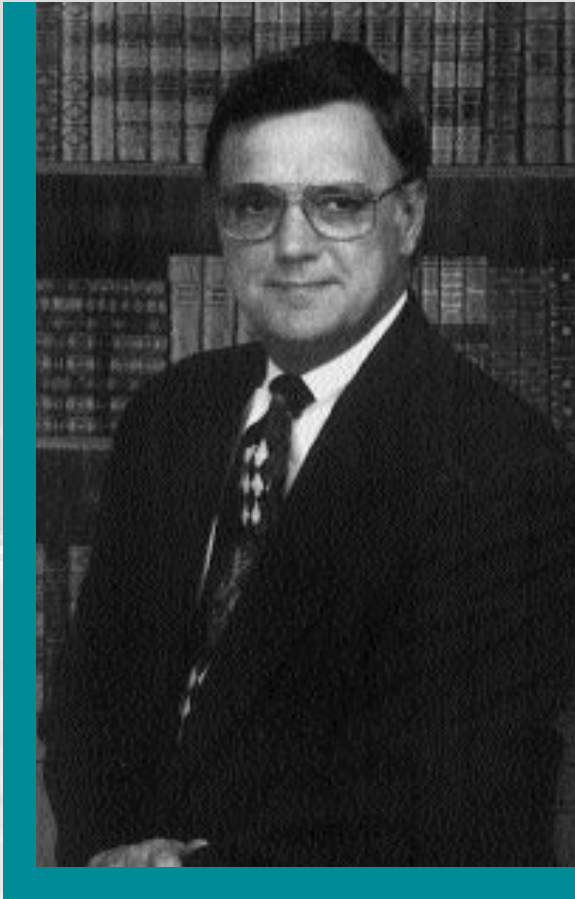




A PUBLICATION
OF THE MPI
FOUNDATION

Making Meetings Work

An Analysis of Corporate Meetings



Scientifically rigorous data

about what happens in a corporate meeting room is rare. Too often we rely on our impressions, whether as planners, as attendees or as senior managers. Even our evaluation tools—usually on-the-spot surveys or post-meeting wrap-up sessions with the planning team—seem woefully inadequate at times. The information seems too “soft” when we must persuade senior management to make hard changes or increase budget dollars to improve the outcome of future meetings.

The absence of such data was one reason the Foundation of Meeting Professionals International embarked on a nationwide research project which—through focus groups, case studies, fax questionnaires and telephone interviews—identified key success drivers to sales meetings, management meetings and education/training meetings in the corporate environment. We didn’t just talk to planners. We focused primarily on

senior managers who fund meetings and those who attend them, the ultimate stakeholders. By using rigorous scientific sampling and surveying techniques, the MPI Foundation has created a true-to-life snapshot of the state of the corporate meeting in America. More importantly, the study—nicknamed a “gap analysis”—created a statistical instrument to measure the at times great distance between these stakeholders’ expectations of a meeting’s outcome and the reality delivered by a planner.

Certainly it is not all bad news. Corporate meeting planners do many things well. This first MPI Foundation paper identifies both successes and failings while providing some tips on how to fill in the gaps mapped in the study. The MPI Foundation is currently reviewing plans for similar studies of association meetings and international meetings.

As a research and development organization dedicated to the meeting industry, the MPI Foundation will continue to identify needs through such studies as this and funding programs and projects that fulfill them. We will help you ensure that the objectives you set in the meeting room are met in the wider organization outside.

Weldon D. Webb

Chairman, MPI Foundation
May 1998

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Purpose

This paper examines the effectiveness of corporate meetings from the perspective of (1) senior managers responsible for budgeting and sponsoring meetings, (2) meeting attendees, and (3) professional meeting planners. Meeting effectiveness was examined from three perspectives: organizational outcomes, personal outcomes, and the meeting process.

The study upon which this paper is based examined sales conferences, management meetings, and education/training meetings. To qualify for the study, meetings had to involve significant planning and spending and be attended by 20 or more people.



Process

The study was conducted in two phases. Phase I consisted of two corporate case studies and a series of focus groups in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Key findings from these case studies and focus groups determined the questions used in the second phase. Phase II consisted of telephone or fax interviews with 160 senior managers, 420 meeting attendees, and 94 meeting planners.



