

**The effects of diversity on the performance of a meeting.**

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# **Abstract**

Meetings, with its purpose of information exchange or as a way to coordinate work tasks and solve problems, have become a big part in the everyday life of a company. The effectiveness and outcome of the meeting are largely influenced, both positive and negative, by a variety of factors. Since almost all organizations rely on some form of teamwork, getting along in meetings and being able to discuss different topics properly is very important for achieving the goal of the company. Because of this, I want to discuss the question of if too much diversity harms the communication in meetings or the company in general. I also want to bring to light not only the problems that can occur when people have different opinions which are a result of their different origin and culture but whether or not those cultural differences can, for example, help to make progress with problem-solving.

# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Relevance of the topic**

Meetings nowadays have become a big part of the company’s structure and the employee’s day to day life. Almost every decision made has been discussed in some form of meeting[[1]](#footnote-1) beforehand. Just looking at the U.S., there are up to 55 million meetings every single workday (Lehmann-Willenbrock, Rogelberg, Allen & Kello, 2018). Studies have shown, that employees and managers attend approximately 3.2 meetings per week, but while employees spend on average 6 hours per week in meetings (e.g., Rogelberg, Leach, Warr, & Burnfield, 2006; Schell, 2010), employees in managerial positions spend up to 23 hours of their week in meetings and they are expected to have even more meetings in the future (Rogelberg, Scott & Kello, 2007). Some of them spend up to 80 % of their work time in meetings only (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. 2018). The rest of a manager’s time is often spent with preparing meetings or discussing the meeting results (e.g., Van Vree, 2011). Overall, a lot of the companies’ resources (e.g. the employee’s time, or money in form of salaries) are invested in meetings.

Because of factors like globalization, demographic shifts, or the implementation of cross- functional work teams, workforces tend to get more diverse (Leibold & Voelpel, 2006; Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998). Nowadays work teams are more racially and ethnically diverse, a higher percentage of women can be found, and the participants tend to be older, comparing to the teams from the past (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). This was stated by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2012 and it is still becoming more common for an employee to work in a multicultural team (Nam, Lyons, Hwang, & Kim, 2009). This trend for more diversity won’t slow down soon because, for example, the European Union supports the mobility of workers both within and between member countries (Bonin et al., 2008).

## **1.2 Current state of research**

So far, the role of diversity[[2]](#footnote-2) in meetings remains largely unexplored (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Rogelberg, Shanock, & Scott, 2012). While the topic Meeting science itself is fairly new to researchers, the question what effects diversity and differences between the participants can have on the overall workflow of a meeting is barely covered in science. Studies dealing with the relationship between diversity and team communication, for example, are rather rare. That could become a problem when trying to cover the question. The lack of research may be surprising because the relation of diverse work teams and the conduct of meetings can bring together various perspectives for improved problem solving (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Rogelberg, Shanock, & Scott, 2012).

What has been researched are the cultural differences in the process of a meeting. Most of this existing research has been conducted in Anglo- Saxon work contexts. Some of the most influential studies have been done by Rogelberg (Köhler & Gölz, 2015). But these studies were done with participants from various English - speaking countries, such as the U.S. or Australia. Since their culture is pretty similar, the question if, for example, meeting expectations or norms differ between different cultures has not been answered thoroughly and only looking at these studies, it remains still unknown if the cultural differences influence the meeting expectations or the workflow of a meeting.

The researches done in meetings and on the whole topic meeting science will probably get more in the future since it is very important to companies that their employees work efficiently and at the same time are satisfied with the meeting itself and its outcome. Because of that, studies on meeting planning and meeting leadership are a big part of meeting science, as well as taking a look at premeeting activities. Premeeting activities can consist of distributing the agenda and important documents or, for example, preparing the environment the meeting takes place in (Niedermann & Volkema, 1999). Furthermore, the cost of meetings has been in the spotlight for companies. The researches on the finances deal with questions like how the costs for meetings can be lowered because meetings take up a big part of the work - life of a company and it is estimated that many organizations devote between 7 and 15 % of their personnel budgets only into meetings (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. 2018). Because of that, meetings can be a huge waste of money and time, so studies aim to make them more time and money efficient.

But there are not only studies on the meeting itself or the preparation that goes into a meeting, some researches focus only on the leader of the meeting. But again, it is surprising that not that many studies have examined the topic as context - specific (e.g., Peus, Braun, & Frey, 2013), even though it is very important to take a look at effective meeting leadership (Rogelberg, et al. 2012).

