

# Ruled by the calendar?

## *Public sector and university managers on meetings, calendars, and time*

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses modern organizational meetings in the public sector, with a focus on time, specifically the planning and scheduling of time among managers. In this qualitative analysis, data were gathered through an ethnographic study of managers in several public organizations, all in Sweden. During interviews and field observations, managers told about their time work involving strategies for dealing with their fully booked calendars, or for handling what they described as boring or meaningless meetings. These strategies can be conceptualized as a form of "meeting resistance" among the managers in these organizations. Their retold experiences and strategies raise issues of meeting resistance in relation to the meetingization of contemporary work life and, in a wider sense, questions of power and control over time at work. By using a variety of strategies for negotiating and resisting the rule of the calendar, managers may achieve a greater sense of control over their time. Nevertheless, despite their strategies and resistance, the machinery of meetings is hard to stop due to an *Eigendynamik* of meetings.

*Keywords:* meetings, time, resistance, managers, ethnography

"MEETING IS MURDER", declared *The New York Times* magazine in February 2016, with a teaser that proclaimed: "They're boring. They're useless. Everyone hates them. So why can't we stop having meetings?" (Heffernan 2016). Despite such grumblings, in line with research reporting common criticism of meetings as superfluous and time-consuming (see, e.g., Schwartzman 1989; van Vree 1999), many organizational activities clearly take place in the form of formal meetings. These are events that are planned, set for a specific time and place and where specific members are invited for a particular purpose, where members of organizations "transact, negotiate, strategize, and attempt to realize their specific aims" (Schwartzmann 1989:37). The number of meetings has increased in the last 50 years, in the public sector as well as in trade and industry (Allen et al 2015).

Van Vree (2011) used the term "meetingization" to describe the expansion of meetings in contemporary societies. He accounts for the increase by referring to a long-term process: as people become increasingly mutually dependent, in parallel with democratization, more problems are solved through talking and decision-making in meetings. Enhancing this process are contemporary strong tendencies towards efforts of coordination and col-

laboration within as well as between organizations. Van Vree also notes that this meeting culture in contemporary societies demands a specific knowledge:

”... the challenge of ambitious people is to regulate the necessary meetings, not so much by the second nature of rigid rules and stately customs but more by a ‘third nature’ of conscious considerations of efficiency, effectiveness, and pleasure. Deciding if a meeting is necessary or the most effective thing to do or not, choosing the most efficient or appropriate (electronic) form, inviting the right people and the right number of people, tuning procedures in to the current goal of the meeting, choosing the right location, appropriate light, fitting attire and food, using informal but direct manners during meetings, moderate expression of emotions – these are ingredients of a new third nature of meetings, which groups of people are developing today” (2011:20).

Even if the process of meetingization involves many occupational categories, managers attend more meetings than other employees and are most governed by the social control of proper meeting behavior. Our focus in this study concerns middle-level managers in public Swedish organizations. These managers described a work situation with too many meetings, meetings that they do not initiate but have to attend, and/or meetings seen as unproductive. At times, they described a situation similar to that in Sune Carlson’s classical study *Executive Behavior* (1951) where, rather than governing the organization, the CEOs were governed by their calendars. However, during our interviews, managers also talked about different strategies for dealing with their fully booked calendars and what they described as boring or meaningless meetings. These strategies, we would argue, can be conceptualized as a form of “meeting resistance” among these managers.

Of course, issues of power and control are relevant here. Indeed, the how, when, and why of meetings may be viewed as an ongoing negotiation about who controls time in modern organizations.

Several questions arise: How do managers describe and relate to their schedules and calendars, specifically concerning meetings? What strategies and forms of resistance do managers use for dealing with the increased number of meetings? How do they in various ways try to negotiate and resist what may be described as the rule of the calendar? Meetings are important to study in order to understand both how organizations are constituted in everyday work life through meetings (Hall, Leppänen & Åkerström 2019) but also how managers experience and manage their meetings.

The time calendars of managerial staff are filled with organizational and personal planned activities and duties. What also was clear from the interviews and observations is that many activities were informal and spontaneous, which are not noted in the calendar. We would argue that formal as well as informal meetings play an important role in how managers perform their organizational time work in everyday work life and how they experience and arrange time during workdays. The clear result, from both the interviews and field observations, is that not everyone wholly embraces meetings

as the optimal way to communicate, plan, and make decisions within organizations. Even if managers felt that their meetings were an important work task, they also have the sense of meetings being "given" by their organizational context in such a way that fetters their maneuvering space. Moreover, meetings appear to have an *Eigendynamik*, where one meeting easily generate another, a self-enforcing quality that is difficult to stop or slow down (Åkerström 2019).