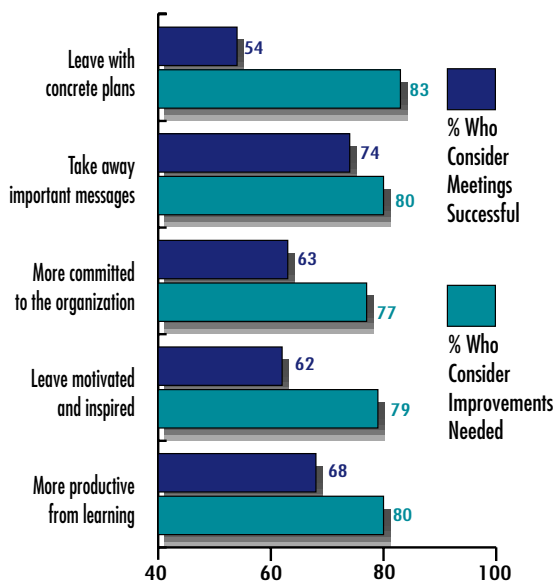
Findings

1. Senior Management Meeting Sponsors

An overwhelming majority of managers (85%) think their meetings are successful and produce a somewhat or much higher return on investment (ROI) than other investments. Some managers measure success by quantitative measures (e.g., ROI, sales leads), while others focus on qualitative measures (e.g., interaction, appropriate speakers, clear purpose/mission).

Managers are quite pleased with the meeting process, the knowledge and skills of meeting professionals, the timing and pacing of meetings, and the selection of quality facilities. Meeting planners are obviously attuned to the expectations of those to whom they report.

Rank Order of Managers' Meeting Satisfaction with Areas of Needed Improvements



In terms of meeting outcomes, managers think meetings are most successful in conveying a clear sense of organizational priorities and strengthening the organizational culture. Managers are less convinced that attendees leave with concrete plans, take away important messages, develop a greater commitment to the organiza-

tion and leave motivated and inspired to be more productive.

Managers are most concerned that the impact of meetings seems to diminish quickly once attendees are back in their work environments. Why this occurs may be related to the expectations of what can be accomplished with the agenda, the content, the delivery, and the pace of the meeting. Managers may lack understanding of how to change the workplace behavior of attendees. Most managers think that the dissemination of information is sufficient for bringing about change. Behavioral change, however, is difficult and generally requires time for attendees to process and internalize the content. Attendees indicate agendas are often too ambitious. "It's a brain drain. . . there's only so much that you could gather out of it before you have to relax," stated one attendee.

2. Meeting Attendees

Most attendees are largely satisfied with the outcomes of the meetings they attend (70%), with an even larger number being satisfied with meeting organization and management (85%). This indicates that meeting planners have achieved a high level of competence in securing good learning environments.

Attendees are more satisfied with sales and education meetings than with management meetings. They think sales and education meetings are better investments than management meetings.

Attendees judge the success of meetings somewhat differently from senior managers. Attendees place greater emphasis on what transpires within the meeting in contrast to senior managers who are more concerned about

Learner Overload

"Attendees have limited capacities in their

working memory, the same as your

computer. Once they are overloaded,

frustration and demoralization inevitably

set in which blocks further learning. One

key to teaching is to avoid overloading

one's working memory."

Ruth C. Clark, Author



the outcomes of meetings. Below is a comparison of the top success factors as seen by senior managers and attendees.

Need for

Frequent

Breaks

People learn the most

by taking frequent

breaks. They

remember the

content learned first

and last. More

frequent breaks

mean more firsts and

lasts. Breaks are a

time to consolidate

what has been

learned and an

opportunity to

revitalize brain cells

for the next session.

Key Meeting Success Factors of Senior Managers

1. Clear sense of organizational priorities.
2. Concrete action plans.
3. Improved interaction.
4. Important messages are remembered.
5. Greater productivity from learning.
6. Improved motivation and inspiration.
7. Greater commitment to the organization.

Key Meeting Success Factors of Attendees

1. Well prepared speakers.
2. Agenda covered as promised.
3. Equipment worked.
4. Stayed on schedule.
5. Sufficient materials.
6. Attendees from appropriate departments came.
7. Speakers held their attention.

