Context to the Institute of Continuing Education Case Study

In the update from the Vice-Chancellor on the 18 June the concept of meeting free times (over the summer months) was mentioned as a way of slowing down and having space to refresh, reflect and refocus. The following case study highlights how the Institute of Continuing Education have trialled the implementation of fewer meetings and a better work-life balance.

The case study and the Vice-Chancellor’s message provides the learnings and space to consider the University’s meeting heavy culture and question whether all the meetings you attend or organise are necessary, or if there is another way the same outcome could be achieved. Meeting free times is not about condensing all your meetings into the remaining time, but rather thinking about whether the meetings you attend are really needed and, if so, how could they be more effective and efficient.

Finally, this isn’t about making things more challenging, but rather an attempt to provide space to think and refresh, which should have a positive impact on your mental health and wellbeing.

If you have any questions regarding the case study please contact: ourcambridge@admin.cam.ac.uk.
ICE’s innovative approach for fewer meetings and a better work-life balance

A case study by Linda Andrews
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Following the results of the University-wide staff survey and subsequent feedback from staff across the Institute (ICE), the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) considered practical ways to improve ways of working and enhance work-life balance for all ICE colleagues. We therefore proposed that from 1 January 2020, for a trial period, no ICE internal meetings should be scheduled before 1pm on Mondays or after 1pm on Fridays.

Dr James Gazzard, Director of Continuing Education, sent an email to all ICE staff stating that the SLT had agreed to run a pilot from 1 January to 31 July 2020 whereby there would be a moratorium on internal meetings on Mondays before 1pm and on Fridays after 1pm. This moratorium included all ICE-led (primarily internal) meetings such as ICE committees, divisional, team and 1:1 meetings. There were no exceptions unless in emergency situations. Where possible, colleagues were asked to change any committees or meetings that were already in diaries during the proposed protected times before the pilot began. The plan was to review the pilot in Summer 2020.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Institute introduced the concept of ‘Fallow Days’ instead, with a pilot running from May to July 2020. This offers the option of a meetings free ‘out of office’ day/half day each week to all colleagues in a drive to promote wellbeing by giving everyone time and space to conduct work that requires extended thought and reflection. It is not a ‘day off’, but a valuable break from the pressures of constant remote meetings (known to cause fatigue), calls and emails, plus freedom from the feeling of having to be ‘always on’.

Cambridge’s working culture is overly dependent on meetings. We wanted to find ways at ICE to give everyone a chance to clear their diaries, create time to focus on key projects and escape the grind of wall-to-wall meetings.
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| There has been (and still is) some resistance to the idea although it is widely viewed as a positive move. The overall aim of this approach is to look after the wellbeing of ICE staff and give individuals ‘permission’ not to be available at all times. | Some meetings did have to be re-scheduled and, while some members of staff continued to schedule meetings during the pilot, this was strongly discouraged. The message needs to be reinforced by the Head of Department and it is important the SLT leads by example. | • Giving staff ‘permission’ not to be available at all times.  
• Giving staff the opportunity to catch up on important work and not be in meetings all the time.  
• An increase in staff motivation, engagement and wellbeing. |

“It is widely acknowledged that Cambridge’s working culture is overly dependent on meetings. We wanted to find ways at ICE to give everyone a chance to clear their diaries, create time to focus on key projects and escape the grind of wall-to-wall meetings. From January 2020 we began trialling an initiative, based on staff input, whereby no internal meetings could be scheduled before 1pm on Mondays and after 1pm on Fridays. The feedback was interesting; while some reported the approach was too restrictive, we received broadly positive comments. The protected time was valued in order to undertake work that required time to think. Also, in terms of promoting mental health and wellbeing, no meetings on Monday mornings reduced the dreaded Sunday evening email traffic and colleagues reported it positively impacted on family life. Also ‘tired and fractious’ Friday afternoon meetings were left behind. Since the COVID-19 lockdown, we’ve extended the concept to what we’ve called ‘Fallow Days’. The seemingly endless treadmill of Zoom and MS Teams meetings are exhausting and have meant colleagues have had little control over their diaries, impacting negatively on their wellbeing. The Fallow Day idea gives colleagues complete freedom, one day or half day each week, to excuse themselves from all meetings and focus on work which requires quiet time and, equally importantly, prioritise the time they need to spend with their families, whether exercising or just recharging. We await feedback on how the Fallow Day concept, alongside a very flexible approach to working, will support ICE staff through the pandemic.”

– Dr James Gazzard, Director of Continuing Education