## Meetings, time, and resistance

To understand how schedules and meetings are conceived within modern organizations, we briefly discuss the historical development of meetings and time. Then we move on to discuss and reflect on meetings, time, and calendars as a modern phenomenon. This review of the literature is not meant to be exhaustive but to provide our study with some useful concepts. Additionally, it provides an analytical frame for the final discussion.

Van Vree offers a historical perspective on meetings (1999), noting that modern meeting behavior began to be instilled in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, attendance was required in formal town and state meetings, and an absence could be punished with a monetary fine. The notion of punctuality had already started to take shape as early as in the medieval monasteries (Zerubavel 1981). These instances were also the earliest to introduce the idea of temporal regularity, not merely on a weekly or monthly basis, but also at the level of the hour. Late coming was condemned, as a sin. This development also demonstrates the findings of Norbert Elias (1992), who argues that as the functional dependency relations between people increased, so did the regimen of the clock-time. In general, the increasing importance of time in connection with meetings arguably illuminates a broader social process of time and time control: "The social compulsion of time, represented by clocks, calendars, and timetables, formed an increasingly finer mesh of relatively unobtrusive, moderate, even, and non-violent, but omnipresent and inescapable social constraints" (van Vree 1999:147).

Thus, we may note the connection among time, discipline, and control, not only in modern-day organizations but also in its early forms, such as the medieval monasteries as mentioned by Zerubavel (1981). For van Vree (1999), meetings represent traces of broader and more general social processes, which also helps to illuminate the changes in meeting behavior. The increased attention to questions of time and the standardization of time is a good example of this argument. Moreover, meeting behavior and meeting activities can be viewed in terms of the rationalization of human behavior, not only regarding issues of time and time-keeping but also as a way of constraining, formalizing, and controlling human behavior during meetings.

In contemporary society, schedules and calendars regulate and plan work-time for many employees. Although time in these calendars may be presented initially as a blank slate, it eventually becomes mapped out and divided into meetings, tasks, and assignments, as they are filled in by marking weeks, days, and hours. As such, the calendar is perhaps not quite as "tyrannical" as the factory whistles in industrial

societies. However, managers in our study still at times refer to the "tyranny" of time being managed by their calendars.

It may be argued that time in general in modern societies and organizations is quite controlled, compartmentalized, assigned, and distributed. David Lewis and Andrew Weigert (1981) suggested the concept of *temporal embeddedness* to describe the complexity of modern time structures, where dimensions such as organizational and personal time are intertwined and interact with one another in complex ways. According to them, this embeddedness leads to time conflicts and to what they call the stratification of time.

Additionally, a process towards a certain *moral* theme of time can be discerned in which time should not be wasted but used wisely, productively, and efficiently. Zerubavel (1981) underlines the strong contemporary emphasis on efficiency, which includes the strict condemnation of time wasting. This implication is also mirrored in language: time is running out, time is money, time is scarce, time is short (even though time still sometimes may be perceived to move slowly, such as during a meeting considered boring or towards the end of the working day).

In line with the above reasoning, timing and synchronization of social life in modern society can be viewed as closely connected to historical themes of discipline and social control.

### **Time as a social practice**

Flaherty (2011) has described *time work* as the process of controlling the sequence and allocation of everyday events and activities: "By 'time work' I refer to intrapersonal and interpersonal efforts directed toward provoking or preventing various temporal experiences. This concept implicates the agentic micromanagement of one's own involvement with self and situation" (Flaherty 2011:11).

In line with this perspective, we argue that the notion of time as an ongoing social practice is relevant for understanding the use of time calendars and how personal and professional time may be perceived as having a tense relation to one another. Flaherty (2011) mentions several examples of what he refers to as temporal agency at work, such as staff members taking time from their employers in the sense of using work time as personal time to, e.g., run errands, speak on the phone with family and friends, or browse the web for private purposes. This phenomenon, although Flaherty does not phrase it that way (2011), may also be interpreted as a form of "resistance," as various ways of transforming organizational time into personal time.

Staff, however, do not seem to view activities such as these in a lighthearted way. Rather, the interviewees in Flaherty's (2011) study expressed a certain degree of discomfort about exercising this form of temporal agency concerning work time. Furthermore, their actions were also accounted for by describing them as "necessary," sometimes also mitigated by declaring that they despite these behaviors, they still "work hard." This discussion of agency and organizational time, although not directly related to the subject of meetings, demonstrates that the uses of time at the workplace are complex and multifaceted.

### Resistance and time

Johansson and Vinthagen (2016) notes the importance of time as an aspect of everyday resistance. Time is highly valued in organizations, by managers and workers alike, and key modern organizational concepts such as "efficiency" have clear associations with the dimension of time. Several types of everyday resistance at work are mentioned by Johansson and Vinthagen (2016) as variants of time theft: foot dragging (lowering the work pace), "the wig" (using time at work to pursue one's personal interests) or taking long breaks. Such practices challenges the organization's control of time, which is noteworthy considering most organizations' emphasis on efficiency and productivity.

