

To Meet or Not to Meet:

Questioning the Effectiveness of Meetings for Organizational Knowledge Management

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Abstract

Meetings represent a substantial portion of library professionals' workday. How do organizations create efficient meetings that consider employee time and responsibility, while most effectively utilizing and applying human knowledge to organizational work tasks, culture, and decision-making? More importantly, how is meeting efficiency measured? This chapter aims to discover organizational communication assessments frameworks best suited to the study of meetings, and how that assessment may lead to richer understanding of organizational knowledge management in libraries.

The first objective identifies the literature that informs meeting effectiveness practice, and how outcomes of meeting effectiveness revealed in this literature correlate to knowledge management outcomes. Building on this, the second objective proposes applications for assessing knowledge management through meeting effectiveness in library practice, guided by this review and the experiences of organizational communication assessments and meetings at the University of Kansas Libraries.

Keywords: meetings, knowledge management, organizational communication, academic libraries,

Introduction

Studying meetings presents a very practical approach to studying knowledge management, given the challenge of explicitly defining knowledge management. In simple terms, knowledge management constitutes a process of identifying knowledge (search and identification), sharing knowledge (collaboration), and using knowledge (action) to meet the goals and objectives of the organization.¹ Organizational meetings involve and contribute to each of these stages, but especially to collaboration and action. As collaborative action events, meetings play a large role in organizational communication and the management of knowledge as a result.

Why study meetings as opposed to other organizational communication? First, those involved in meetings exercise, create, and capture both explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge for the organization, the latter of which is difficult to capture in most organizational communication assessments. Secondly, as a practical matter, meetings constitute the most expensive communicative interaction happening in the workplace, especially given time spent in meetings continues to increase, despite communication technology advances intended to reduce this need.² Design trends in organizational structures contribute to this effect. For example, flatter organizational structures result in more self-directed teams, project work, and quality improvement (change) initiatives, which include and empower employees as they participate in the process.³ This suggests that an organization's structure is bound to its patterns of communication, particularly in the form of meetings.

Meetings are perceived as simultaneously a waste of time and yet indispensable. As such, closer examination of what takes place in meetings, both quantitatively and qualitatively, is warranted. Those inefficiencies, even if only perceived, can lead to real organization costs in terms of staff wages, missed opportunities for efficiency and innovation, and lower morale.⁴ Dated (and likely underestimated) figures cite up to a 15% personnel budget impact.⁵ If meetings are worth the cost, why are they loathed and yet ubiquitous? Does the high cost warrant interventions? What can be done to increase meeting efficiency and adopt more effective practices? Examining these questions requires exploring contextual realities of meeting interactions themselves, the best practices for effective meetings, and approaches for assessing the same. The research contributing to the study of meeting explored in this chapter connects organizational knowledge management to best practices in meeting effectiveness and outlines ways to assess these in academic library contexts.

Methodology

Studies of meeting effectiveness span industrial and organizational psychology, management, marketing, organizational behavior, anthropology, sociology, and communication.⁶ This chapter analyzes themes related to the study of meetings in the context of organizational communication and library and information science. Given the abundance of studies on meetings in the organizational communication literature, its scope for this chapter is narrowed to two primary theoretical frameworks: organizational communication and conversational analysis. The scarce evidence of meeting study in library literature meant broadening this area to literature addressing knowledge management and change management in libraries. A case study using KU Libraries assessment outcomes from strategic planning and restructuring reveals potential gaps

between grounded approaches and current library practice. Specific recommendations for improving meeting effectiveness and more broadly assessing these as measurements of knowledge management in libraries are proposed.

Organizational Communication (OC) Framework

The organizational communication (OC) literature links knowledge management to communication of information, perceiving a process composed of messages, inputs, transmissions, and outputs. In this message-centered approach, leadership or power structures within organizations drive and shape the organizational communication and managed knowledge. As meetings present just one of many “vehicles” for communication in this framework, the connection between meetings and knowledge management in organizations remains somewhat vague.

