Joseph Allen, Ph.D., is the founding director of the 6-year-old Center for Meeting Effectiveness at UNO. The goal of the center, he says, is to “establish a knowledge and expertise in the area of workplace meetings.” It’s definitely needed.

“To give some perspective, there are 167 total academic articles published on the topic (of meetings),” he says, while in 2015 alone “there were more than 1,000 articles published on the topic of leadership. Clearly, we don’t know a lot about meetings.”

The UNO center is busy filling that void. It’s partnering with affiliates in the Netherlands, Germany, Chile, Italy and China on a cross-cultural study on meeting lateness. It’s also engaged in a study on how after-action review meetings in health care can best limit patient errors.
TIRED OF ALL THE TALK?
CAN’T STAND ALL THE SITTING?
UNO PROFESSOR JOE ALLEN DIGS INTO WHAT MAKES A MEETING HUM... OR HO-HUM

By Rick Davis

“Sometimes I feel like my whole life is a meeting with small breaks in between,” jokes UNO graduate David Craft (BSBA, ’90; MBA, ’92), an executive with Wells Fargo Wealth Management Group in Omaha.

With client, staff, leadership and volunteer board meetings filling his schedule, there is a large measure of truth in his quip.

And many who work in an office can relate.

Consider: There are an estimated 25 million meetings EVERY DAY in corporate America. And that number has been on the rise.

While the study of workplace meetings is a relatively new academic pursuit, UNO faculty member Joseph Allen already is one of the leaders in the field.

Allen, associate professor of industrial and organizational psychology and director of UNO’s Center for Meeting Effectiveness, says there are few reliable statistics on the topic. But he cites two studies that show that daily meetings in the U.S. more than doubled from the 1990s to 2011 – from 11 million to 25 million.

“It actually doesn’t surprise me,” Allen says. “During that time, we transitioned from more of an industrial economy to an economy based on information and complex issues — a problem-solving economy.

“So there are more meetings and more collaboration required both within organizations and across organizations to identify and solve problems.”

Meeting volume aside, there is another, more troubling statistic that should have business executives and organization leaders reaching for Tylenol.

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR MEETINGS
Want more productive, effective business meetings in 2017?
Joseph Allen, Ph.D., associate professor of industrial and organizational psychology and director of UNO’s Center for Meeting Effectiveness, offers the following practical advice.
• Create an agenda, and follow it
• Start and end the meeting on time
• Invite only those for whom the meeting is relevant
• Give attendees a chance to voice their thoughts and opinions
Participants rate nearly half of all meetings as “poor.” That finding was published in the “Handbook on Meeting Science” (Cambridge University Press), which Allen edits, and was compiled from about a half-dozen studies that Allen helped conduct, surveying about 5,000 workers.

“About half the time that people spend in meetings, they consider a waste of their time,” Allen says.

One of the most commonly heard complaints: meetings not starting or ending on time. It has been a recent focus of Allen’s research.

“Meetings that start late are perceived as less effective and less satisfying,” Allen explains. “And actual performance of the group, in these late meetings, is actually worse than in the meetings that started on time, even though they had an equivalent amount of time to work on the problem.”

He found that prompt attendees spend valuable time grumbling about the person who is late, or misses the meeting altogether, rather than focusing on the purpose of the meeting.

Tom Bockman, a UNO graduate (BS in criminal justice, 2013) and a vice president for sales at First Data in Omaha, says meetings that start late are one his pet peeves.

“If you’re not five minutes early, you’re late. That’s my rule that I go by,” says Bockman, who attends about eight to 10 meetings a week, about three or four that he oversees. “I was in the Marines for four years, and you were always 15 minutes early no matter what time the meeting started.”

Meetings Matter

Allen began studying workplace meetings while a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he earned his Ph.D. in organizational science in 2010.

He collaborated with his faculty advisor, Steven Rogelberg, on studies that examined meeting satisfaction and overall job satisfaction among employees. Rogelberg is currently the Chancellor’s Professor at UNC Charlotte, a professor of management and editor of the “Journal of Business and Psychology.”

While — as one might expect — pay, promotion opportunities, relationships with one’s boss and co-workers are important factors in job satisfaction, Allen and Rogelberg’s research also found that meeting experiences are important.

“Meetings have a pretty prominent role in how we feel about where we work,” Allen says of their research. “That was the first study that I did on the topic. It kind of opened my eyes to the idea that meetings actually matter.”

They can make a difference in bottom-line productivity. Well-run meetings, for instance, can help employees feel more engaged in the company or organization, which, in turn, can increase performance. “That’s dollars-and-cents … kind of stuff,” Allen says.

