

# Improve Remote Work Effectiveness by Rising to These Top 10 Meeting Challenges

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By Analysts [Adam Preset](#), [Mike Fasciani](#)

Initiatives: [Executive Leadership: Talent](#); [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Resource Center](#); [Digital Workplace Applications](#)

Gartner's survey of more than 7,000 digital workers identified 10 key challenges in relation to modern digital meetings. Executive leaders responsible for remote work strategies must prioritize improving meeting practices, technologies and culture for their organizations to thrive.

## Overview

### Key Challenges

- The top 10 challenges of remote meetings cannot be solved through technology alone. Most stem from improper use of that technology and poor meeting practices.
- Common barriers still prevent productive meeting experiences, but technology can help if it is properly deployed, adopted and supported.

### Recommendations

Executive leaders responsible for meeting management, practices, technologies and tools should:

- Eliminate nonessential meetings and improve the remainder by focusing on structure, attendees and premeeting expectations. Work with business leaders to provide these best practices.
- Tackle the problems that impede meeting success by cataloging and then prioritizing technical pain points for resolution.

## Strategic Planning Assumptions

By 2024, in-person meetings will drop from 60% of enterprise meetings to 25%, driven by remote work and changing workforce demographics.

By 2024, combating meeting overload will be one of the top 10 workforce management conflicts in most enterprises, as best practices and governance to keep meetings in check fail to match the speed and frequency at which workers can meet.

By 2024, only 10% of enterprise video meetings will take place in rooms, with the remaining 90% on personal computers or mobile devices, causing enterprises dramatically to drop investments in meeting room devices.

## Introduction

Executive leaders have an urgent need to drive a strategy for overcoming the barriers to productive online meetings. As more workers have gone remote, Gartner clients tell us that their need to communicate and collaborate fluidly is hampered by old ways of conducting meetings.

Clients invest in meeting solutions and technologies because they increase the pace at which they can meet and extend their reach to collaborate and innovate globally.

**Stamp out common and systemic problems with meetings to advance collaboration and improve worker satisfaction.**

Now more than ever, organizations must:

- *Support remote working* – Enterprises need to meet the challenges of more flexible work policies.
- *Protect worker quality of life* – Maximizing the practice of remote meetings is a necessary measure to reduce employee exposure to illness.
- *Save money* – The world economy is dynamic, but it is perennially sensible to optimize for cost and reduce travel expenses.
- *Save time* – Physically commuting to and from meetings introduces an opportunity cost in time that could be better spent on other activities.
- *Support sustainability* – Reducing the environmental impact of the use of fossil fuels is a conscious ethical stance for many organizations.

In a 2019 consumer study, Gartner gathered data from more than 7,000 digital workers that indicates a starting set of 10 challenges to address in relation to remote meetings (see Methodology).

Global conditions related to COVID-19 in 2020 have caused many enterprises to focus on providing and using meeting technologies to continue business operations. This research offers prescriptive guidance on the problems that executive leaders must solve to enable today's remote workers. Otherwise, they risk just propagating more bad meetings at scale.

The following checklist captures the key practices, but read further for greater depth.

## 10 Practices for Remote Workers to Improve Digital Meetings

1. Limit meeting overload with calendar blocking.
2. Encourage contributions via chat, docs, and whiteboards.
3. Track decisions and next actions at the end of every meeting.
4. Define a clear purpose for every meeting, otherwise cancel.
5. Invite only mandatory attendees.
6. Fix audio, video, and workspace issues.
7. Standardize tools and workflows to have consistent meetings.
8. Join meetings early to take pressure off.
9. Hold meeting content in one place.
10. Schedule shorter meetings.

