Gender Equitable Actions

Are you on mute? Best practice in online meetings

Rose Capdevila:

Online work meetings have become a regular and taken-for-granted feature of everyday working lives for many people. It's often been celebrated for its flexibility, allowing people to work in ways that might fit better with their personal lives and commitments. But what is the real impact of using online meetings at work?

We explored these issues in our international research project, Gender Equitable Interactions Online, where we examined digital work meetings in organisations in four countries: Germany, Iceland, Spain and the UK.

How much of your time is spent in online meetings at work?

Interviewee 1:

Not that much of my time is spent in online meetings. I think we're quite good in my team to keep it not too many meetings, or maybe it's that I'm very good at declining meetings.

Interviewee 2:

Probably about 70 to 80%, something like that. I do enjoy them.

Interviewee 3:

It's not unusual for me to have 10 or 11 meetings in a day. So how many hours? Six to eight hours.

Interviewee 4:

Three or four hours a week.

Interviewee 5:

Quite a lot of time. But I actually really quite like the functionality of Teams.

Lisa Lazard:

We often hear that online meetings save time, but time isn't the same for everyone.

Women still do most of the unpaid work at home, about 76% of it. This means not just housework and childcare, but also the invisible work of keeping family life running smoothly: remembering appointments, planning meals, noticing when someone's upset, making sure that everybody's needs are met.

So when there are a lot of meetings during the working day, leaving less time to complete the work, or when meetings spill outside core hours, they hit some people harder than others.

Gender is only part of the picture. Power dynamics around, for example, age, race, class, disability shape how much flexibility people actually have. So when we join a video call, we're not all arriving with the same amount of time, energy or bandwidth – literally and emotionally. What are the problems with online work meetings?

Interviewee 6:
Accessibility is probably the main problem that I've seen – not really that I've experienced, but I've seen – because the live transcription isn't really up to scratch. It can make it very hard to follow. You always fall behind in the meeting if you rely on that transcription. But the other option is switching to text meetings entirely, and then that disadvantages other people who, you know, maybe type slower, and they can fall behind. So I think it's about trying to find that balance of accessibility. I think that's the downside of online meetings that you don't have if you're all in a room together.

Interviewee 7:
I think some of the challenges are the kind of non-verbal communication. Not everybody turns their cameras on, and you don't want to interject if they're mid-sentence, but then if they don't have their camera on, then you don't know when you can come in. Also, I feel like it's a lot more formal in online meetings, as opposed to if people are actually together in the same space, conversation will be a little bit more fluid.

Interviewee 3:
It's a limited way of interacting with people. And so if you're someone who is paying attention to body language and presence, a lot of that is cut off. You can see some of it, but not nearly as much as you can in person.

Interviewee 8:
If you've got sort of like quite a few people in the meetings, it can be sort of difficult to get your point across.

Rose Capdevila:
Most of us haven't been trained to lead or chair an online meeting, or even how to take part in online meetings effectively. Our findings showed that not everyone gets equal space in a meeting.
In both online and in-person meetings, some people naturally end up talking more, often those in senior roles or those who simply feel confident speaking up. Meanwhile, others tend to get less space. This often includes women, younger colleagues, and people who belong to groups that don't always get treated equally, such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ colleagues, or people with disabilities. These colleagues are more likely to be interrupted, talked over, or given less time to share their ideas.

These differences aren't about anyone's skills or expertise. They're shaped by social expectations and power dynamics that influence meeting discussion in subtle but very real ways.

Lisa Lazard:
Communication in online meetings isn't just about what we say, it's how we listen, respond and make space for one another. And sometimes, without meaning to, we slip into patterns that silence or sideline people: interrupting the same person repeatedly, questioning somebody's expertise, talking over quieter voices, or saying 'it's just a joke' to justify a comment that could be hurtful.
Humour is a great example of this. Used well, it builds connection, strengthens teams and creates positive, open environments. But used poorly, it can undermine trust, create tension and exclude others.

Rose Capdevila:
The good news is that there are some simple ways that we can work together to make our online meetings more inclusive, effective and more productive.
It starts even before the meeting begins: asking whether a meeting is genuinely needed, scheduling it at a time that allows colleagues to attend, checking what people might need to participate comfortably, and making sure everyone has the information, tools and time to prepare. These small steps signal respect and help prevent exclusion before it even happens.
Once the meeting starts, a little structure goes a long way. Simple things like agreeing on how people will take turns, keeping an eye on how we speak to each other, and setting a few easy ground rules can make discussions fairer and stop certain voices from taking over.

Lisa Lazard:
It also means actively welcoming in the quieter voices, the people who have insight but may not speak first.
Finally, a big part of all of this is reflection: noticing our own habits, assumptions and influence in online meetings. When we understand our role in shaping the space, we're far better equipped to make it fairer, warmer and more inclusive for everyone.
What would you change about online meetings?

Interviewee 9:
The thing I would change about online meetings is I would make them shorter, personally. I think it's too long having hour-long meetings. I think they need to be quick, conversational, otherwise they go in one ear, out the other. And I also think people need to sort of follow up on those meetings more. Oh, and stop having meetings about meetings too. Could have been an email.

Interviewee 1:
I think there are lots of people that feel maybe they have to be on camera or don't have to be on camera. I think it's just reminding people that whatever they feel comfortable with – maybe even sending a poll out before to say, 'Do you want to be on camera? Is this a cameras-on event, or is it just cameras off is okay as well?' But it's just being mindful that everyone's different and everyone likes to work differently. But yeah…

Interviewee 4:
I think, carrying on from what I said, just having really clear objectives. I hate getting invited to a meeting where I don't know why I need to go. There's no clear agenda or objective. So I think being very clear, sticking to the time, and having then actionable outcomes at the end as well is really important.

Interviewee 7:
I would prefer it if everyone had cameras on, just because it helps people to get to know each other a little bit better, and just helps with the whole communication aspect.

Interviewee 3:
I encourage people to lean in more. In some of the meetings I'm in, sometimes I see people kind of sitting back, maybe with their cameras off, not participating, so they're like an audience. And, you know, I know that there are different needs and requirements that people have. It might be that actually, for neurodiversity, it's really hard having a camera on or the video feed. But if possible, I think people, and using the functions, so putting their hand up, writing things in the chat, so there's engagement.

Rose Capdevila:
To learn more about best practice in online meetings, we have developed a free online badged course. With a bit of planning and attention, we can make online meetings inclusive and more productive for everyone.