## **1.3 Research objectives and research question**

This study aims to answer the question of what effects differences between the participants of a meeting can have on the performance of a meeting. As highlighted before, the topic is not one of the most researched questions in meeting science, because of that, I also want to bring to light what the current standpoint in science is. Furthermore, the advantages and maybe occurring problems or disadvantages when having a diverse workgroup should be portrayed well, but the goal is to find answers that encourage having more diverse workgroups. In conclusion, how do cultural and gender differences affect the performance of a meeting?

## **1.4 Methodic procedure**

The goal is to extract the positive and negative effects on the performance of a meeting from different scientific papers dealing with meeting science. To achieve that, a literature research is done, with a focus on scientific articles that are still up to date, using online Libraries to find the scientific articles and papers needed for the research.

# **2. The relevance of diversity for meeting performance**

To understand the topic of meeting science itself better, it is important to define the different words. The most important terms for this study are limited and explained in the following paragraphs.

## **2.1 Meeting**

A meeting, stated by the Cambridge dictionary[[3]](#footnote-3), is a planned occasion when people come together to discuss something. It can also be defined as a planned gathering of three or more individuals who assemble for the purpose of work – related interaction (Schwartzmann, 1989). Those are very basic definitions of the term meeting. Meetings can be classified into specific subgroups. For example, into formal and informal meetings. A formal meeting has to occur at a prespecified time, involve a leader and an agenda, an informal meeting does not need those things (Boden, 1994). The term meeting can also be divided into ‘face to face’ meetings and meetings via video chat or telephone and, as already stated in the introduction, they have a purpose of information exchange and are used to coordinate work tasks (Schwartzman, 1989). In meetings, decision making and problem - solving are top priorities, but general brainstorming for new ideas is also done in meetings. In this study, I will only focus on the meetings held in person and on formal meetings, meaning they have been announced beforehand, were planned and structured.

## **2.2 Diversity**

Team diversity, in general, refers to differences among group members that can either be relation or task - oriented (Gerpott & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2015). Relations oriented differences are things such as age, gender or race, task-oriented differences are, for example, the education or the functional background (Gerpott & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2015). Relations oriented diversity contains visible aspects of diversity (Gerpott & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2015), differences that can be seen from the appearance. For my paper, I will concentrate on two relation-oriented differences, the gender and the cultural background of the meeting participants.

## **2.3 Performance**

The word performance can be defined differently, it depends on what topic you look at. For example, the Cambridge dictionary states, that performance can be the act of doing something, but more important to this study, performance also refers to how well something is done, for example, a job or an activity. Business English performance can describe how successful, for example, an investment is (The Cambridge dictionary[[4]](#footnote-4)). In this study, the definition of performance as being a term describing how well something is done will be used.

# **3. Method of literature selection and analysis**

The research question of what effects differences between the participants of a meeting can have on the performance of a meeting is examined with the help of eight studies. In advance to the literature search, a hypothesis was prepended: a diverse workgroup has more positive effects on the performance of the meeting than negative ones. At first, the way the studies were compiled is described and after that, the chosen sources are displayed and characterized.

##

## **3.1 Structured literature selection**

To compile the sources for this paper only online libraries licensed by the University of Hamburg were used, besides google scholar. The online libraries were Katalogplus and Web of Science Core Collection. In the first step, the time when the literature was published was limited to the last 5 years, if possible. The goal was to get the most up to date articles and studies. The most used keywords were “meeting science”, “meeting”, “diversity”, “differences”, “performance” and “cultural differences” in combination. To get a more in-depth search, more words were integrated into the search, e.g. “cross-culture”. The search request was made by using wildcards, such as an asterisk (e.g. divers\*). This is used at the end of a root word so that the database will look for all possible endings for that root. Boolean Operators (e.g. AND / OR) were used as a conjunction to combine or exclude keywords in the search. Those are used to get a more focused and productive result. When possible, the search was narrowed down by just searching in the fields for “title”, “topic” or “abstract”. Once a search resulted in more than 1000 articles and studies, the search was defined even more by using filters and more specific keywords. The online library Web of Science Core Collection allowed to filter the result by “highly cited in Field” and by “Hot Papers in Field”, this made it easier to find the better studies.

When searching just meeting science in Katalogplus, almost 6.000 results came up. To define the search, the timespan of the publication year was set to 2000 till today, the language was set to English and because the source needed to be available online, only e-books were listed. This brought the number of results down to roughly 1500. But. Since this was still too many, more keywords were implemented (e.g. AND divers\*).