## Analysis

### Eliminate Nonessential Meetings, Structure Those You Lead With Purpose, and Invite Only Relevant Attendees

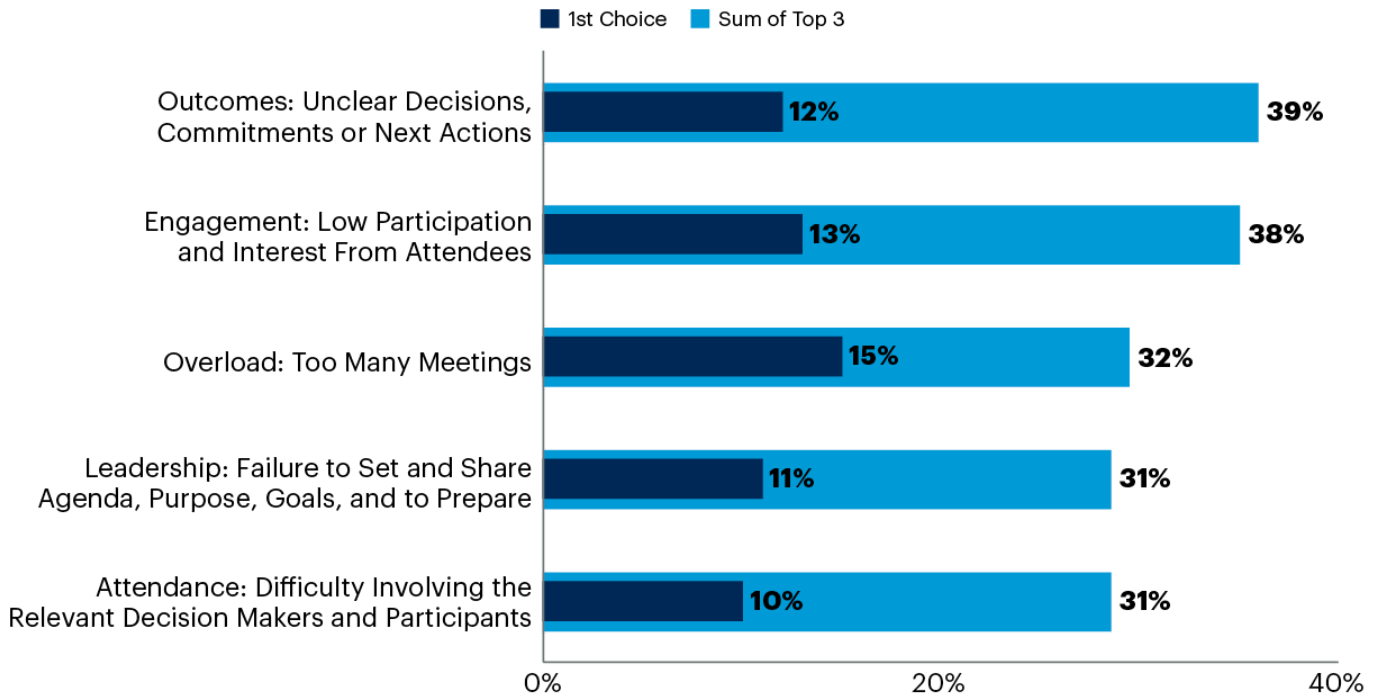
Gartner's data about meetings can help executive leaders create an objective strategy. Everyone has an opinion about what's wrong with their meetings. To counter the inclination to focus on only a small set of anecdotes, we advise a systematic approach. Use facts to inform your approach:

- Survey your workforce for your key meeting pain points, and/or
- Use Gartner's data about the top pain points as your baseline for action.

The top five challenges reported by Gartner survey respondents are all related to meeting practices rather than specific technologies (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Top Five Challenges During a Meeting That Prevent You From Being Productive**

**Top Human Challenges During a Meeting That Prevent You From Being Productive**  
 Percentage of Respondents. Sum of Top 3 Ranked and 1st Choice



n = 7,261; all respondents

Q: What are the top three challenges during a meeting that prevent you from being productive?

Source: Gartner

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For each challenge, we provide guidance on changes you should make to your meeting practices, how technology can help, and advice about the cultural shifts you should enable or that you will see.

**Challenge 1: Overload – Too Many Meetings**

Remote workers are not subject to the physical limitations of face-to-face meetings. That benefit creates a challenge: The pressure to meet at any time from anywhere, just because we can. Workers must reclaim the power over their own calendars.

**Take action:**

*Practice* – Every remote worker needs time blocks that are meeting free. Leaders must promote this idea and model good behavior on their own calendars. Do not water down your resolve by defending exceptions.

*Technical* – Every remote worker should pick sensible ranges of time to allocate on their calendars with clear labels such as #meetings or #focus. Do this in consultation with close collaborators to reduce conflicts.

