

# The unscalable frequency of meetings\*

Maria Dimou

CERN IT Lightning Talk

\* Title inspired from this book

# Situation

- Our scientific community is formed by more 10.500 people from 64 countries or more.
- This is a treasure of cultures & different ways of thinking, a proven “singularity” in terms of harmonious collaboration for 60 years.
- All this variety of mentalities can be a source of inspiration also for ideas on working methods and specifically on meetings.

# Complication

- Our projects are big and last long. Hence, many meetings are held for:
  - Information dissemination
  - Coordination
  - Development/migration check-points
  - Decision making.
- The amount and duration of meetings increase proportionally to the community and projects' size.
- We can't stay as we are, this modus operandi doesn't scale. Because:
  - Information gets repeated in different fora
  - Overlapping participants' population, bored &/or stressed work on their laptops/smartphones during the meetings.
  - "Real work" is pushed to the evening!

# Question

- Radical, massive, imposed changes are impossible or utopic:
  - Consensus is never met at such large number of cases and personalities involved.
  - Such changes are usually undone a few years later and we go back to where we were sometime in our forgotten past.

So what can be done?

- How can we use all the “brain power” we have around, to break out of this spiral that seems to get worse?

# Answer

- Take small steps to avoid “fashion” effects.
- Zero meetings is impossible. Try to:
  - Hold some meetings standing-up
  - Limit information meetings to a few minutes
  - Ban laptops when possible
  - Question the frequency of *regular* meetings
  - Select the timeslot that will keep meetings brief (end of the day/Friday)
  - Prepare and circulate material in advance when competing ideas are likely to surface.
  - Make alternative environments available for ideas’ circulation before/after/instead of meetings.

# Concretely

- Responsible & respected chairpersons:
  - Set time limits even in free-format contributions
  - Check slides in advance and match/limit time
  - Stop speakers when time is up
  - Make sure meeting material is meaningful and reached all relevant parties on time
  - Identify the optimal media to advance with the task (social, email, twiki, indico) not just meetings
- Responsible & respectful speakers/participants:
  - Take the time, in advance, to write/say the strictly necessary & sufficient
  - Introspect & chop any hidden “look at me” motive.

# How-To

- Avoid stagnation, a meeting is a tool not a fatalism.
- What counts is communication, not the meeting ‘institution’. Use alternative paths.
- If you won’t learn from or contribute to a given meeting, do not go.
- [social.cern.ch\(\\*\)](#) is ‘one of the paths, not The Path. Consider those who best function in face-to-face interaction and have wisdom to contribute.
- Mutual education works best. Each person’s experience & personality contributes more than processes & “business” models.

(\*)suggested in the 2014 IT Staff survey, mentioned at the [2015 PoW note](#)

# Proposal

To educate & support each other, rehearsing, brainstorming, advising:

- Form small groups, max. 12 people, together with our experiment partners, to debate what can be done better and shorter.
- Have 1 person, not the same one, participate in 2 groups, not always the same, to relay info and bridge efforts.
- Use post-it on the wall to focus and follow progress à la Scrum.

Coffee Monday February 9<sup>th</sup> at 16hrs in rest. 2 &/or

Scrum Thursday February 12<sup>th</sup> at 16hrs in room 28-1-025

It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it.

Joseph Joubert

1754-1824

Thank You!



# Sharing thoughts

Discussions with (in  $\alpha$ - $\beta$  order):

Alberto Aimar – CERN IT

Bob Cowles – Grid security expert

John Huth – Harvard Univ. ATLAS experiment

Despina Katsikakis – Architect, workplace expert

Tanya Levshina – FNAL

René Schneider – Haute Ecole de Gestion Geneva

Domenico Vicinanza – GEANT, DANTE, Anglia  
Ruskin Univ.

...influenced the content of this talk. I am grateful!