The process for analyzing communication in organizations, according to OC constructs, occurs through communication audits.⁷ Five common themes arise.⁸ Table 1 shows these themes mapped to organizational communication issues most commonly experienced in libraries.

Table 1. Comparative Themes in Organizational Communication and Libraries

Themes of Organizational Communication	Issues in Library Organizations
Adequate information flow of key change issues	Change management, silos, information sharing meetings
Preference for supervisory communication	Leadership, silos, information sharing meetings
Foundations of teamwork and positive employee attitudes	Meeting membership, roles, relationships
Preference for face-to-face communication	Meetings (general)
Dissent as useful feedback	Problem solving, Decision-making, Meeting facilitation

Viewed side by side, the relationship between meetings and these themes suggest how ineffective meeting practices may negatively impact organizational knowledge, including: whether adequate sharing of key issues happens at all (meeting initiation), who is sending and receiving messages (meeting attendees perspectives and roles), what occurs in meetings (information sharing, problem-solving, negotiation, team-building), and how effectively the meeting accomplishes organizational goals (meeting effectiveness, decision-making, knowledge captured for future action). If meetings are not studied effectively in organizations, then an enormous amount of organizational knowledge content and context remains unknown. Key organizational change milestones, such as strategic planning and restructuring, appear throughout the OC literature, further highlighting the role of meetings in library knowledge management. These changes are primarily leadership-driven, involve participation in the decision-making process (through meetings), and ultimately result in the formation of new groups committed to developing knowledge together.

This hierarchical approach to assessing organizational communication, especially through meetings, presents a useful perspective on relationships between leadership and staff, influencing perception of the organizational vision to the operations of the organization.⁹ However, the focus on messages and transmission gives an incomplete picture of what happens within meetings and says nothing about the effectiveness of even vision-informed operations to the overall knowledge structure of the organization. The Montreal School began to shift OC research to actions and interaction within organizations with the concept of meta-conversation and authentic translation. This school defines of management as meta-conversation to mean “a conversation (that of management) that generates accounts about other conversations (those of the multiple

communities of practice that make up the organizations), all now being given a voice (however authentic the translation is) by their representatives in the managerial meta-conversation”¹⁰

Despite the leadership bias that remains in this approach, the Montreal School began a change from the idea of organizations creating communication to one of organizations emerging from communication. Positive contributions from the Montreal school address communicative competencies of leadership; translating meta-conversation from the bottom up, instead of the top down; and measuring meeting satisfaction across all levels of organization, not just from leadership perspectives.¹¹

Conversational Analysis (CA) Framework

The literature of conversational analysis (CA), established by Boden’s seminal work, *The Business of Talk: Organizations in Action*, further focuses the sociological lens for meeting research by studying meetings as collaborative actions, rather than as a product of individual roles of actors within organizations. These studies argue that the sociological nature of interaction is too complex a phenomenon to address through [OC] structural frames, and suggest those frames underestimate the power of talk to create “reciprocal and self-organizing systems”.¹²

Characterized by the analysis of turn-taking initiation and duration, topic organization (e.g. agendas), and facilitation of multimodal meetings practices (e.g. space, text, images, and actions), CA aims for interactive participation that ultimately contributes to making sense of the topic at hand. CA research approaches this through deeply granular observation methods examining meeting interactions and strategies in action. Some of the more obvious conclusions illustrate how agendas and facilitative brainstorming tools effectively organize and positively

influence interactive participation in meetings.¹³ Behaviors like identifying others, verbally (by name, position, expertise, or purpose) or non-verbally, improve establishment of roles, turn-taking, and recognition.¹⁴ CA meeting research also evolved understanding the role of leadership, examining specifically the role of the chair in sequencing meetings, the role of facilitators and facilitation, and the phenomenon of teams sharing leadership accountability by developing actions through turns designed and co-oriented to other's contributions.¹⁵ Like the Montreal School, CA research characterized the relationship between an organization and its communications by emphasizing how the organization itself becomes 'talked into being'. Distinct from OC's information sharing meetings, discussion meetings exemplify dimensions of CA interaction in organizations.¹⁶