The strategies and ways of dealing with meetings in organizations that we encountered in our study may be viewed as forms of resistance on a managerial level. Thus, these strategies are not primarily, as are often described in the research literature, instances of worker resistance against managerial control (Ackroyd & Thompson 1999; Johansson & Vinthagen 2016; Karlsson 2012). Rather, these forms of meeting resistance concerns managers, and how these try to find ways in order to make their everyday meeting practices manageable, and also achieving a sense of control over their work time in the organization. As Karlsson (2012) notes, much of the resistance literature has studied worker resistance, and in that sense we would argue that managerial resistance should be studied as well, in order to gain a better understanding of the many and varying forms of resistance in organizations.

### Material and methods

We gathered qualitative data in the form of ethnographic field observations (approximately 200 hours of observations) in Swedish public organizations and interviews with 25 managers at different managerial levels within the organizations (mainly unit managers). The organizations were a public health care institution, youth care institutions, and different departments in one university within public higher education. The purpose of the field observations, as well as the interviews, is to increase knowledge and illuminate what may be described as the "everyday meeting life" within these organizations. Therefore, both formal and informal meetings were observed.

The field observations were conducted mainly through so-called *shadowing* (Czarniawska 2007), where the researcher follows and carefully records the everyday activities of a selected individual (or group of individuals). In organizational studies, Czarniawska suggests this method as a way to capture the fragmentary and kaleidoscopic character of modern organizations. In this study, three managers were shadowed during their working days. One of us shadowed a head unit manager in the psychiatric health care sector, during his daily work activities within the organization. The other shadowed a unit manager at a large juvenile care institution, and another field-worker shadowed a head manager at a smaller, but similar type of institution.

The field observations were carried out with a specific focus and interest regarding the meeting activities of the organizational staff. In this sense, our field work had the character of what may be described as *focused ethnography* (Knoblauch 2005). It is a

well-known methodological problem that observations cannot capture "everything" that goes on. Having a clear focus of interest, however, makes pertinent observations somewhat easier for the researcher. The field notes have been written and transcribed with the ambition of making these as precise and specific as possible, while focusing on particular situations and events of relevance for the study (see, e.g., Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995).

We note that these meetings have been studied in the wider, rather than narrower, sense. Thus, the material consists of not only formal, large-scale meetings with several participants but also small and informal meetings, some with only three participants, because the participants labeled such encounters as "meetings." Additionally, we thought it was important to capture preparations for and talk about meetings, such as discussing when and how a meeting should take place. Another aspect of the talk about meetings involved studying how meetings are perceived and discussed among the members of the organizations.

Thus, in addition to the field observations, the interviews were conducted to further discuss and elaborate on the subject of meetings. In part, the interviewees were chosen among persons whom we had already encountered during field work in the organization. In that way, during the interviews, we could touch upon themes and issues that had already been noted during the observations. In addition, we could ask for clarifications or elaborations regarding these themes and issues. However, in some cases, we chose some of the interviewees because they were managers with a lot of experience on the subject of meetings (leading meetings, as well as attending meetings). These interviews were conducted with managers in the university sector.

The interviews were semi-structured (May 2013) and usually based on the interviewees' time calendars in the weeks just preceding the interview. With the calendars as a starting point, the interviews focused on discussing the specific meetings of the staff, as well as their views on meetings in general. The interviews were digitally recorded and conversational, with the ambition of achieving an active dialogue with the interviewees rather than simply using a question–answer structure (Gubrium & Holstein 1995).

The recorded interviews have been transcribed verbatim, in accordance with established conventions in qualitative methods (see, e.g., Silverman 2011). In the field notes, speech is rendered in the transcriptions as quotes, which contributes to a more reader friendly experience and a greater sense of "being there" in the observed situations. However, it is important to keep in mind that because these quotes are based on field notes, rather than actual recordings, they are not as precise and exact as the interview quotes. That said, care has been taken to faithfully portray the situations and events described in the field notes.

Analytically, the empirical material has been thematized in interplay between the research questions and the basic theoretical and methodological points of departure. Thus, in analyzing our material about meetings, and the various practices and forms of these, we have had the ambition to be inclusive rather than exclusive, in order to capture and illuminate the significance of the everyday meeting practices in the studied organizations. In this process, we have discerned a number of themes that we

discuss and elaborate upon, something that naturally does not preclude there may be other dimensions of relevance as well. All forms of analysis involve a certain amount of reduction of the empirical material, in order to make sense of it (Becker 1998). In that regard, this study is no exception.

Sometimes, in qualitative studies, the concept of *transferability* is used to discuss the possibility of generalizing the analytical interpretations and conclusions of a qualitative study (Fangen 2005). This transferability, of course, cannot be demonstrated and proven statistically. Rather, it is an empirical issue, in the sense that this study may contribute to the understanding of meetings in other organizational contexts, as well. This transferability, we would argue, is suggested by the literature concerning meetings and time, and by our personal experiences. As university staff, we have spent our own fair share of time in meetings and can recognize many of the experiences and arguments from the field observations and the interviews.

