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Getting meetings right

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September 16, 2009 ([Network World](#)) Business gurus yap constantly about “upping your productivity” to which I say “up ...,” well, you get the idea. But my particular hot button for productivity wasting activity, the bad meeting, kills efficiency and morale. Whether it's a conference call or a physical sit down and fight-for-the-last-donut meeting, wasting time insults everyone involved. That's why I'm interested to see if the newly updated [TimeBridge](#) can make good on it's promise to transition from a meeting coordination service to helping “busy professionals run great meetings.”

Most of us are still fighting the problem of coordinating meetings via the e-mail train wreck, as I discussed in [The Law of Meeting Coordination](#) and [Get More Work Done With Less E-mail](#). Shared calendars, from vendors like [Google](#), [HyperOffice](#) and [StreetSmart](#) address the calendar coordination issue pretty well.

TimeBridge does the same thing, and it claims 400,000 users benefit from the service, which takes a more active role in herding attendees.

TimeBridge cleverly uses peer pressure to force those last few reluctant attendees to commit to a meeting time. When using the service, you create a meeting page, add the names and contact info for attendees, and list several alternative times (invitees need not register on TimeBridge to participate). Each attendee clicks a link in the e-mail meeting invitation and picks all the suggested times they're available for your meeting.

Peer pressure comes in because everyone invited can see all the possible times as well as the responses from other invitees. That jerk who also answers meeting e-mails last, complaining none of the times work for him? He has to sign his name, where everyone can see, that he's being difficult yet again.

“Our experience has been that the fifth or sixth person coming to the meeting schedule page almost never blocks a meeting by refusing to accept one of the times that everyone else has already confirmed,” said Yori Nelken, CEO of TimeBridge. “They try to be a good citizen, if possible, and make it easy.”

Transparency in the workplace really goes a long way in taming jerks. Most feel free to deal grief one on one with the person trying to coordinate the meeting, but almost none want their jerkiness on display for the entire group. This single feature may be worth the price of the service, which is free for basic meeting coordination and \$8.95 per user per month for the Plus features of Web conferencing services. These include sharing a computer screen, a virtual whiteboard, and phone conferencing for up to 100 people.

TimeBridge has four core applications: Let's Meet (invitations and times), Collaborative Meeting Agenda, Meeting Time Manager, and a new iPhone app. We've already talked about the first as a great way to gently but firmly force meeting anarchists to play nice with others. Invitation e-mails work with Outlook, Google Calendar and Apps, and all applications following the iCal calendar coordination protocol like Yahoo, Notes, OfficeLive and others. Attendees can get an e-mail invitation, click to see the custom meeting page, click the times they're available, and allow TimeBridge to make the entry to their calendar. I can't imagine meeting coordination being less of a hassle unless you could use a Star Trek tractor beam and transport attendees to the meeting location.



But as we all know from painful past experience, the meeting arrangements don't waste nearly as much time as a meeting with a long, wandering, vague agenda. Enter the Collaborative Meeting Agenda portion of TimeBridge, which lets attendees see the agenda and make comments to modify the agenda before the meeting.

While CEO Nelken says this allows the meeting coordinator to become a "meeting hero," it also uses peer pressure to force the one who called the meeting to do their homework. Weak agendas or off-topic items can get commented into submission before the meeting donuts get ordered. And knowing the agenda eliminates excuses from the attendees about being unprepared. The coordinator must prepare, and the attendees must prepare. When the meeting starts, little time should be wasted.

Getting the meeting started can be tricky, which brings us to Meeting Time Manager. If reminder e-mails don't succeed, a mouse click initiates more e-mails announcing the meeting has started. For mobile meeting procrastinators, text messaging may not get them into the meeting, but their excuse that they forgot disappears. Maybe TimeBridge should add a sound effects trigger on the newer phones, playing the Rawhide theme to "Round'em up and head'em out" to the meeting location.

Speaking of newer phones, the iPhone app TimeBridge just added lets folks on both end of the meeting spectrum, attendees and coordinators, manage many of the functions via the dancing fingers iPhone interface. The app even tells you if someone you want to call is in a TimeBridge-coordinated meeting, so you can't innocently call and pull them out of the meeting (even when the two of you have worked out the excuse).

TimeBridge wants to play David to the meeting waste of time Goliath. I hope it succeeds, and it has the tools in place to at least eliminate common meeting excuses. Can't find a time? Handled. Don't know if the agenda impacts you? Handled. Need constant reminders to remember a meeting? Handled. Like to play with your iPhone more than work? Handled.

Technology can not eliminate personnel issues, and some jerks are incredibly resistant to becoming civilized and productive team members. For the majority of meeting planners and attendees, however, TimeBridge offers a great set of tools to make meeting coordination and attendance as painless as possible. Just get there early to get the good donuts.