In addition, there are real costs associated with meetings.

“If you’re going to have a meeting, you have to have a reason for it. Otherwise you are just wasting a lot of money.”

Meetings aren’t cheap. It’s not only the room, or on the phone. But it’s could be doing if they weren’t in a

However, corporate America, in general, Allen says, has been slow to put resources behind improving the quality of its meetings.

“It is one of the most containable costs that is not targeted for quality improvement,” he says. “This is one that is just sucking the life out of people, and we’re not doing anything about it.”

Steps Toward Improvement

So, how can meetings be made better?

For one, meeting organizers should create an agenda and stick to it, Allen says. He also suggests sending the agenda to attendees in advance of the meeting—a few days before, if possible.

“Give people the opportunity to have input on the agenda,” Allen says. “It may help clear things up. It also gives people a chance to prepare.”

Shonna Dorsey, who earned her bachelor’s (2003) and master’s (2010) degrees from UNO, is a big proponent of meeting agendas. The co-founder and managing director of the Interface Web School in Omaha and a member of numerous boards attends about 15 meetings a week.
“The main thing for me is to have a very clear agenda,” Dorsey says, “along with action items coming out of the meeting.”

When she is organizing a meeting, she follows Allen’s advice and sends out an agenda the day before, along with a quick recap about the purpose of the meeting and what she hopes to cover. She also stresses the need to start on time — even if all of the attendees have not yet arrived.

Allen says “time courtesy” is essential to meeting success. That not only includes starting and ending the meeting on time, but keeping the meeting on track with the agenda. (For instance, a report scheduled on the agenda for five minutes, should not take 20 minutes.)

Get Attendees Involved

The most effective meetings engage attendees. Getting input from a variety of individuals at a meeting can yield many benefits — from finding unique solutions to complex problems to identifying barriers to success.

But it’s not always easy. Some attendees may tend to dominate the conversation, while introverts may shy away from sharing their opinions or ideas. Meeting managers or leaders need to strike a balance, and keep the meeting moving on time.

“We found that … allowing everyone to share their input is very appropriate and necessary for good meeting outcomes and employee engagement,” Allen says.

That could mean politely shutting down individuals dominating the conversation, or calling on the introverts and asking their opinions. But meeting facilitators don’t always need to be serious. In fact, Allen says meetings that include humor are often seen as more successful.

“When you are engaging in humor, you tend to also engage in other positive practices,” Allen says. “You’re more relaxed. You’re more willing to share ideas. There’s psychological safety. That facilitates a better interactive process within the team.”

Who knows, you may even come to see meetings as fun.

Just make sure to come on time.

MEETING MEANDERINGS

How long should a meeting run?

That should be determined by your agenda and the topics that need to be covered, Allen says, rather than by Outlook or other calendaring tools. If your agenda calls for a 20-minute meeting, schedule it for 20 minutes. One thing is for certain, Allen says: “A meeting will fill the time for which it has been allotted. Regardless of how long your agenda may be, even if you have a 20-minute agenda, if you schedule it for 30 minutes, it will take 30 minutes.”

REFRESHMENTS ANYONE?

“If a meeting goes over an hour, if they don’t have refreshments, then the meeting is rated significantly more poorly than if there are refreshments,” Allen says. “Basically, once you go past an hour, if there is nothing to refresh the people in the room, you’re cruising for trouble.”

WHAT IS THE BEST MEETING SIZE?

“Research would say that the optimal group size for team-related activities would be five to seven people,” Allen says. “Once you get beyond that, you have additional responsibilities. If you have fewer, you might not have enough people to achieve the complexity of the task. Generally, five to seven people are pretty common and it’s also the recommended group size.”

STAND-UP VS. SIT-DOWN MEETINGS

“There is some research about standing up versus sitting down,” Allen says. “We found that stand-up meetings are just as effective and are not as long as sit-down meetings.”

TECHNOLOGY: A DISTRACTION OR BENEFIT?

How about those attendees connected to cell phones, iPads and laptops during meetings? “If the use of technology is related to the meeting, it’s often very facilitative, very helpful,” Allen says. “(For example, Googling the answer to a question.) “If the use of technology is unrelated to the meeting, it often derails the meeting.” His advice: Establish ground rules regarding technology use prior to the meeting.

AVOID THIS TYPE OF MEETING

“If I could wave my magic wand, I would completely and utterly eliminate … the information-sharing meeting,” Allen says, those round-robin updates around the meeting table. “Couldn’t we use technology to eliminate those meetings? The answer is, ‘Yes.’”