### **Ethical considerations**

All participants in the study were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could at any time discontinue participation, in accordance with the criteria formulated by The Swedish Research Council [Vetenskapsrådet] (2002). The focus in the study is on the subject of meetings, not on specific individuals. Therefore, individual names and names of organizations, places, etc., have been altered to preserve anonymity. Most of the time, however, our presence as researchers at meetings and during other everyday work activities at the organization was deemed to be of no ethical concern. We did not attend meetings involving something considered inappropriate by the managers (such as when sensitive issues concerning staff or clients were to be discussed). The project has been evaluated and accepted by the Ethical Review Board, Lund (Dnr. 2017/117).

### **Grumbling about meetings**

Some of the managers we interviewed described the importance of meetings as a way to coordinate, inform their staff, and reach a common organizational understanding of various issues. One even exclaimed: "I think there should be more meetings!" Meetings are, of course, varied in nature, and all interviewees could point to both valuable and unproductive meetings. When asked to speak about formal work meetings in general, however, most of the interviewees offered a common criticism: many meetings are inefficient. They seem to share this view with managers in general, at least according to a web survey from 2014 and 2017 by the Swedish magazine *Chef* (CEO, or "managers").<sup>1</sup> According to that survey, about half of respondents did not think that the meetings that they attended were efficient. The share of respondents who thought that they had to attend too many meetings increased from 43% in 2014 to 54% in 2017.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://chef.se/chefer-har-for-manga-moten/> [2018-10-13]. This refers to the article from 2014. The results from the second survey from 2017 was sent to us from a journalist at the magazine.

So, what more precisely do the interviewed managers grumble about? They mostly voiced complaints related to a discourse of rationality, in the sense that meetings are supposed to be productive and efficient but lack these elements. One of the interviewees draws on this theme, also describing a feeling of being "imprisoned by meetings" when he is asked about meetings in general.

Well, basically, I think meetings are tiresome. I guess it comes from some type of quest for freedom. I feel confined by my calendar being so filled with meetings and because many of them take too long and are too unfocused and boring. To fill the time, people tend to talk about things that are not for them to bother about. [---] Meetings are a bit like gas, they tend to fill the space they've got.

Another often-voiced irritation concerned time conflicts. Many of the managers we interviewed have well-filled calendars, so squeezing in another may be difficult. We have repeatedly witnessed the difficulty of coordinating many people. Consider Ingrid's irritation when the Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO) suggests a date for a meeting. IVO is a government agency responsible for supervising health care and social care, as well as health care and social care staff. Now Ingrid and her colleagues must meet their representatives because a patient's family have filed a formal complaint.

Ingrid tells, with visible irritation, that IVO has suggested one, and one only, date to meet. "I find that *very* optimistic by IVO, to only suggest one day, the 29<sup>th</sup> of April (one month ahead) as there are many of us who have to participate," she says. They agree on six persons that have to attend, among them the senior manager Ewa. Ingrid suggests that it might be good if she and Stephen can agree on three dates, and then suggest these meeting days. (Field note)

### **Managing meetings**

In the empirical material, we found several dimensions that we believe are relevant for understanding how managers deal with what they describe as meeting problems. The first dimension is strategies "during meetings" and mainly concerns what is described as the need for structure and effectiveness during meetings. We would suggest that this idea may very well also be described as a form of meeting resistance and, as such, an effort to control how time is used within modern organizations. Another aspect that the managers mentioned involves taking control of one's calendar. In modern organizations where meetings are numerous, finding strategies and solutions to handle the multitude of meetings seems to be a real and tangible issue. Finally, the notion of organizational change also came up during the interviews and field observations. Digital meetings were discussed as one possible way to make meetings more effective and less time-consuming. However, the digital meeting solution has its own problems, such as the need for staff members to understand and learn new technologies.

### During meetings

One way to resist what managers labeled as unnecessary time spent in meetings was to proclaim their view of the optimal way of behaving *during* meetings. They emphasize that time is precious and that it is important not to waste it, in particular with regard to meetings. Being a chair during meetings offered some opportunities in controlling what they labeled as time waste. One manager at a youth care institution talked about meetings not being like a "coffee break." When the interviewer asks how he conveys this to his staff, he says:

*Erik:* That's done through acting as chairperson at the meeting.

*Interviewer:* It is through acting as chairperson. But how do you go about being a chairperson?

*Erik:* If you bring up something that is irrelevant. "Do we need to discuss that now? No. What is it that we should be discussing now?" That you constantly manage ...

*Interviewer:* Mm, right. So you are rather controlling?

