

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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CM Feature

COMMUNICATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT

Holding Productive Meetings at the Law Firm

Meetings can accomplish many objectives. When executives and employees are gathered in the same place, they have the chance to brainstorm about how to improve upon company practices and resolve any number of issues occurring in the office.



KYLIE ORA LOBELL
Freelance Writer

“If the meeting occurs during the lunch hour, there will be the least amount of disruption.”

**SPENCER MARC
ARONFELD**

Founder, Aronfeld
Trial Lawyers in
Miami



However, meetings can also be a huge waste of time, and end up costing the company more than saving it.

To guarantee that meetings will be productive, law firm managers and executives must prepare ahead of time. They have to go into meetings knowing what they will be discussing and for how long, how they’re going to present information, and what their overall objectives are.

Law firm managers and executives can employ the following best practices to ensure that meetings will result in beneficial outcomes for the firm.

KEEP AN EYE ON THE CLOCK

Lawyers bill their clients by the hour. If they’re sitting in meetings, they’re losing money. It’s imperative to keep track of time and make sure meetings run as short as possible.

“If a meeting is going too long, people are going to get fidgety,” says [Joel A. Rose](#), Certified Management Consultant and President of Joel A. Rose & Associates, Inc. “They’re going to start to look at their iPhones and wonder about emails and voicemails.”

[Jim Calloway](#), Director of the Oklahoma Bar Association’s Management Assistance Program, says that meetings should go no longer than 45 minutes. “Twenty years ago, a 90-minute meeting didn’t seem that unusual to people. But now, our attention span has been limited.”

DID YOU KNOW?

When they aren't done properly, meetings are an all around time-waster. According to *Psychology Today* and a survey of executives by 3M Meeting Network, 25 to 50 percent of the time people spend sitting in company meetings is squandered.

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JIM CALLOWAY
Director, Oklahoma
Bar Association
Management
Assistance Program



SCHEDULE MEETINGS DURING LUNCH

Lunchtime is often the only break that lawyers have in their days, thus making it the perfect time to hold a meeting. They won't be upset about losing that billable hour, and they'll be much less distracted.

“If the meeting occurs during the lunch hour, there will be the least amount of disruption,” says Spencer Marc Aronfeld, Founder of [Aronfeld Trial Lawyers in Miami](#) and the author of [Make It Your Own Law Firm](#).

The lunch hour is also ideal for non-attorney staff, says Aronfeld, because in the morning, they typically have to greet clients and answer phones. In the late afternoon, everyone is tired and antsy to go home, and would rather be anywhere than in a meeting.

PASS OUT AGENDA BEFOREHAND

It's up to the meeting chair to prepare an agenda, says Calloway. “Circulate an agenda that states the goals, and what the meeting is supposed to accomplish. If you can't really say what the meeting's supposed to accomplish, you should really consider why you're having a meeting.”

Thomas Clay, a Principal of [Altman Weil, Inc.](#), says that the agenda might include the time limits that are going to be imposed on each topic. That way, the meeting can run more smoothly. He added that it's important that any supporting materials, just like the agenda, should be given to employees prior to the meeting. “Don't be handing out a lot of stuff at the meeting,” he says. “Then people will focus on the reading and not the presenter.”

HAVE ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS

A company-wide meeting should not be a place where everyone voices his or her opinions and complaints, or where an information dump occurs. To avoid this, Rose says that on a frequent basis, managing partners should walk the hallways, stop into employees' offices and see if there are any issues that they need to address.

Calloway suggests that executives have an open-door policy, but only during specific times of the day or week. Otherwise, they could become bogged down with these individual meetings.

Aronfeld is an advocate of one-on-ones because, “People won't say what they want to say in a group. I do these meetings every single day. I go into the office of one of my workers and go through the issues.”

QUICK STAT

In addition to costing law firms time, pointless meetings can also lead to a loss of money and energy. According to CBS News and consulting firm Get a Klu, workers lose 31 hours a month, or four work days, to unproductive meetings. When that's translated into partners' billable hours, it can end up costing them thousands of dollars.

"Within 48 hours after the meeting, copies of the minutes should be distributed to everyone. That way, they'll have a memorialized copy of everything, such as the action plan agreed upon."

JOEL A. ROSE

President, Joel A.
Rose & Associates,
Inc.



CONSIDER USING TECHNOLOGY

PowerPoint can make a meeting more productive, as well as enhance the impact of the content discussed in the meeting. "The use of pictures is much more effective than the use of words," says Clay.

When using PowerPoint, Clay says it's imperative that there are no more than six words per line. "Most lawyers jam their writing on the slides. You really don't want to do that. If [the content is] that important, give them a hard copy of it."

Calloway makes use of PowerPoint to convey information, and brainstorms with his team on interactive whiteboards. Instead of scheduling meetings via email, which can be confusing, he utilizes apps that let people fill out a calendar to show their availability.

Some apps that simplify the scheduling process include Doodle, SelectTheDate, NeedToMeet and TimeBridge. All of them are either free or provide a free trial, and their features include polling employees to see which times work best, synchronization with Outlook, iCal and Google Calendar, reminders when it's time for the meeting, and the ability for employees to see executives' schedules so that they can arrange one-on-ones.

Aside from PowerPoint, there's other software available that will improve how information is expressed at meetings. Keynote for Mac, for example, is an intuitive program that lets users share their presentations in iCloud, Gmail and Dropbox. Users have the capability to take photos and videos without leaving the app and the chance to collaborate with up to 100 people on one presentation at the same time.



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"If you can't really say what the meeting's supposed to accomplish,

if meeting chairs are using iPads, they can try 2Screens – Presentation Expert, which displays their device's screen on a whiteboard or television. However, it only shows the files and content that the presenter wants the audience to see. If the presenter wishes to take notes and look up other information while the display is being shown, he or she can do that privately.

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JIM CALLOWAY

*Director, Oklahoma
Bar Association
Management
Assistance Program*

**CONDUCT A FOLLOW-UP**

A productive and successful meeting must conclude with a follow up. Otherwise, employees are liable to forget key discussion points. "There should be minutes taken," says Rose. "Within 48 hours after the meeting, copies of the minutes should be distributed to everyone. That way, they'll have a memorialized copy of everything, such as the action plan agreed upon."

GOING FORWARD

Meetings are necessary, but they don't have to be a nuisance to executives and employees. They can be seen as a place where the law firm comes up with new ideas, strengthens workplace morale and figures out solutions to issues plaguing the firm. With the right tools and guidelines, meetings can be productive and have a positive impact on the law firm going forward.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kylie Jane Wakefield is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles. She covers legal issues, blogs about content marketing, and reports on Jewish topics. She's been published in *Tablet Magazine*, *NewsCred*, *The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles*, and *CMO.com*.

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