*Cultural – Every organization must declare in a policy statement that it values focus time as much as it values collaboration and meeting times. Even managers or sales professionals who have a heavy meeting load need time outside of meetings to prepare for and follow up on meeting activities. Some organizations will elect a broad approach and establish new norms, such as “Meeting-free Friday.”*

### **Challenge 2: Engagement – Low Participation and Interest From Attendees**

Meeting engagement is even more challenging for the remote worker than the office worker. When meetings are remote, attendees must often deal with the distractions of home and work all at once. Important meetings demand attention and participation, but engagement can only happen when you have the right topic, attendees, time and interaction.

#### **Take action:**

*Practice – Every remote worker needs a clear way of contributing to a meeting, either vocally or via in-meeting chat. To create or add value in a meeting, the host must ask for those contributions without assuming that audio and video – often monopolized by the top talkers and extroverts – are the only vectors. Use all methods available to draw out introverts as well. The meeting host must encourage a flow of input via chat, brainstorming tools, shared documents and digital whiteboards.*

*Technical – Every remote worker should take the time to develop the basic competencies to engage fully in remote meetings. That means understanding common activities such as how to enable video, mute/unmute, raise a virtual hand to ask a question, present materials and use chat to share ideas.*

*Cultural – Every organization must reinforce good behaviors for better engagement in remote meetings. The days of nannying attendees to monitor whether they are paying attention and have clicked into the correct window should be over. Instead, a good active listener shouldn't even touch the keyboard (unless taking notes). Chat participants add commentary that is on point. The most verbal participants take their turns, leave space for others and are as good at listening as they are at talking. The meeting host facilitates smoothly and preserves flow to keep participants from getting bored. Enabling video is not a cure-all for better engagement, but remote workers may find that video, when appropriate, adds additional visual cues to enable richer interactions.*

### **Challenge 3: Outcomes – Unclear Decisions, Commitments or Next Actions**

Remote workers do not have many opportunities for the small daily office interactions that help them clarify and course correct on their way to achieving goals. The worst remote meetings end with a lot of discussion about work, but with little to show for the time spent. Remote meetings in which we identify work, resolve complex issues and make decisions are more valuable.

#### **Take action:**

*Practice – Every remote worker needs to understand their new commitments and balance them alongside existing priorities. Spend the last five to 10 minutes of every meeting reviewing decisions and*

next actions.

*Technical – Every remote worker should have at least a simple system to track their commitments and prevent “to do” items from getting lost (see Note 1: Tracking Your Actions). Teams should implement a shared digital system where issues are visible so workers can more easily hold themselves and each other accountable (see Note 2: Tracking Your Team’s Actions). Automated transcription to capture and record meeting minutes and actions can add efficiency as organizations invest and the technology matures.*

*Cultural – Every organization must support its remote workers in remote meetings with a structure that makes meeting outcomes clear. This can be in the form of a simple pattern of questions you ask at the end of every meeting: What did we decide? What are our next actions? Who is assigned? When are the due dates? Do we expect any problems? When are we meeting again?*

#### **Challenge 4: Leadership – Failure to Set and Share Agenda, Purpose, Goals, and to Prepare**

Meeting leaders can easily erode the trust of their remote workers if they fail to show respect for their attendees’ time. A key element of retaining that trust is demonstrating preparation for meetings by sharing a meeting agenda and purpose, ideally in advance.

##### **Take action:**

*Practice – Every remote worker needs clarity on the purpose of a meeting in order to guide their contributions. If you are a meeting organizer and have no firm agenda, cancel your meeting, as the opportunity cost of convening and wasting time outstrips the possible benefit of a vague gathering.*

*Technical – Every remote worker should share meeting agendas as part of their calendar invitations rather than leaving meetings open-ended. Use shared tools for good note taking that captures the agenda and outcomes together to help validate whether the meeting met its intended purpose.*

*Cultural – Every organization must hold leaders accountable for how they use or abuse the time of remote workers in meetings. Attendees should always feel free to ask, “What is the purpose of this meeting?” if it is unclear. Leaders must value their organization’s time enough to prioritize meeting preparation time.*

#### **Challenge 5: Attendance – Difficulty Involving the Relevant Decision Makers and Participants**

The fear of missing out can drive some remote workers to optionally attend meetings that are, at best, only tangentially relevant. This is not the best use of anyone’s time. Strive to have the right people in a meeting, which means only inviting those whose attendance is considered mandatory because they have critical information to share or are involved in decision making.