*Erik:* Very controlling. And above all listening closely. Now this conversation is heading somewhere else, it's heading towards the ski holidays. Then, you have to, bring it back and focus on what we are supposed to do.

The discourse on meetings often rests on rationality and efficiency, as illustrated above. If we have meetings, then they should be productive and goal-oriented and fulfill their purpose in discussing certain specific and well-defined issues. Another way of seeing it is that this manager is using his position as a chairperson to exert power and control over the meeting. If the discussions during a meeting are heading "towards the ski holidays," then you, as a chairperson, have the power to steer it into a more focused direction.

Another telling example is from an interview with a manager, Angela, in the university sector. Angela recalls how she had toddlers when she began to work as a manager; therefore, she was eager to know not only when meetings started but also when they ended. "You could be called to a meeting at 13.00, but there was no mention of when it finished," she says. This, according to Angela, is not acceptable, and clarity about the time frames for a meeting is important for her as another way to save valuable meeting time. She emphasizes her use of the calendar in this sequence of the interview by noting: "I had three places to pick up [the children]. So then it was sort of structure, structure, structure."

"Structure, structure, structure." By using a rhetorical *triad* device, Angela puts a strong emphasis on this dimension. Lateness is not accepted, and one may note that this need for structure seems to have been particularly pronounced when she had small children. In this sense, her emphasis demonstrates clearly the temporal embeddedness that Lewis and Weigert (1981) referred to as private and professional dimensions being intertwined in everyday life at work, and how combining these may call for certain strategies, and indeed, certain forms of resistance. If you have to pick up your toddlers

at daycare, then you must have a clear and specified time when a meeting will end. Angela continues:

*Angela:* I rarely put meetings right after one another. If it is necessary then, but usually, if I have placed them right after one another I still have ... I usually start the meeting with: we have this time at our disposal, and then I am ... that is, very concerned that if we have set this time ... then we have floated away, but then I have often checked that, and noted that now we are floating away here, "can we ... can you go on?" So I am not just [bangs the table] ...

*Interviewer:* Is that a way to sort of relieve your meeting stress, trying to have that space?

*Angela:* Yes, I'm allergic to meetings.

*Interviewer:* Are you?

*Angela:* Mm.

*Interviewer:* Then it doesn't sound so good to be [laugh] a manager.

*Angela:* Yes, but you can become very structured and challenging yourself.

Angela describes herself as "allergic to meetings." One might add that she seems to be allergic primarily to a certain kind of meetings, namely those who are badly structured and unproductive. By not putting meetings one after the other, Angela manages to create some space for herself, possibly relieving some of the stress of dealing with meetings. At times, managers may self-critically admit being prone to digression and chairing meetings with less structure than required, as did Stephen, a manager we shadowed working in a health care organization, in a conversation with the field observer before a meeting. During the meeting, he makes a passing remark to one of the participants: "Greta, you've often requested an agenda, so I've made one for today." Greta nods, smiles, and says, "Good!" In this short exchange, we can imagine there having been meetings in which Greta exerted some efforts at social control to enhance efficiency.

### Passing time

Despite intentions, running meetings in an efficient and well-structured manner may not always be so easy to achieve. An attendee is not always the chair or organizer of a meeting. Meetings may be an arena for managers, "where the action is" (Goffman 1967/1982), i.e., situations to display competence and moral character, but the interviewees all agreed that they had to attend meetings where "actions" was missing and where they had little control.

In spite of possibly resulting feelings of boredom, the interest in the meeting should be the main activity and the dominant involvement where they engage in focused interaction. In spite of such meeting morals, meeting participants can often engage in side-involvements or "aways" (Goffman, 1967/1982:126). At meetings where the managers felt a lack of involvement, they could engage in other activities, and there are indeed ways of doing so. They can daydream and think about other things, answer e-mails on their laptop, or write text messages on their mobile phone. One of the inter-

viewees who worked at a university told us, for instance, about "information meetings" with the faculty where the dean was chair: "Quite simply: it may be boring. That's when you start looking for mail on your phone... A sign of it being boring (laughter)." She added that she did this furtively, trying to hide such activities.

Side-involvement may also concern devoting oneself more openly to "multitasking" during meetings. This behavior may express changing norms in meeting behavior. In our field notes, behavior such as answering emails or working with a document other than those under discussion during the meeting were notable during larger meetings. When an interviewed retired manager at a university considered his meeting experiences, he emphasized the more common use of laptops and mobile phones where they engaged in other issues during large, formal meetings in his final working years. This behavior, he claimed, would have been unthinkable before but was now perfectly acceptable.