Table 2. Comparative Themes in Organizational Communication, Conversational Analysis, and Libraries

Themes of Organizational Communication	Themes of Conversational Analysis	Issues in Library Organizations
Adequate information flow of key change issues	Turn-taking organization	Change management, silos, discussion meetings
Preference for supervisory communication	Sequential organization	Leadership, silos, discussion meetings
Foundations of teamwork and positive employee attitudes	Overall structural organization of the interaction (including lexical choice)	Meeting membership, roles, relationships (individual communication/self-correction)
Preference for face-to-face communication	Turn design, Lexical choice	Meetings (general) interaction,
Dissent as useful feedback	Interactional asymmetries	Problem solving, decision-making, meeting facilitation

Making Sense of Meeting Effectiveness Results

The study of meetings through OC and CA frameworks show progressive evolution in addressing alternatives to the challenges negatively impacting collaborative communication in organizations. Both fields test and support strategies for effective meetings -- practices likely

familiar to library practitioners, despite the limitations of any similar study in the library literature. Two meeting effectiveness strategies rose to the top of the reviewed literature: using agendas and fostering mutual involvement in discussion.

The use of agendas was the most commonly cited meeting effectiveness practice, regardless of size or length of the meeting, and especially when practices to design timeframes and ensure successful completion of agenda items are considered.¹⁷ Strategies like balancing or soliciting attendee involvement in discussion also proved a standard, effective practice across the literature and across meeting sizes. However, meeting size and length did influence whether participant involvement occurs. Consequently, as meeting size increases, greater attention to strategies for mutual involvement is key. These findings suggest that organizations would benefit from training meeting participants in facilitation skills, regardless of whether meetings designate a single facilitator role.

Other common themes emerged in ways which correspond to the two main strategies. The concept of *time* appears frequently in the context of meetings and with agendas, in relation to perceptions of value (i.e. waste of time) and in actual strategies to order time. Conscientious behaviors related to time and meeting effectiveness also mentioned the importance of punctuality for starting and ending meetings.¹⁸ In addition to the agenda's role in ordering meeting content, agendas also order and facilitate time required before, during, and after meetings. Leadership and decision-making themes relate to refining meeting purposes and strategies for organizing and facilitating the flow of meetings, and showed how mutual involvement leads to, or diverges from, effective decisions processes.

A handful of lesser referenced themes emerged from the research, many of which appear particularly useful for library practice and knowledge management. The fact that 76% of

organizations determine meeting participation based on hierarchy rather than on needs suggests the importance of incorporating feedback loops before, during, and after meetings.¹⁹ An overreliance on meetings that are created (or otherwise function) through hierarchical constructs perpetuates what is known as *silo-mentality* -- a metaphor to a grain silo, often used to convey a situation in which information is purposefully internally segregated. Regardless of intention, some of the causes of silo-mentality is an over focus on management functions and evaluating functional performance and a reluctance toward mutual engagement among leadership and front line staff.²⁰ That silos are observed as a general feature in many academic library structures represents a significant knowledge management concern. Feedback loops, technology, and the role of meetings standards in local practice speak to some of the structural components to reduce silo-mentality in practice.

The agenda accomplishes one feedback loop between convener(s) and attendee(s) that (when used) gives the opportunity to clarify purpose and roles in advance and during the meeting. Feedback loops used during meeting interaction, negotiation, and decision-making clarify purpose to tasks, relationships, and team member satisfaction. When sharing agendas and meeting minutes are not limited to attendees, but shared more broadly across the organization, feedback loops can be created up, down, and across a richer context and provide opportunity to clarify and connect purposes between different meetings and stakeholders.