##### **Take action:**

*Practice – Every remote worker needs to revisit meeting commitments that are considered optional and decline them. “Listen in” meetings are less valuable and only have the effect of dividing employees’ attention between those meetings that are important and other work, which is also likely to be important.*

*Technical – Every remote worker should break the habit of inviting optional attendees to meetings or attending meetings where their attendance is optional. Keep the colleagues you would have considered optional informed by sharing meeting notes, transcripts and relevant materials with them.*

*Cultural – All organizations must strive for smaller meetings with more focus when they need to make decisions. This is only achievable if they are more selective with attendees. Be cautious about the “status update” meeting. Sessions dedicated to the sharing of new information are not as useful in a climate where today’s remote workers span multiple time zones.*

## **Tackle the Problems That Impede Meeting Success by Cataloging and Then Prioritizing Technical Pain Points for Resolution**

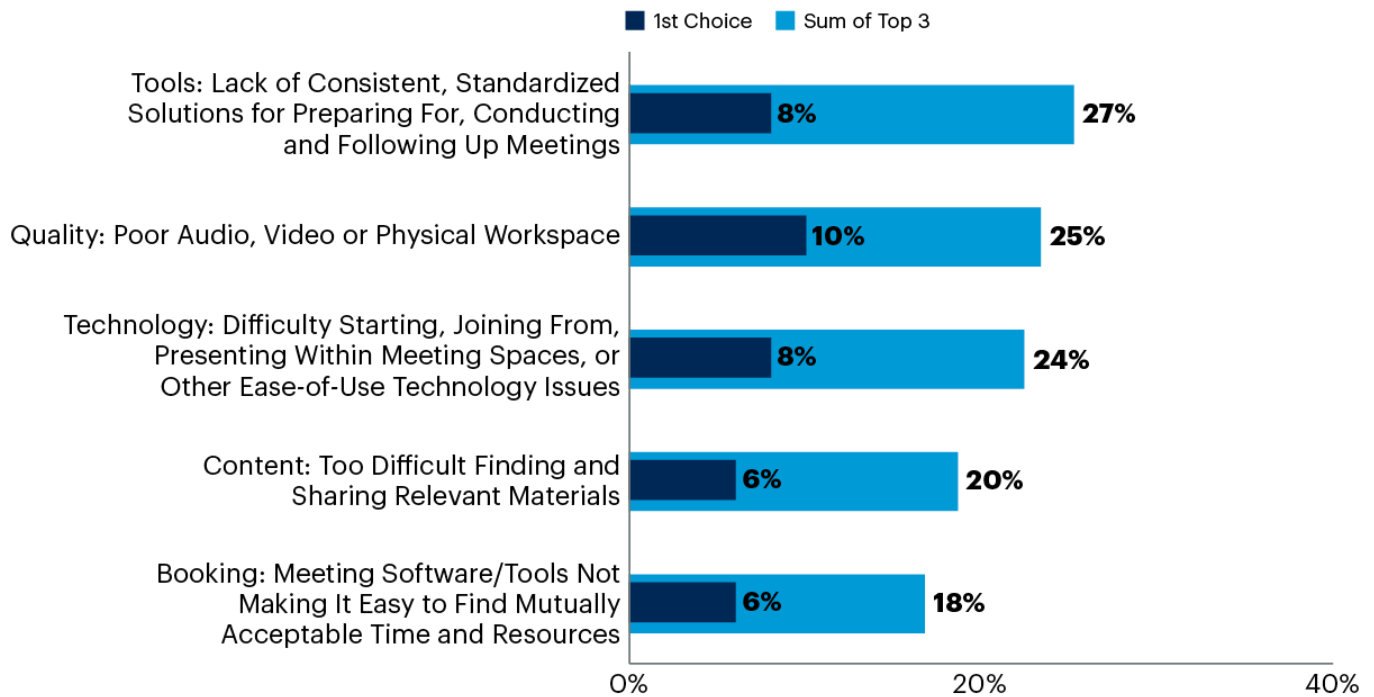
Executive leaders will often leap to solving technology problems first before thinking problems through. Gartner encourages a balanced view based on current priorities. As more cloud-based meeting solutions buckle under the strain of an increased load of remote workers, it may be wisest to tackle the most prominent technical pain points if your organization is in a critical transitional period. However, neglecting to improve meeting practices as well will simply allow you to scale meetings that are already bad and have more of them.