One may also indulge in sheer entertainment during meetings that are un-engaging, such as when the late US senator John McCain was exposed playing internet poker during a Senate hearing on the US and Syria conflict. McCain explained: "As much as I like to always listen in rapt attention constantly with the remarks of my colleagues over a three-and-a-half-hour period, occasionally I get a little bored."<sup>2</sup> We would suggest that these kinds of diversions during meetings, as well as working with other tasks through laptops, could very well be viewed as forms of meeting resistance. You may physically be attending a meeting, but your mind and focus of attention may very well be somewhere else.

### **Taking control over one's calendar**

Some "meeting strategies" thus serve to manage time during meetings. Others serve to manage one's meetings as a whole in organizing work life by attending to one's calendar. Zerubavel (1981) has noted that one important dimension of schedules and calendars is that they enable the structuring of time and are vital for achieving coordination and synchronization. Calendars could also be used, however, to create some freedom or flexibility.

One way to do this is a radical measure: to simply delete some meetings by, as one manager called it, "cleaning up the calendar" when there are many meetings to attend. This cleanup occurred in a situation where the manager felt that he had lost control over how he spent his work time in the organization as a manager. This chair of an academic department described a situation where he has "no room to maneuver" because of being constantly fully booked with meetings.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2013/09/04/mccain-on-smartphone-poker-i-get-a-little-bored/#comments>

I've tried to clean up among my meetings, because I've thought that "Oh my God!" I get no room to maneuver in this job, 'cause it's completely controlled by others who want to book meetings with me. So I sit and work with things that other people have defined. But I also have to get some damned room to maneuver, in order to see the next place that the department is heading to, and to make plans for entering that place. So, I did engage in a certain cleanup of meetings during a period of time. And it went reasonably well. Reasonably.

We suggest that this is an example of meeting resistance, to be engaged in a "cleanup of meetings" by refraining from being a member of some committees and work groups. One may note that the cleanup to which the manager referred went only "reasonably well." A manager is expected to accept being a member of more meetings and groups than might be desirable. However, although the strategy perhaps was not 100 percent effective, he explained that he had managed to create a bit more time to plan ahead for his department.

Yet another strategy we found was created as a defense from the rather common practice of having a calendar that colleagues shared. This sharing was done through a digital calendar, often in Outlook. The sharing was often organized so that not only the staff saw the manager's time schedule but also others such as some of the administrative staff or senior managers could book them into a meeting. The strategy some of our interviewees mentioned was to use an acronym that implied being busy.

*Angela:* I have ... PT in my calendar.

*Interviewer:* What is PT ... priority time, or what is it?

*Angela:* Personal time.

*Interviewer:* Personal time. Right [laugh].

*Angela:* I put that in --- have to do that. But that's the way ... I have to do it because I've had meetings that make me have to work with things that require ... so I have a meeting time with myself.

*Interviewer:* Right. Is it a thing you think you should do, so to say, book that kind of... as well as schedule your own time as well?

*Angela:* Yes, but you can easily ... yes but ... when else will I work with this other stuff? It's not as if I have nothing to do, I only have these hours to work with.

Using acronyms like "PT," which others could not decipher but that safeguards a specific time slot, was one way of taking some control over one's calendar. When Angela creates the "PT," it enables her to, as she describes above, arrange for times that she can use to see colleagues, answer emails, or do "other stuff" a manager needs to do. When staff referred to similar tactics in a less guarded way, by simply writing "Busy," like the doctors in the psychiatric health care organization, managers could get a bit irritated. "We have no idea what they are doing or where we can reach them," as one of the managers exclaimed during a meeting where the various managers discussed

scheduling of staff's time. This irritation was voiced in a discussion of difficulties in drawing doctors into meetings.<sup>3</sup>

### **Organizational efforts**

Can there be other solutions to meeting competitions and time conflicts, as well as increased effectiveness during meetings? The managers we met mentioned different possibilities. One told about the changes introduced at a higher level in the organization when a new manager began. She has kept the regular manager meetings but simply changed them from being held once a week to once a month. Another possibility that one manager at a youth center told us she had suggested was to limit the persons invited to meetings. The manager above her, however, had not agreed; he said that everybody has to be involved. She sighed during the walk to the next meeting and said: "If we are going to see the youngsters and their parents, and talk to staff about treatment, which is our core task, we should change." She added with a laugh, "but then we have to have another meeting."

The head unit manager at a psychiatric unit, John, spoke many times during the field work about yet another organization possibility, and quite enthusiastically, about the new forms of meetings that digital technology has made possible. Virtual meetings, he argued during a meeting with unit managers, would be more and more common in the future, not least because they save time:

John means that this contributes to much more efficient meetings, because people don't have to travel all the way to the unit from nearby towns and cities, to participate in the meeting. "It saves time and a meeting that would otherwise perhaps take an entire afternoon, can be done in an hour, because you don't have to travel," he says enthusiastically. (Fieldnote)

Considering the ambivalence towards meetings described in the beginning of this paper, it is easy to conceive that digital technology may be viewed as a possible solution. The prospect of saving time may be an enticing one, but it is worth noting that the notion of saving time through digital technologies is not completely without problems. Carol, one of the unit managers, says that she can understand the advantages with new technology. The problem, however, is that she forgets how to use it, thus highlighting the technological aspects of the new virtual form of meetings.