## **3.2 Sample of the literature analysis**

While looking for sources a problem occurred, that was not strung to one database. For the chosen topic diversity in meetings, almost no good sources were found. This was no surprise since this field is mostly unexplored. The most used source for this paper is the Cambridge Handbook of meeting science, which can be found by looking up meeting science on katalogplus. This made the literature search easier since many studies were summarized in one source and allowed to get a lot of information from one paper. While searching for other sources, different chapters from the handbook came up, especially when searching with google scholar.

The next step will be organizing and describing the studies in a table to get a better overview of the content and purpose of the studies. They are summarized by source, research object, variables, sample and conclusion (table 1).

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Source** | **Research object** | **Variables** | **Sample** | **Results** |
| Köhler, T. & Gölz, M. (2015)  | Are there cultural differences in meeting expectations and execution? | * Purpose
* content
* Roles
* Structure
* Time management
 | Different Studies from the last 20 years (1993-2014) are summarized. | Obvious cultural differences regarding meeting expectations and norms along the five dimensions by Köhler et al. (2012)  |
| Straube, J. & Kauffeld, S. (2020)  | What influence do faultlines have on the communication in meetings?  | * Demographic faultlines
* Functional or knowledge-based faultlines.
* Subgroup formation
 | Existing researches are summarized and combined with a measuring tool to give a new base for future researches.  | Strong faultlines can ensure subgroup formation. FCI can be used and adapted in future research.  |
| Odermatt, I.; König, C.J.; Kleinmann, M. (2015)  | What options do managers have to make the meeting more effectively? | * Necessity of the meeting
* Planning
* Goal setting
* communication
* clear feedback
 | Reviewing existing literature and research on meeting preparation and design characteristics, from the year 1964 to 2014. | Several design characteristics warrant particular attention when preparing a meeting. There are several areas where additional research is necessary. |
| Lehmann- Willenbrock, N.; Gerpott, F. (2015) | What influence does diversity have on the performance of a meeting?  |  Differences in* gender
* age
* cultural background
* ethnical background
* functional background
 | Existing studies and researches are summarized, and a conceptual model is used to explore the role of diversity as an input factor for meeting interactions and outcomes. | Diversity can have positive and negative effects on meeting processes and outcome. The conceptual model implies a call to further integrate diversity. |
| Lehmann- Willenbrock, N.; Rogelberg, S.G.; Allen, J.A.; Kello, J.E. (2018) | What constitutes a good meeting and which factors influence it? | * Pre- meeting factors (input)
* Within- meeting factors (processes)
* Post- meeting factors (outputs)
 | Statistics and sample studies summarized into a rather short article. | Organizational leaders need to bring resources to the problem of ineffective meetings.  |

Table 1: studies on diversity and performance in meetings

# **4. How differences make a difference**

Meetings are not only vital for communication and coordinating tasks (e.g., Rogelberg, Allen, Shanock, Scott, & Shuffler, 2010; Tracy & Dimock, 2004), they are also strongly shaped and influenced by the meeting participants interactions and their communication with each other (e.g Men, Fong, Luo, Zhong, & Huo, 2017; Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009).

The expectations on how meetings should be differs depending on the country and culture. Prior research have shown, that meeting participants from different cultural backgrounds can have different expectations and norms, when it comes to communication, working in teams and the organization und coordination of a meeting (e.g., Fiske, 1992; Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2002; Hofstede, 1991; Ko ̈hler, 2009). Studies have also shown, that effective communication and information sharing tends to be more difficult in diverse teams, than in more homogeneous groups (e.g Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). In diverse teams, it is important to share information and have a effective communication due to the different perspectives and knowledge (e.g Men, Fong, Luo, Zhong, & Huo, 2017; Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009).

## **4.1 Influencing factors**

Most studies dealing with the effects of cultural differences on meetings are not exploring differences in expectations and norms that people have when it comes to meetings (Köhler & Gölz, 2015). Those studies and papers do not include whether different expectations about the purpose of a meeting exist across cultures, or if there are different cultural norms about the duration of a meeting and the role distribution (Köhler & gölz, 2015).

Köhler et al. (2012) did a study with participants from different countries (The US, Germany, the UK and Japan) to examine if for example the purpose or the content of a meeting differs between the countries (Köhler & Gölz, 2015). It was found in their study, that for example, Germans do have different expectation regarding the purpose of a meeting in comparison to the Americans. Meetings in the US are expected to solve problems, exchange information and ideas, set a direction and are overall very outcome and goal oriented (e.g. Köhler et al., 2012). Miller (1994) stated, that American meetings are often used to change opinions and conviction.