The second half of the top 10 meeting challenges reported by Gartner survey respondents are all related to the use of technology in meetings (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Challenges 6-10 During a Meeting That Prevent You From Being Productive

### Top Technical Challenges During a Meeting That Prevent You From Being Productive

Percentage of Respondents. Sum of Top 3 Ranked and 1st Choice



n = 7,261; all respondents

Q: What are the top three challenges during a meeting that prevent you from being productive?

Source: Gartner

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Gartner

For each challenge, we provide guidance on changes you should make to your meeting practices to fully exploit the technology you have and what to focus on to improve the technology itself. We also provide advice on the cultural shifts you should enable or that you will see.

#### Challenge 6: Quality – Poor Audio, Video or Physical Workspace

Great remote meetings demand concentration, but environmental and technical impediments can make meetings more taxing and less satisfying. A lot can go wrong along the path from your device to other meeting participants in other places around the globe, so give yourself an edge by making local conditions reliable first.

#### Take action:

*Practice – Every remote worker needs ways to make meetings comfortable in order to fully focus.*

Environmental factors, such as having a private, quiet space that makes it easy to hear and enough lighting for good video, make a difference. Ideally, requirements for remote worker's physical workspaces should be outlined in the organization's remote work policy and communicated to employees by managers prior to remote work beginning. Take time to have a solo meeting on your own or a casual



troubleshooting meeting with a trusted colleague to fine-tune your remote office meeting environment and technology.

*Technical* – Every remote worker should request and be granted noise-canceling headsets and webcams if needed to improve the quality of remote meeting experiences. Consciously limit the use of internet bandwidth by other devices sharing the same network during a meeting. In the worst case, drop video to preserve bandwidth for high-quality audio, which may become more necessary as cloud-based meeting solutions endure strain during periods of rapid growth.

*Cultural* – Every organization must help remote workers solve meeting quality problems, which may require developing specific expertise at the help desk or special brief training materials. The alternative is to have workers who constantly and consistently experience poor meetings and waste time with technology rather than advancing their goals. If your organization is plagued with technical problems that you haven't tried to solve, expect the fatigue to result in dissatisfaction with meetings and low credibility for IT.

### **Challenge 7: Tools – Lack of Consistent, Standardized Solutions for Preparing for, Conducting and Following Up Meetings**

Much meeting effort is applied during the real-time interaction, which is only a point in time along a continuum of collaboration. As more and more meeting solutions handle audio, video and content sharing sufficiently well for typical business needs, remote workers need better support for all the activities that happen around the moments of real-time collaboration.

#### **Take action:**

*Practice* – Every remote worker needs to reduce context switching into and out of different tools to make sense of what's happening in a meeting. Start by agreeing with regular collaborators about best practices and reasonable ways to consolidate meeting materials.

*Technical* – Every remote worker should have the fewest touchpoints necessary for a meeting workflow. If possible, a single destination, such as a persistent team meeting room or channel, is the best place to keep agendas, meeting notes and recordings with transcripts. Standardize across the organization, if possible.

*Cultural* – Every organization must communicate standards for arranging meetings as part of onboarding new remote workers. Without these norms specific to our environments, we can spend too much time discovering how meetings *might* work when others already know what *will* work. Some standards will not apply to all meetings, so deviate when appropriate.

### **Challenge 8: Technology – Difficulty Starting, Joining From, Presenting Within Meeting Spaces, or Other Ease-of-Use Technology Issues**

Ease of use is subjective (see Note 3). But workers typically believe a meeting technology is easy to use if it:

- Starts instantly without large, necessary client downloads
- Relies on clicks or taps rather than (mis-)typing codes
- Has simple, visible, intuitive controls for sharing materials.