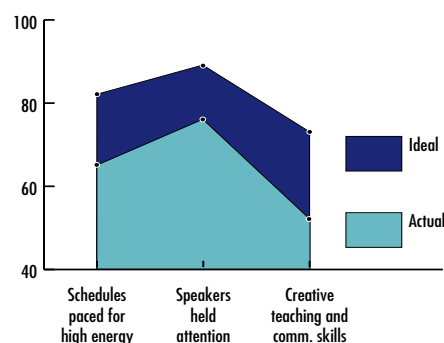
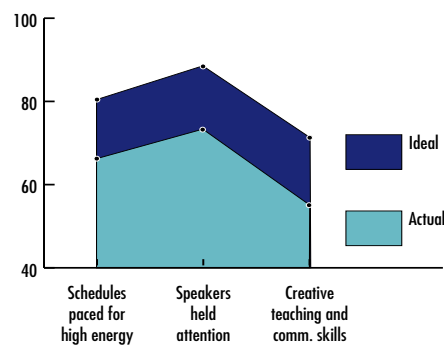
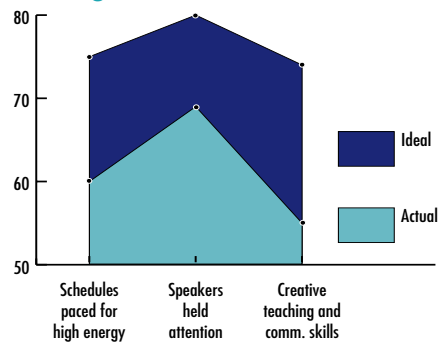
Of the three types of meetings studied—sales, management, and education/training—attendees’ expectations are more in line with those of senior managers on management meetings. Attendees are most interested in the appropriate attendees coming and working well together.

Attendees at sales meetings place greater emphasis on the meeting location and environment, program scheduling, and keeping on schedule. Having a reasonable schedule was indicated by attendees as an area that needs improvement. Attendees commented, “Allow frequent breaks,” “Do not drag too far into the afternoon,” and “Use evening activities to blow off steam.”

Those who attend education and training meetings view speakers, materials, topics and follow-up as key success factors. They place less emphasis on location and environment and who attends.

While many differences exist in the success factors identified for sales, management and education meetings, all meeting types exhibited three consistent needs to varying degrees (see chart): 1) the schedule should be paced to maintain high energy; 2) speakers need to do a better job holding the attention of attendees; and 3) creative teaching and communication skills must be used.

Attendees’ Rating of Needed Improvements Common to All Types of Meetings



Sales

Management

Education



There appears to be a close relationship between areas identified as needing improvement by attendees and the failure of meetings to deliver the

outcomes desired by senior managers. Attendees express a need to be engaged in learning that is challenging, stimulating, and led by effective speakers. “They did not do their homework before the meeting,” according to one attendee. Another commented, “The speakers they had were dreadful—they were not on our level at all.”

Emotions—the basis for Inspiration and Motivation

When content is presented in a stimulating and challenging manner it generates emotions within us as we try to make sense of what is occurring. Emotions are critical in determining whether we pay attention, learn, process, and retain information. We tend to remember best those experiences in which we had some emotional involvement and forget those in which we had little or no emotional involvement. Attendees will be as passive as a presenter allows them to be or will be as active as the presenter requires them to be, both of which impact learning.

Attendees say they would be inspired and motivated and more committed to the organization if effective speakers were engaging and challenging.

Overall, attendees have participated in a number of meetings and have developed rather high expectations of speakers and meeting outcomes. Therefore, their focus and concern on poor speakers is understood. Occasionally they encounter speakers at meetings who lack speaking experience and training in how to make effective presentations. These speakers have a limited repertoire of presentation skills, especially skills that involve the audience. Research shows that if learning is to occur, presentation skills are just as important as content.

Speakers who lack the presentation skills identified in this study tend to use the lecture method. This form of presentation tends to (1) focus entirely on content, (2) overload attendees with information, and (3) minimize opportunities for attendees to process the message. More experienced speakers have learned to limit their content, focus on a few key points, and provide opportunities for attendees to process information through questions, discussion, problems, exercises, case studies, etc. Attendees make their own meaning of what they experience. Active mental processing by attendees converts information into knowledge. When faced with a great deal of information, attendees have to select what they will process and what they will discard—a natural sorting process the brain uses to prevent overload and keep a person functioning. Until information becomes knowledge to each attendee, it has no value to them and cannot be retrieved.