Carol says that she can understand that, but the problem with things like Lync (a computer software program) is that she uses it so infrequently. "And then you forget," she says, and the other unit managers nod in agreement. John says that

---

<sup>3</sup> Such difficulties have been described by Hall (2012) in a study of managers. In a hospital he studied the managers had problems in involving doctors in meetings. They claimed that they had to prioritize their patients. This contrasted sharply to the university where managers had no problem in involving teachers and researchers in meetings.

despite this, he still believes that Lync will be used much more regularly in the future because it saves so much time by not having to travel to various meetings. (Fieldnote)

To conclude, several aspects of meetings and time are interesting to note and elaborate. The rule of the calendar is not absolute and definite; rather, through using different kinds of strategies, the "calendar control" can be managed, and indeed resisted, as we have seen in the previous excerpts from the interviews and the fieldnotes. Below, we will elaborate further on some of the aspects concerning meetings, resistance, and time that we find to be of particular interest.

## Discussion

In mass media, handbooks on meetings and in social science research, the expansion of meetings is noted, often combined with a meeting critique: there are too many meetings, and many of them are not considered meaningful. It was clear in the empirical material that the managers echoed these opinions. Even if they saw meetings as a self-evident and important element of their work, the theme of our interviews and remarks during field observations initiated grumblings about meetings. The managers complained about too many meetings, or time being wasted when they were stuck in boring meetings. They also described their strategies for dealing with meetings in ways to make them manageable. However, if there is a certain "resistance movement" concerning meetings within modern organizations, that movement is a rather discreet one. One could say that it is hidden in the organizational shadows, rather than positioning itself up on the barricades. By using various strategies, managers may be able to regain a sense of control over how they spend their time in the organizations. Indeed, they might be able to create some "room to maneuver," as one manager described it.

Such room to maneuver could be gained by prioritizing and choosing carefully which meetings to attend, avoiding those where the time frame is unclear, or at least trying to choose meetings that seem to be the most fun, constructive or interesting. One strategy that many mentioned with a conspiratorial smile, apparently considering this to be their own personal solution, was to guard their time by filling in time slots with acronyms like PT (personal time) in a digital shared calendar.

Various strategies for using time during the meetings one attended were described. One theme concerned making efforts to ensure efficiency by following a meeting agenda, having a clearly formulated time frame and purpose with the meetings. The aforementioned examples of effectiveness are generally in line with the concepts of rationalization and effective time management, and in this sense could be placed within the framework of the manifest functions of meetings (van Vree 1999). If meetings are successful in making decisions, generating creative ideas, and discussing and planning subjects that are relevant for the organization, then they have achieved their purpose, at least as long as they also manage to do so within a reasonable time frame.

Nevertheless, many meetings lacked these features; these were instances when the participants engaged in "multi-tasking" (Wasson 2006). One interviewee explained that he has survived many meetings by getting other work-tasks done. Managers could, if attending larger meetings with low social control, answer emails, write a draft or read texts that did not concern the meeting where they participated. The well-known practices of doodling or daydreaming at meetings may in this sense be regarded as not only escaping meetings (Åkerström 2017) but as ways of exercising, or perhaps even reclaiming, a certain kind of agency concerning time at work.

Some managers attempted to initiate organizational changes in order to reduce meetings. They could lengthen the period between regularly held meetings, suggesting that less people should be invited to meetings, and finally to organize virtual meetings thus saving time otherwise needed for traveling to various meetings. Such efforts may illustrate a sociological ambivalence as to the machinery of meetings. Those with well-filled calendars are managers, those we perceive as having prestigious positions. However, as the classic study by Carlsson (1951) illustrated, those who are supposed to govern an organization are largely governed by it. The meetings are there, whether the managers want them or not, and the calendars are quite often filled in by others. Nevertheless, by using the strategies we have discussed managers may achieve some sense of control of their time.

Our analyses touches on a contemporary phenomenon, the *meetingization* of society (van Vree 2011). We have discussed how managers in different public Swedish organizations maneuver as a response to this "compulsion to meet" (2011:241); the managers do "time work" (Flaherty 2011) when juggling their calendars, multi-task during meetings or engage in efforts to re-organize their organizations' routines. Despite this meeting resistance the locomotive of meetings, seems difficult to stop. All of the managers reported a continuing competition between meetings (Thelander 2017). Additionally, many unscheduled and informal meetings take place during their workdays; according to Barth and Florén (2007), these occupy as much time as formal meetings. Such informal meetings may also generate additional formal meetings. As Schwartzman has noted, "meetings generate meetings" (Schwartzman 1989:161). Meetings appear to have an *Eigendynamik*, where one meeting easily generate another, a self-enforcing quality that is difficult to stop or slow down (Åkerström 2019).