The flexibility of the structure determines opportunity for feedback loops, whether the structure is the agenda content or order, the meeting roles (chair, facilitator, expertise, power), or the hierarchical divisions in the organization. Too rigid adherence to these structures can cause use of feedback loops to backfire. For effective communication in meetings to be judged not just from positions of power, then some standard ground and reciprocal participation is needed.²¹

Standards in meetings effectiveness strategies and communication technologies play a balancing role in the need for meetings to have both structured order and flexible processes.

Lessons for Libraries and Knowledge Management

So far, this review has shown two theoretical approaches for studying meetings, one structural and leadership-driven (macro) and the other representational, interactive, and more communicatively-centered (micro). Although these two grounded approaches provide practical meeting effectiveness strategies, theoretical gaps remain for meeting research which can “go beyond this micro/macrolevel dichotomy” and move toward how participants use meetings to make sense of their collective organizational knowledge.²²

Knowledge management (KM) conceptualized in library practice as an interplay between tacit and explicit knowledge parallels the interplay between meetings transforming to the accomplishment of organizational goals and objectives. The traditional visual associated with KM in libraries is a triangle moving up from data to knowledge to wisdom. Currently, the amount and pace of information created and shared across libraries challenges the ability to construct meaning from these messages. As libraries shift workflows designed around physical books to networked online resources, teams navigating from linear to networked communication environments also need new frameworks to understand their complexities and interdependencies.

Libraries historic and evolving expertise with data and data management represent familiar domains of expertise where knowledge management has naturally evolved. Some examples include cataloging and metadata taxonomies, digital libraries and digital scholarship support, research data management, administrative policy and information strategy, archiving internal knowledge assets, and succession planning.²³ Many of these involve explicit knowledge

in the form of documents and objects, both physical and digital. They also involve more collaborative project-based work for which communication and structured management (aka project-management) are also becoming established norms. Both also constitute explicit and tacit knowledge products of meetings.

The following section describes a case study assessing knowledge management and meetings effectiveness and presents the gaps between library practice and the theoretical approaches from the literature examined in this review.

Case Study Background

Motivation for studying how meetings inform knowledge management in libraries stemmed from the University of Kansas (KU) Libraries experience with meeting effectiveness in practice. KU Libraries' assessment responded to organizational change and knowledge management, making it a relevant example for this chapter's focus. Between 2009 and 2017, KU Libraries initiated a five-year strategic planning process followed by a large-scale organizational restructuring. Both these efforts involved conducting assessments of organizational communication. One of the four strategic plan outcomes directly addressed organizational knowledge management through meeting effectiveness. Subsequent restructuring led to the creation of an Organizational Development department to operationalize actions related to this goal. During this strategic planning process and related reorganization, the KU Libraries undertook a variety of internal communications assessment projects.

The following case study describes one of these assessments, which highlights organizational communication and meeting effectiveness.

First, in 2009, the dean formed an internal communication task force charged with developing a plan to streamline the messages for target audiences within KU Libraries. The charge sought to identify modes of communication, preferences for communication, and preferred message types, based on specific information content. Methods chosen for this internal assessment were based on team leaders' professional experience in strategic communications and library assessment, rather than rigorous adherence to a theory or method outlined in this chapter. The design of the task force charge and subsequent survey align with one OC audit themes to address information flow of key issues. However, neither the charge nor the survey assessed any other interactive communications normally recommended for OC audits (Table 1). Respondents' open-ended comments indicated needs for additional assessment focused on: how communication modes and channels are organized; interactive discussion and feedback opportunities (especially related to decision-making); and the consistency and effectiveness of meeting content and information sharing. These comments mirror themes in CA frameworks (Table 2), including themes like feedback loops, technology, and standards. Yet studies in libraries have not examined these in detail. Resulting actions from this task force included development of a regular summary update from the dean, improved centralization of documents on a networked drive, and a focus on increasing meeting effectiveness.