The faster we can help workers get in, meet and share, and get out, the better.

#### Take action:

*Practice* — Every remote worker needs confidence in the meeting technology they use, but that confidence is earned or eroded each time a meeting is difficult to start. One very simple thing that everyone can do to take the pressure off is to join meetings five or more minutes early. More meeting services are under high load at the top and bottom of the hour, so get in before the rush. Give yourself more time to log in, download software, or troubleshoot if needed.

*Technical* — Every remote worker should have click-to-join or tap-to-join meetings. In enterprise, it's a balance rather than a battle between security and convenience. Authenticated users joining company-issued meeting solutions should use invitation links and VoIP/PC audio along with video. Meetings should have passcodes, but avoid a meeting join workflow that requires the typing in of passcodes, such as into a conference bridge. If traditional telephony is required, have the meeting dial you back. For more recommendations, see [“Maximize Meeting Solution Security by Addressing Detection, Protection, Response and Recovery.”](#)

*Cultural* — Every organization must make starting and joining meetings as simple as possible without compromising security. Executive leaders should survey remote workers to determine whether problems happen rarely or occasionally for some, or are systemic for all. Because meetings are the lifeblood of many organizations, IT help desks must resolve any feedback about problems that meeting organizers and managers report.

#### Challenge 9: Content — Too Difficult Finding and Sharing Relevant Materials

Content adds necessary richness to meetings. Workers may create and collaborate on content in many technologies that are separate from their meeting applications, such as locally on devices, within browsers in web applications, file servers, cloud storage and portals. Organizing content, sharing it with others, and creating and working on it in a meeting context are common tasks that should be simple and repeatable.

#### Take action:

*Practice* — Every remote worker needs to have a shared agreement with regular collaborators for how and where they will organize team content. A basic system with a single location, simple folder structure and easily understood naming conventions saves time. For repeatable activities and processes, having a few “living documents” that are collaboratively co-authored and are often revised can be dramatically

simpler. If sharing content is too difficult because we do not understand how our meeting tools work, it is very important that we take time to practice so that our meetings remain effective.

*Technical – Every remote worker should be given best practices by IT for persistent meetings; that is, meetings with a virtual workspace where participants chat, start meetings, store content and work together.* Workstream collaboration technologies have gained momentum as an all-in-one destination for meeting activities. There are two other common recipes for regular team or project meetings in which the workflow connects a meeting solution virtual room with either 1) a shared folder on an online content collaboration platform; or 2) a dashboard or project view in a collaborative work management tool.

*Cultural – Every organization must align its meeting solution strategy with its content collaboration strategy since content is so critical to meetings.* Organizing content better can take us part of the way. But if workers are overloaded by content volume, the solution may be a matter of prioritizing investment in vendors that make it easier to search for and find that content. An alternative solution is to rethink meeting content entirely. Instead of a model in which we mostly share material to keep colleagues up to date, use meeting time for dynamically generating new content, such as through crowdsourcing and collecting ideas, or co-authoring new assets in real time.

### **Challenge 10: Booking – Meeting Software/Tools Not Making It Easy to Find Mutually Acceptable Time and Resources**

Time is a precious resource and physical space to meet is sometimes a scarce commodity. The challenge in remote work is balancing attention on work activities against other personal needs, whether that means health, home or family. Global organizations that must work across time zones spread available attention very thin.

#### **Take action:**

*Practice – Every remote worker needs to be available to meet with colleagues, managers and team members at the appropriate level, but without overcommitting to meetings as an activity.* Examine your calendar and estimate your time spent on different types of meetings. If you supervise a team, one-to-one meetings with your remote workers should be inviolate. For the rest, make small changes: shorten meetings, make them less frequent, and use other tools and practices to collaborate rather than always meeting.

*Technical – Every remote worker should reconsider meeting defaults.* Ignore the implicit guidance of calendar programs that default to hour-long meetings and pick your own, preferably shorter time slots. If your default behavior was to prefer a meeting room, the time is now right to skip the hunt for available space in a meeting room and instead enjoy the flexibility of meeting directly from your desk or while mobile.