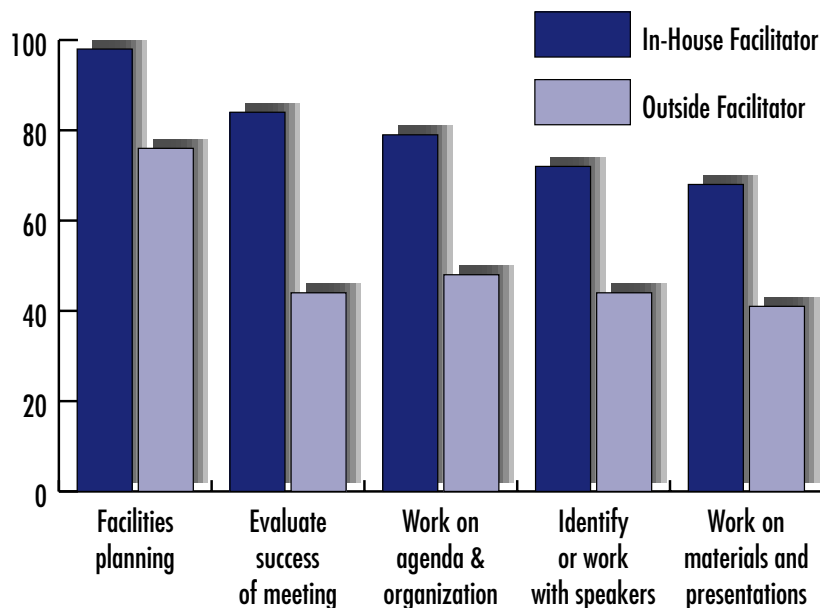


3. Meeting Professionals

Meeting professionals agree with attendees on what makes meetings successful. **They differ in their perceptions, however, of whether meetings leave attendees inspired and motivated. Meeting professionals overwhelmingly think meetings accomplish this while attendees disagree.** This is not surprising as meeting professionals are generally not concerned with how attendees perform after the meeting. Both groups think meetings build relationships among attendees and that management makes attendees feel valuable.

Managers and meeting professionals agree on the importance of quality facilities. They both believe meeting professionals have the right skills and knowledge. They disagree somewhat on maintaining control over the timing, organization, and pacing of meetings. Meeting professionals feel managers do not do a good job in this area, while managers disagree.

Managers' View of the Role of Meeting Professionals



While nearly all senior managers expect the planner on staff to handle facilities planning and help evaluate the meeting's success, there is declining expectation that the planner will assist with meeting content and delivery (see chart). Managers did, however, favor the internal

planner in expanded roles, over an outside contractor.

Meeting professionals have considerable control over meeting facilities and arrangements and somewhat less control over **areas that attendees think are very important—meeting content, organization, timing, and pacing.** Senior managers appear to have the perception of a clearly defined, but limited role for meeting professionals. These managers, meanwhile, seem to take greater responsibility for meeting organization, content, and pacing and often take an active role in conducting the meeting. By limiting the role of meeting professionals and taking responsibility for the meeting content and process, senior managers may well be contributing to less than desired program outcomes.

Conclusions

Senior managers are quite pleased with meeting facilities and arrangements and think meetings are a good return on investment. Their major concerns for improvement are what happens with the attendees, especially after meetings—that they leave with concrete plans, take away important messages, be more productive, are motivated and inspired, and more committed to the organization.

Attendees are more concerned about reasonable agendas and effective speakers which may be causes for their not feeling more inspired and motivated. **The greatest needs for improvement relate to the planning and delivery of content that leaves attendees motivated and inspired.** Meeting logistics and facilities appear to be adequate.

Little Reminders

What can planners do? Managers say the impact of meetings on attendees quickly diminishes once attendees are back in their work environments.

When I facilitate sessions, I provide toys that many tell me are kept on their desks to remind them of what they learned. If your company is taking a closer look at new products, positioning, etc., a magnifying glass will be a reminder of the meeting and reinforcement of ideas presented.

