



Geber86/E+ via Getty Images

# In defence of the meeting

Attending a meeting and thinking it should have been an email is a common experience, but the flipside also applies – there are times when meetings are the best choice.

Words **Amanda Woodard**

In *A World Without Email*, author Cal Newport talks about “the tyranny of the inbox”, arguing that email is inefficient and disrupts focus. The constant flow of written communication can have a negative impact on work performance too, says Newport, who is a computer science professor at Georgetown University.

Organisational psychologist Dr Amantha Imber says it is not as simple as “email, bad” and “face-to-face, good”. Imber, author of *Time Wise*, says, “It’s about whether you are controlling the technology or whether you are allowing the technology to control you.”

## WHEN ARE MEETINGS BEST?

In some cases, a single email can quickly become a more labour-intensive exchange than having a quick meeting or picking up the phone.

If a business is facing a serious challenge that affects many people, or a manager has critical feedback, this is best communicated face-to-face, Imber says.

It is true that emails are appropriate for sharing information with multiple people at any time of day. In this way, email is efficient and can be used to send multimedia attachments.

“You might send a perfectly innocuous email, and the receiver reads it as aggressive or flippant. Emails are the least effective way for communicating messages where there might be an emotive response.”

DONNA MCGEORGE, ORGANISATIONAL COACH

Organisational coach Donna McGeorge says email also tends to be more formal in style, and younger people tend to avoid it, “just as they do talking on the phone”. Instead, instant messaging is preferred and is “becoming increasingly accepted in business situations”.

There is no guarantee that recipients will open every important email. “If it’s an important message, such as a policy change, I use multiple methods of communication, and email is just one of them,” McGeorge says.

“Email messages can also be misconstrued,” adds Imber, especially if tone is misinterpreted. A message that could be interpreted negatively is often better delivered in a meeting.

McGeorge agrees, “You might send a perfectly innocuous email, and the receiver reads it as aggressive or flippant. Emails are the least effective way for communicating messages where there might be an emotive response.”

#### ALTERNATIVES TO “EMAIL POLLUTION”

Imber suggests switching off notifications and being more mindful of email usage to avoid “email pollution”.

“Think before firing off emails to people when you want to get something off your chest,” Imber says.

Imber also suggests creating a “to discuss” list that includes only people contacted regularly.

“Whenever you have something that needs to be discussed with them – which doesn’t require an immediate response – put it on the list.

“When you have your next meeting, whether video or in person, bring those items to that meeting. You can discuss them quickly instead of having a drawn-out email exchange,” she explains.

Employees at Inventium, Imber’s behavioural science consultancy, use email to share ideas and feedback.

“It’s good for teams to be deliberate about what they do ‘synchronously’ and what they do ‘asynchronously’ – most teams don’t think this through.”

At Inventium, this takes the form of brainstorming by email, “so that people aren’t under pressure in an in-person meeting and can think about ideas and solutions to problems in their own time and contribute that via email”. ■



#### VIRTUAL VS IN-PERSON

Organisational coach Donna McGeorge says the use of virtual meeting platforms saw a massive increase during the pandemic, but “Zoom fatigue” has become an issue.

McGeorge also says that virtual meetings require more concentration than an in-person meeting. When real connection is needed – particularly when colleagues have not seen each other for a while – in-person meetings trump everything else.

“Their value is that we have access to so much more data. I can see body language – an intake of breath, a frown. I have visual clues. While you can get some of that during a video call, you don’t have the same richness of communication,” McGeorge says.

Body language researcher Albert Mehrabian was the first to break down the components of a face-to-face conversation. He found that communication is 55 per cent non-verbal, 38 per cent vocal – such as tone – and 7 per cent words only.

To make an in-person meeting effective, there may be a limit to how many people are in the room.

In 1913, French agricultural engineer Maximilien Ringelmann discovered that as more people are added to a group, the longer everything takes and the more inefficient the group becomes.

“Anytime you have more than seven people together, you start to get diminishing returns – otherwise known as the ‘Ringelmann effect’,” says McGeorge.



#### LISTEN

to an audio recording of this story



#### READ

an INTHEBLACK article on successful hybrid meetings



#### READ

an INTHEBLACK article on tools to fight email overload