When looking at Meetings in other countries, it is visible that purpose and expectations do differ across cultures. For Example, both German and Japanese use meetings mainly for consensus building (Köhler et al., 2012). While Americans use meetings mainly for solving problems, Germans lean more towards making decisions. While Germans and Americans do their information and idea exchange in the meeting itself, Japanese do these tasks in a so called Premeeting[[5]](#footnote-5) (Köhler et al., 2012).

But not only the purpose varies from country to country. German meetings are characterized by long and in – depth discussions on problem solving (e.g., Friday, 1989; Hedderich, 1999) and a meeting structured and driven by an agenda with no changes to it (Depper- mann et al., 2010; Meyer, 1993) and open discussions between meeting participants (Hedderich,1999). Meanwhile meetings in Japan are divided into a premeeting and the actual meeting, with premeetings being more informal (Miller, 1994). There is a string hierarchy in Japanese meetings, the supervisors are not challenged openly during the formal meetings (Meyer, 1993).

These findings show, that meetings expectations and norms systematically and consistently differ across different countries. Those different views on how a meeting should be can influence on how meeting participants from different countries and cultures work together (Köhler & Gölz, 2015).

## **4.2 Faultlines in meetings**

But not only expectations and norms have an influence on the performance of a meeting. Team members tend to be more open to communicate with similar team members, they would rather share information with people if they see or sense similarities (e.g., Harrison, Price, Gavin &Florey, 2002). There is a saying in Germany: ‘Gleich und gleich gesellt sich gerne’, which basically means ‘people of the same kind stick together’. When team members align in homogeneous subgroups, they meet other team members, that share a similar background, way of thinking and view. The factors why people are from the same kind and tend to divide themselves into subgroups are called faultlines.

Diversity Faultlines are hypothetical dividing lines that split a group of people into more or less homogeneous supgroups (Lau & Murnighan, 1998; Meyer & Glenz, 2013). They describe to what extent a group is divided into subgroups based on their different attributes (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020). Faultlines are used to as a multidimensional measure of team diversity and instead of observing just one dimension of diversity, “Faultlines consider differences on multiple attributes simultaneously” (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020: 165).

A distinction is made between two different types of Faultlines. Scholars typically differentiate between demographic Faultlines and functional or knowledge – based Faultlines (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020).

Demographic Faultlines are characterized by demographic attributes, such as age, gender or the cultural background. (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020). They are usually highly visible, because of that meeting participants rely on these attributes to detect similarities to the other participants and try to derive implications on how the other team members might think or behave (e.g., Fiske, 2000). The demographic Faultlines are often associated with negative stereotype and refer to someone’s identity (Pelled, Eisenhardt & Xin, 1999). If more than one similar feature is present in a group, it can lead to a categorization into an ‘us’ and ‘them’, that is stronger than in a group where just a single attribute is similar (Meyer, Shemla & Schermuly, 2011). To get a better understanding of how demographic Faultlines work, Straube and Kauffeld (2020) give an example in their paperwork: a team of four is divided into two female members and two male members. Two of them are 25 years old and the other two are 50 years old. It is possible that Faultlines divide these four members into two subgroups, considering the gender. But if the women are the two older members, the team’s Faultline is strong because two identical subgroups have been formed, considering not just the gender but the age (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020).

Functional or knowledge – based Faultlines refer to the alignment of functional attributes, such as tenure, functional background or education (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020). These types of attributes are often referred to in researches as increasing the team performance or creativity because teams with members from different functional backgrounds share a larger pool of information and knowledge (Joshi & Roh, 2009).

Looking at the well – established social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), people tend to like and prefer the so called ingroup members over outgroup members. Ingroup members are the ones that are in the same subgroup, outgroup members belong to another subgroup, even though all of the members originally belonged to one bigger group. This preference is because individuals perceive ingroup members as more similar to themselves, outgroup members seem to be more different (Byrne, 1971).

# **5. Impact on meetings**

The forming of subgroups and the categorization into an ‘us’ and ‘them’ can impair the team’s functioning (Meyer, Shemla & Schermuly, 2011) and has been found to be detrimental for team performance (van Knippenberg, De Dreu & Homan, 2004). Negative stereotyping and the alignment of several attributes reinforce this effect even more (Lau & Murningham, 1998, 2005). Team members are more likely to interact with other members from their subgroup in a positive and productive manner though interactions with members from another subgroup is less likely and, if present, more prone to misunderstandings or conflicts (Vora & Markóczy, 2012).