A further outcome of the recommendation to focus on meeting effectiveness included creating an inventory of recurring meetings in the libraries, their membership and charges, and the frequency of their meetings. This inventory compiled information from library intranet pages, word of mouth, and information requested by email to all library staff. Follow-up emails to review and update the inventory continue to be sent to committee chairs and supervisors on an annual basis by the Organizational Development department.

In 2012, KU Libraries redesigned its organizational structure into four major divisions and many cross-functional initiative (CFI) teams, which would involve collaboration across the hierarchical organizational divisions (aka silos), in order to more effectively implement these strategic goals. The responsibility for managing the knowledge and communication between these new groups fell largely to the appointed leadership appointed, whether hierarchical (department head, division heads, associate deans) or lateral (committee chairs, team leads, project managers). As a result, each group determined the preferred channels and tools for meeting and sharing information, which in practice meant a decentralized variety of tools used to capture knowledge outcomes. Such autonomy permeates the culture norm of academia -- and, to its credit, often contributes to efficient communication among individuals within a team. On the other hand, it creates habits of communicative silos, knowledge gaps that may lead to duplication of effort, and ultimately undermines the interdependency necessary to accomplish goals and provide everyday library services.

Discussion and Recommendations

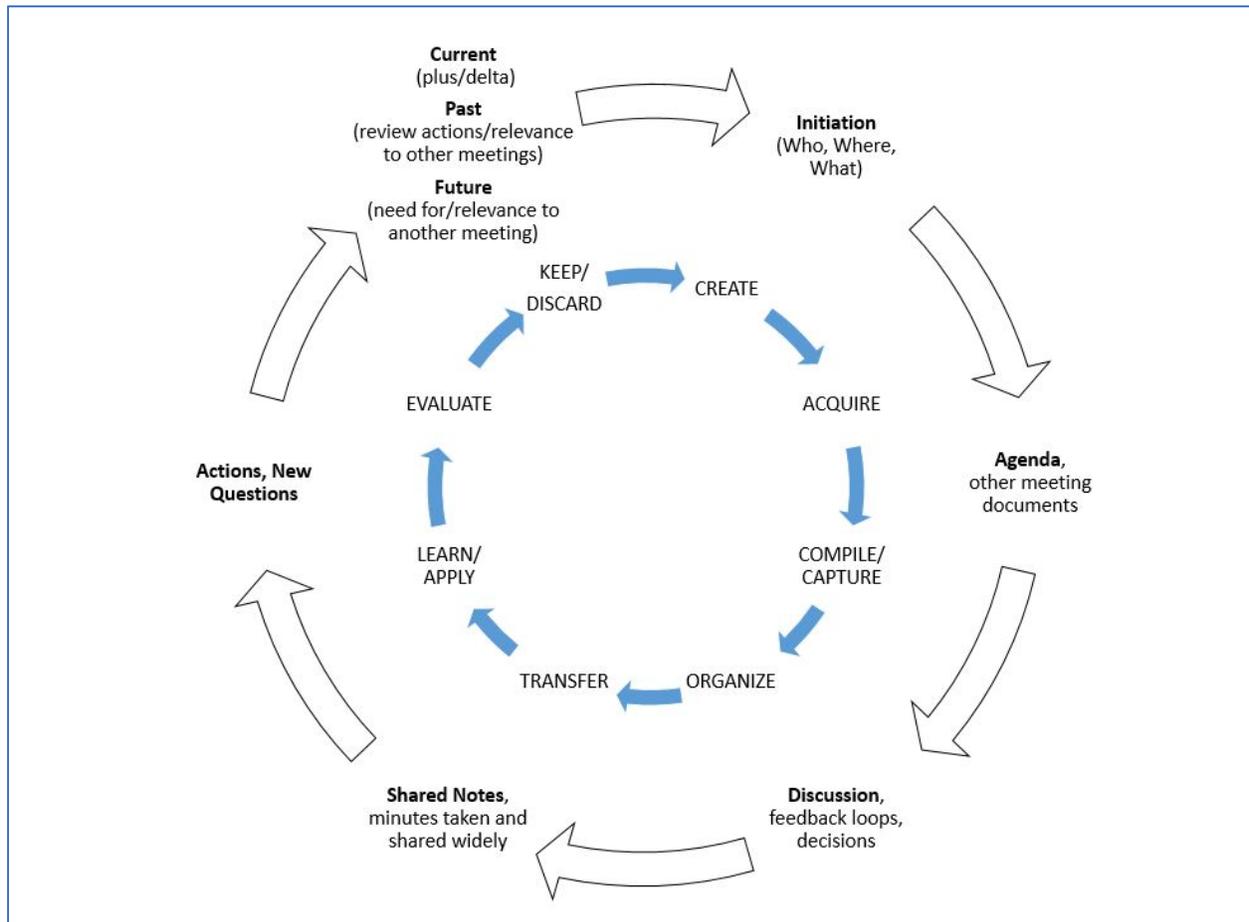
Interpersonal and organizational communication needs perpetually arise from strategic planning efforts, reorganizations, succession planning, and system migrations — in other words, states of significant change. Looking back on the tables outlining organizational communication issues in libraries, this chapter has pointed to change management events as the hub (and trigger for assessment) of knowledge management events. While libraries may have assessed leadership communication or suggested meeting effectiveness strategies, testing the effectiveness of these strategies to inform knowledge management in libraries remains underexplored. Two theoretical approaches provide possible (if problematic) foundations for replicating research of meetings as

