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Meetings

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 advice / Rant

In this TED talk Jason Fried explains why work doesn't happen at work. He describes the evils of meetings. Meetings are particularly disruptive for applied statisticians, especially for those of us that hack data files, explore data for systematic errors, get inspiration from visual inspection, and thoroughly test our code. Why? Before I become productive I go through a ramp-up/boot-up stage. Scripts need to be found, data loaded into memory, and most importantly, my brains needs to re-familiarize itself with the data and the essence of the problem at hand. I need a similar ramp up for writing as well. It usually takes me between 15 to 60 minutes before I am in full-productivity mode. But once I am in "the zone", I become very focused and I can stay in this mode for hours. There is nothing worse than interrupting this state of mind to go to a meeting. I lose much more than the hour I spend at the meeting. A short way to explain this is that having 10 separate hours to work is basically nothing, while having 10 hours in the zone is when I get stuff done.

Of course not all meetings are a waste of time. Academic leaders and administrators need to consult and get advice before making important decisions. I find lab meetings very stimulating and, generally, productive: we unstick the stuck and realign the derailed. But before you go and set up a standing meeting consider this calculation: a weekly one hour meeting with 20 people translates into 1 hour x 20 people x 52 weeks/year = 1040 person hours of potentially lost production per year. Assuming 40 hour weeks, that translates into six months. How many grants, papers, and lectures can we produce in six months? And this does not take into account the non-linear effect described above. Jason Fried suggest you cancel your next meeting, notice that nothing bad happens and enjoy the extra hour of work.

I know many others that are like me in this regard and for you I have these recommendations: 1- avoid unnecessary meetings, especially if you are already in full-productivity mode. Don't be afraid to use this as an excuse to cancel. If you are in a soft $ institution, remember who pays your salary. 2- Try to bunch all the necessary meetings all together into one day. 3- Separate at least one day a week to stay home and work for 10 hours straight. Jason Fried also recommends that every work place declare a day in which no one talks. No meetings, no chit-chat, no friendly banter, etc… No talk Thursdays anyone?

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