An example on how the subdivision in different subgroups can affect the teamwork: team members with different backgrounds, functional as well as cultural, might have different ideas on how to solve a problem. One subgroup might share the strategy of gathering information about the problem before trying to find a solution, while the other subgroup likes to brainstorm on solutions before discussing the problem in – depth. Members of a subgroup might see that their fellow teammates share their strategy, find support and might not feel the need to discuss it with the whole team. Resulting from this, a shared understanding is only present in the subgroup, but not within the whole team (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020). This way, important information and aspects might not be discussed, and decisions might be based on incomplete or misunderstood information (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020). When a strong Faultline is present it is difficult for groups to reach a common understanding (Carton & Cummings, 2012), because of that, the meeting might be more ineffective. Research has shown, that negative effects can occur when the communicational structure in a meeting is highly centralized, meaning the communication is concentrated on a single individual (Sauer & Kauffeld, 2013).

On the other hand, if team members elaborate on information thoroughly, the positive effects of diversity, which are grounded in the different perspective and broader knowledge provided by, for example, the different backgrounds and education, can unfold (Van Knippenberg, Dawson, West & Homan, 2011). To conduct successful meetings, all team or group members need a shared understanding on how problems should be solved. It is crucial for the success of a meeting, that a common goal and a shared strategy to attain this goal exists (Kauffeld & Lehmann- Willenbrock, 2012; Somech, Desivilva & Lidogoster, 2009). Summarized, it is important to have a balanced communication between all team members, because this has shown to have a positive impact on the team productivity (Reagans & Zuckerman, 2001; Sauer & Kauffeld, 2013).

# **6. Preventing Faultlines and benefiting from diversity**

A better understanding of cultural differences and Faultlines can prevent managers “from falling into cultural traps” (Köhler & Gölz, 2015: 142). Managers should take all aspects of cultural differences into account when trying to understand how meetings are done in different countries (Köhler & Gölz, 2015). Understanding the different meeting norms, depending on the country, and the expectations every team member has is crucial and can help enable successful meetings (Köhler & Gölz, 2015). To get a productive meeting and a better outcome, when having teams that involve more than one culture, it is important to make the meeting expectations explicit at the start of their collaboration (Köhler & Gölz, 2015). This way, everyone is one the same page and misunderstandings should be less likely.

The same goes for dealing with Faultlines and subgroups. The meeting leader or manager should actively focus on the communication between the subgroups, so no communication failures can occur (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020). They should foster interactions, especially if the subgroup members come from different functional or cultural backgrounds (Men et al. 2017). Most importantly, meeting leaders need to be aware of the possible risk of subgroups emerging, ad that intersubgroup communication can be challenging for the team (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020). Meeting leaders can for example establish pre-determined connections between members of different groups (Rico, Sánchez-Manzanares, Antino & Lau, 2012), that way they could prevent the building of subgroups in the first place and prevent potential threats to the team effectiveness (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020). They can also highlight the importance of different perspectives at the start of a meeting to positively impact the members attitude toward diversity (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020). Research has shown, that network density and network homogeneity can help foster the team productivity (Reagans. & Zuckermann, 2001), as well as friendship ties between the subgroups (Ren, Gray & Harrison, 2015). Friendships between members from different subgroups can bridge the negative effects of Faultlines on the team productivity and overall performance (Ren, Gray & Harrison, 2015).

If attention is paid to the points mentioned above, teams can benefit from diversity, for example they would benefit from the larger pool of knowledge and ideas and different opinions can often lead to better discussions (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020).

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# **7. Conclusion**

Regarding the research question the results show, that diversity in meetings always has an impact on the performance. But it depends on how the differences between the team members are handled whether the impact is positive or negative. When the characteristics of diversity are seen as positive and relevant for the meeting, they might improve the meeting outcome (Gerpott & Lehman- Willenbrock, 2015). However, if diversity is seen in a negative way, it can affect an increase of dysfunctional interactions and a lower functioning of the team (Pelled et al., 1999).

It is overall important to enable communication and try to bridge the negative effects of faultlines (Ren, Gray & Harrison, 2015). It can also be helpful to set norms and expectations for the meeting outcome beforehand to make sure eversone If every member is educated about the risks of faultlines it can be possible to avoid subgroup formation (Straube & Kauffeld, 2020) and make us of the positive effects diversity can have.

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# **Eigenständigkeitserklärung**

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Bargteheide, 28.06.2020

Unterschrift

1. Meeting types explained at 2.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Diversity explained at 2.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *MEETING | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary*. (n.d.). Retrieved 15 January 2020, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/meeting [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *PERFORMANCE | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary*. (n.d.). Retrieved 19 January 2020, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/performance> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. a gathering in the run up to an official meeting in which details of the official meeting are discussed (*PRE-MEETING (noun) definition and synonyms | Macmillan Dictionary*. (n.d.). Retrieved 28 June 2020, from https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/pre-meeting) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)