## References

- Ackroyd, S. & Thompson, P. (1999) *Organizational Misbehaviour*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Allen, J. et al (2015) *The Cambridge Handbook of Meeting Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barth, H. & H. Florén (2007) "Managerial work in small firms – Exploring gender variations and similarities" *Conference proceeding at the 19th NFF Conference*, 9–11 August 2017, Bergen, Norway.

- Becker, H. S. (1998) *Tricks of the Trade. How to think about your research while you're doing it*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carlson, S. (1951) *Executive Behaviour: A study of the work load and the working methods of managing directors*. University of California: Arno Press.
- Czarniawska, B. (2007) *Shadowing and Other Techniques for Doing Fieldwork in Modern Societies*. Stockholm: Liber förlag.
- Elias, N. (1992) *Time. An Essay*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Emerson, R. M., R. I. Fretz, & L. L. Shaw (1995) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fangen, K. (2005) *Deltagande observation*. Malmö: Liber förlag.
- Flaherty, M. G. (2011) *The Textures of Time. Agency and Temporal Experience*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1967/1982) *Interaction Ritual. Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Hall, P (2012) *Managementbyråkrati: organisationspolitisk makt i svensk offentlig förvaltning*. Malmö: Liber.
- Hall, P., Leppänen, V. & Åkerström, M. (2019) *Mötesboken – Tolknings av arbetslivets sammanträden och rosévinsmingel*. Malmö: Egalité.
- Heffernan, V. (2016) Meet is Murder. *New York Times Magazine*. [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/meet-is-murder.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/meet-is-murder.html?_r=0) [2017-06-14].
- Holstein, J. A. & J. F. Gubrium (1995) *The Active Interview*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.
- Johansson, A. & Vinthagen, S. (2016) "Dimensions of Everyday Resistance: An Analytical Framework" *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 42 (3) 417–435.
- Karlsson, J. Ch. (2012) *Organizational Misbehaviour in the Workplace. Narratives of Dignity and Resistance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Knoblauch, H. (2005) "Focused Ethnography. Forum." *Qualitative Social Research*, 6 (3) Art. 44.
- Lewis, J. D. & A. J. Weigert (1981) The Structures and Meanings of Social Time. *Social Forces*. 60 (2) 432–462.
- Mars, G. (1982) *Cheats at Work. An Anthology of Workplace Crime*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- May, T. (2013) *Samhällsvetenskaplig forskning*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Schwartzman, H. (1989) *The Meeting: Gatherings in Organizations and Communities*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Thelander, J. (2017) *Meetings and Time – a sociological study of public sector managers*. Research Report 2017:1, Department of Sociology, Lund University.
- The Swedish Research Council [Vetenskapsrådet] (2002). *Forskningsetiska principer inom humanistisk-samhällsvetenskaplig forskning*. Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet. [www.codex.vr.se/texts/HSFR.pdf](http://www.codex.vr.se/texts/HSFR.pdf) [2017-09-21].
- van Vree, W. (1999) *Meetings, Manners, and Civilization: The Development of Modern Meeting Behaviour*. London: Leicester University Press.
- van Vree, W. (2011) Meetings: The Frontline of Civilization, *The Sociological Review* 59 (1) 241–262.

- Wasson, C. 2006. Being at two spaces at once: Virtual meetings and their representation, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 16 (1) 103–130.
- Zerubavel, E. (1981) *Hidden Rhythms. Schedules and Calendars in Social Life*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Åkerström, M. (2017) Boredom and Aways in Meetings. Gothenburg Meeting Science Symposium. [https://lucris.lub.lu.se/admin/files/65923857/BOREDOM\\_AND\\_AWAYS\\_Gothenburg\\_Symposium.pdf](https://lucris.lub.lu.se/admin/files/65923857/BOREDOM_AND_AWAYS_Gothenburg_Symposium.pdf).
- Åkerström, M. (2019) The Merry-Go-Round of Meetings. *Sociological Focus*. 52 (1):50–64.

### Author presentations

*Joakim Thelander* is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Kristianstad University. His research interests in addition to meetings include media descriptions of crime, cyber-crime, and qualitative methods.

*Malin Åkerström* is Professor in Sociology at Lund University. Her research interests include not only meetings, but also corruption and bribery, cultural criminology, and qualitative methods.

### Corresponding authors

Joakim Thelander  
Kristianstad University, Faculty of Health Science  
291 88 Kristianstad  
[joakim.thelander@hkr.se](mailto:joakim.thelander@hkr.se)

Malin Åkerström  
Lund University, Department of Sociology  
Box 117, 221 00 Lund  
[malin.akerstrom@soc.lu.se](mailto:malin.akerstrom@soc.lu.se)