*Cultural – Every organization must enable workers to solve meeting scheduling problems creatively.* The only way to systematically improve the meeting booking problem is for everyone to contribute to the solution. For example, set core hours with frequent collaborators within a few time zones of each other

(midday to 6 p.m. EST, for example) to help have shared meeting times available. New, sometimes tiny, blocks of time will add up incrementally. New hours cannot be created, but they can be found.

*Additional research contribution and review: Claudia Ramos, Whit Andrews.*

## Evidence

This research used results from the 2019 Digital Workplace survey. The research was conducted online from March through April 2019 among 7,261 respondents in U.S., Europe and APAC.

Participants were screened for full-time employment in organizations with 100 or more employees and were required to use digital technology for work purposes.

Ages ranged from 18 through 74 years old, with quotas and weighting applied for age, gender, region and income, so that results are representative of working country populations.

Results of this study do not represent “global” findings or the market as a whole, but are a simple average of results for the targeted countries covered in this survey.

The interpretations, insights and recommendations are informed by analyst interactions with clients, vendors in related technology markets and subject matter experts.

Readers will benefit from some of the free related material that Gartner makes available to the public:

- [How to Lead Better Remote Meetings](#) (Smarter With Gartner)
- [Secure your Online Meetings!](#) (Gartner Blog Network)

This research note also draws on public information sources gathered through independent secondary research:

- [“Cisco Sees Demand Surge for Webex, Zoom’s Larger Rival.”](#) Bloomberg.
- [“The Basecamp Guide to Internal Communication.”](#) Basecamp.
- [Zoom attendee attention tracking.](#) Zoom.
- [“It All Starts to Blur Together’: Zoom Fatigue Is Here.”](#) Digiday.
- [“Zoom Is Easy. That’s Why It’s Dangerous.”](#) New York Times.
- [“How to Get People to Actually Participate in Virtual Meetings.”](#) Harvard Business Review.
- [“The Right Way to Keep Your Remote Team Accountable.”](#) Inc.

## Note 1: Tracking Your Actions

Gartner is not prescriptive in recommending a single-task tracking methodology for individual workers. Task tracking is personal. The process you can stick with is better than the process you abandon. For some remote workers with dedicated physical space, traditional systems with Post-It notes, whiteboards or paper are perfectly reasonable. Others will go pure digital. For those seeking ideas, consider:

- The reminder app on your smartphone
- The task feature in your email client
- A file or files in your note-taking program
- A dedicated productivity task-tracking app with rich PC client application and/or website.

## Note 2: Tracking Your Team's Actions

Review Gartner's Market Guides on Strategy Execution Management Software, Collaborative Work Management, Workstream Collaboration, Innovation Management, Product Management and Roadmapping Tools, and Enterprise Agile Frameworks for technologies that help to track shared actions across teams and organizations.

## Note 3: Ease of Use From Meeting Solution Customer References

Some meeting solution vendors place a great deal of emphasis in their marketing materials on ease of use. Some enterprise IT buyers will switch from one meeting product to another due to end-user complaints about ease of use from a vocal minority or majority. Ease of use is difficult to evaluate objectively. In some cases, new products with more attention to design and user experience are likely to be qualitatively better than a legacy environment that is overdue for replacement. Personal preference plays a strong role. Gartner clients should be systematic in gathering feedback from their workers and key business stakeholders on what constitutes their own view on ease of use. However, we note that, of all the customer references polled for Gartner's "[Magic Quadrant for Meeting Solutions](#)" in 2019, customers without exception listed "ease of use" as one of the top three strengths of the meeting product they had acquired. This may simply mean that a product is easy to use if you use it every day. It may mean that references are biased to prefer the product they bought over others they have not.

## Recommended by the Authors

[Survey Analysis: Accommodate Different Meeting Cultures and Technology Expectations for a Digital Workforce](#)

[Maximize Meeting Solution Security by Addressing Detection, Protection, Response and Recovery](#)

[Enable More Productive Meetings With Google G Suite or Microsoft Office 365](#)

[Predicts 2020: Digital Workplace Applications Led by the New Work Nucleus](#)

[Magic Quadrant for Meeting Solutions](#)

[Critical Capabilities for Meeting Solutions](#)

[Market Guide for Collaborative Work Management](#)

[Market Guide for Workstream Collaboration](#)

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