Joan Eisenstadt, Independent Planner

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations will make meetings more effective:

1. **Meetings should be planned around clearly identified problems** or issues with specific desired outcomes. These outcomes should dictate the form and process of meetings.
2. **Meetings should be viewed as learning experiences** designed to change the behavior of attendees. This means (1) set common expectations for everyone as to the purpose and desired outcomes of meetings, (2) realize that the meeting is but one part of the change process, and (3) understand that changes in behavior are more complex and require more than merely disseminating information.
3. **The agenda, pace of the meeting, amount of content, delivery methods, and degree of relevance are critical factors** that must be carefully planned. How attendees integrate and use what they experience at meetings depends largely on what

occurs during the meeting. The mere dissemination of content generally does not change one's performance. The delivery methods and degree of attendee processing with the content are just as important as the content if learning and change are to occur according to cognitive psychologists.

4. **Meeting planners can play an instrumental role** in addressing areas that need to be improved by 1) increasing their knowledge of how to institute change within an organization and the proper role of education; 2) expanding their role beyond meeting logistics to include desired outcomes, selection of content and the use of appropriate methodologies and speakers; and 3) by coaching others who have significant roles in the learning process of meetings.

The lack of desired behavioral changes following meetings has been clearly identified by senior managers. This finding is supported by attendees' feelings about needed improvements. It is critical that corporate planners expand their knowledge beyond their typical planning roles toward the production of desired learning outcomes that last well beyond the meeting.

This study by the MPI Foundation has helped identify the "gaps" between the expectations of senior managers and attendees and what corporate planners often deliver. Now, through new tools being developed by the MPI Foundation as a result of this study, planners can conduct their own "gap analysis" of their company's sales, management or education meeting. Armed with a meeting measurement tool that rates proven success factors, planners can begin to effect real changes.

The idea of a successful meeting must be expanded beyond "satisfaction" to the "achievement of desired outcomes."

The Meeting Beyond the Meeting Room

Help your organizations follow up immediately and weeks and months after meetings: send e-mail with a few key bullet points that will continue to help others do their jobs well with what they learned.

Establish a listserv for meeting attendees on the internet or on the intranet of your company. Seed the listserv with key points your management wants to reinforce. Ask those who attended the meeting to write down their experiences and questions while using the network they established at the meeting to continue to grow in their jobs and seek common solutions. Your organization can use their feedback to establish goals for a new meeting of the same people or others in similar positions.

Read More About It

Meeting professionals will find the following publications helpful in planning effective meetings, presentations and working with speakers. The books designated with an asterisk (*) can be purchased from the MPI Bookstore (1.972.702.3044) or may be ordered online at bookstore@mpiweb.org.

Meetings: Do's, Don'ts and Donuts. Sharon Lippincott, Lighthouse Publications, (1994)*

The Small Meetings Handbook. Thomas J. Carrier, (1996)*

The Essentials of Meeting Management. Richard A. Hildreth, Prentice-Hall, (1990)*

Meeting and Convention Planners Guide. Meeting Professionals International Canadian Council, (1997).*

Presentations Plus. David A. Peoples, (2nd ed), John Wiley & Sons, (1992).

PowerSpeak. Dorothy Leeds, Penguin Putnam (1988)

The Continuing Education Guide. Louis Phillips, Kendall/Hunt Publishing, (1994)*

The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy. Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, (1988)

The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species (Improving Human Performance Series). Elwood F. Holton, Malcom Knowles, (1998)

Mastering Meetings; Discovering the Hidden Potential of Effective Business Meetings. 3M Meeting Management Team, (1993)*

Objectives to Outcomes: Your Contract with the Learner. Glen C. Ramsborg, (1993)*

Secrets of Successful Speakers. Lilly Walters, (1993)*

Still More Games Trainers Play. Edward Scannell and John Newstrom, (1991)*

Even More Games Trainers Play. Edward E. Scannell and John W. Newstrom, (1994)*



The author of this MPI Foundation paper is **Louis Phillips, Ed.D.**, consultant, author, and trainer. Dr. Phillips helps organizations improve the quality and impact of their continuing education programs. An adult educator for 20 years, he trains program administrators and instructors for ASAE, National Judicial College, Federal Reserve, Mayo Clinic, and the Academy of General Dentistry. The study referenced in this paper was conducted by **Rockbridge Associates**, an independent research firm based in the Washington, DC area. It was funded in 1997-98 by a grant from the **MPI Foundation** and administered by the Projects Committee, chaired by **Mike Gamble**, Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau.

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