Don’t be late for that meeting! The hidden costs of workplace tardiness

Lateness to meetings: Examination of an unexplored temporal phenomenon:

Meetings are a difficult necessity for nearly all businesses, taking up time, disrupting day-to-day workflows, and requiring their own organizational inputs and efforts. They’re also a near-essential means of co-ordinating teams, distributing tasks, and allowing communication and feedback. Nevertheless, they remain a heavily under-explored area in the research literature.

Closing the gap is a new study from the European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology which asks the question ‘Should we care about meeting lateness?’

Short answer: ‘Yes!’

Using a survey of 195 workers from South-Eastern USA, covering a total of more than 300 meetings, Prof. Steve Rogelberg and colleagues discovered that most people are late for meetings about 5% of the time. In a world where meetings have on average 8 attendees, this means more than a third of meetings will start late, or be interrupted by a late arrival.

But does arriving late matter? The research showed that late arrival reflects badly on the latecomer themselves, who is often judged to be inconsiderate, unprofessional or lacking respect. The wider team may also be negatively impacted by the late arrival, experiencing feelings of frustration and being disrespected, which can harm team cohesion. These unwelcome mood states can have knock-on effects on poor performance in other areas of the working day – a worker in a bad mood is usually a bad worker!

The consequences for the economy as a whole are very real: in the US, as the paper states, ‘An estimated $37 billion is lost annually due to … a third of all business meetings being unproductive.’

A further finding reported by Rogelberg’s paper was a certain flexibility and fuzziness about how lateness itself is defined in different circumstances. A common cut-off point for lateness was five minutes after the scheduled start time – most people will not be annoyed with a latecomer who arrives within that period. But most latecomers won’t even consider themselves to be late if they arrive five minutes after start time and the rest of the group is still chatting, or, if others arrive even later still.

About 20% of people consider any arrival after the agreed start time to be late. A further c.20% will allow for a certain grace period, such as the five minutes mentioned above. Some people define lateness simply as ‘keeping others waiting’ or ‘interrupting the flow.’

32% defined lateness as arriving once the actual meeting itself had got underway, after the arrival, greeting and settling-in period. (How long this period itself can last, and how much work time may be lost getting comfortable in your meeting room chair, is a topic for another day!)

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