a primary source of the practical management of knowledge in organizations. Whether questions about effectively managing knowledge come from leadership or emerge from communicative interactions that discuss, share, or silo information, several meeting effectiveness strategies tested by these methodologies offer valid starting points for improving these issues in meeting interactions.

Based on recommendations from the case study example, centrally-accessible inventories of meeting occurrences, types, regularity, and frequency, could ensure improved meeting planning. For example, a master calendar of meetings allows for the consideration of the meeting loads by individuals or groups, and at certain times of day, days of the week, or weeks of the month, thereby reducing meeting load fatigue. This secondary data could also be used to develop new research questions and methods for studying meetings and meeting effectiveness in practice. Should these practices be applied in libraries, the connections drawn from this review suggest those practices lead to better management of organizational knowledge.

Having in place a dedicated knowledge manager, organizational development department, or staff resources to support effective assessments could certainly help those interested in applying the key grounded approaches identified in this review. However, librarians asked to do more with less should not despair. Understanding the relationship of meetings to knowledge management in their organization represents a first step toward effective practice. Figure 1, adapted from a model mapping the knowledge management cycle, illustrates how it can also map to meeting effectiveness practice. This provides possible starting points for librarians, whether assessing improvement or improving assessment of meetings in their own libraries.²⁴

Figure 1: KM Cycle Mapped to Meeting Effectiveness



Conclusions

Meetings represent the most expensive use of internal communication in organizations, yet many organizations cannot measure how meetings consider employee and organizational efficiency. The consequential risk organizations take in underestimating the importance of meeting practices results in poor knowledge management, employee attrition, and actual budget shrinkage. The literature reviewed for this study supports many of the conclusions drawn from assessments motivated by organizational changes at KU Libraries.

As a favorite African proverb illustrates regarding change, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Knowledge management goes hand in hand with change management, which goes hand in hand with the sense-giving interaction of the actors involved in the change. Meetings, as opposed to email or other prominent knowledge management domains, should be the focus of libraries wishing to assess communication in their organization as well as their organizational change processes.

Questioning the effectiveness of meetings in organizations requires more than purposeful practice of the grounded meeting effectiveness theory examined here. It requires intentionally centering meetings as the most relevant measure of organizations’ communication health. The next steps for library researchers and practitioners should be investment in meeting research. Library and information science literature would benefit from new methodological approaches that draw from the sense-making influences in both fields. The experiences of KU Libraries and the literature reviewed for this chapter illustrate what an important and yet often overlooked knowledge asset meetings are to the organization and how worthy of further exploration.

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