Exploring absenteeism in university meetings: lessons from School B at a public university in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the implications of growing trends of absenteeism in meetings with reference to a selected School (School B) at one of the public university in Zambia. The objectives of the study were to examine the attendance levels of meetings in the selected School of the public university, describe the possible reasons for members not attending meetings in the School, analyse the implications of absenteeism to meetings and to examine strategies of handling virtual and physical meetings in order to reduce absenteeism in the selected School and the university. This qualitative study used phenomenological research design in order for the researchers to interact with different participants and explore their common experiences on the issue at hand. Data were gathered from documents and unstructured interviews held with 22 participants drawn from the Dean's office, Departments, lecturers and Professors. Guided by 'Five theoretical lenses for conceptualizing the role of meetings in organizational life' theory which focused on how organisations could make meetings effective and achieve their objectives, the study revealed that there was no policy at the univeristy regarding measures to be taken against those who missed meetings without apology and that after the meeting, minutes were rarely shared with members until the next meeting. The study has provided valuable insights and recommendations for the institution's leaders, and other leaders in Zambia and beyond, to come up with policies and guidelines that might foster the culture of punctuality and efficiency at meeting attendance.

Keywords: Implication, absenteeism, growing trends, meeting attendance, virtual meetings, organizational productivity, phenomenological research design for broader discoverability

INTRODUCTION

Meetings are like cocktail parties in the sense that no one wants to go but we get really offended if we are not invited. Meetings are the most common ways of communicating in the workplaces. The issue of members not attending meetings is a common problem faced by organisations across various industries. Punctuality and timeliness are crucial factors that contribute to the smooth functioning of meetings, effective decision-making, and overall organisational success. In some cases, despite the clear scheduling and

importance of these meetings, many individuals consistently arrive late or do not even attend. In most organisational settings, wasting time is generally deemed counterproductive and unacceptable. Widely used concepts such as just-in-time production, lean manufacturing, continuous improvement processes, and Kaizen are aimed at streamlining the workflow, increasing efficiency and productivity, and saving time (Imai, 2012; Liker and Franz, 2011; Marks and Mirvis, 2011). However, in the case of meetings, wasted time seems to be an accepted norm, especially when it comes to meeting absenteeism (Rogelberg et al., 2014). Absenteeism to meetings appears common and rarely sanctioned in organisational settings. Yet, despite the growing scientific literature on workplace meetings and their effects on employee attitudes, behaviours, and organisational outcomes (Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012; Silwamba and Daka, 2021; Rogelberg, Leach, Warr and Burnfield, 2006), no much attention has been put on absenteeism in meetings, despite having a number of detrimental effects on individual attendees as well as the organisational function. Work meetings remain a commonplace organizational communication activity. Rogelberg, et al (2006) asserted that meetings have been analyzed as settings for the exploration of some organisational decisions and shape the life sphere of the organisation. They further asserted that meetings also shape the attitudes and perceptions about organisations and the individuals who facilitate and participate in them, and that through meetings both practical and theoretical assumptions that position meetings as generative activities are constituted and sustained. Meetings also shape individual and organisational outcomes. Work meetings remain an enduring and frequently occurring activity in organisational life. Unfortunately, in spite of their prevalence and importance, many members of staff miss meetings. Consequently, the practical relevance and related frustrations of work meetings have received far more attention than theoretical questions about what meetings are and how

they fit into larger organisational processes and outcomes (Rogelberg, et al, 2006), and theory development regarding the role of meetings in organisational life has been particularly sparse.

It is worth noting that meetings are crucial for effective communication, collaboration, and decision-making within organisations. When members do not attend meetings it can hinder collaboration. Understanding the factors contributing to absenteeism attendance can help organisations develop strategies to ensure that meetings are effective. Absenteeism to meetings by some members can lead to frustration among team members who attend. This can contribute to a negative work environment and decrease employee morale and engagement. Overall, the research study on absenteeism to meetings provides insights into a common workplace issue that can have both individual and organisational implications. By understanding the reasons for absenteeism its consequences, organisations can develop strategies to improve productivity and foster a positive work environment.

Statement of the Problem

Experience has shown that there has been persistence absenteeism and late attendance to meetings within organisations including the School B of the University. Despite the importance of meetings, punctuality and the clear scheduling of meetings, a significant number of staff consistently arrive late causing disruptions. This problem might adversely affect organisational productivity, decision making and overall organisational efficiency.

The root causes for late attendance in meetings and absenteeism may vary, including lack of awareness of meeting schedules, poor time management, conflicting priorities, delays in coordinating logistics, or simply a lack of accountability. These recurring instances of tardiness not only undermine the time and effort invested in organising the meetings but also impact the

ability to achieve desired outcomes with the allocated timeframe.

Addressing this problem is crucial to foster a culture of punctuality, accountability, and respect within organisations. By understanding the reasons behind this behaviour, institutions could implement measures to encourage punctuality, reduce absenteeism thereby optimize time management and improve the overall meeting attendance. This study explored the underlying causes of absenteeism and late coming and came up with effective solutions to reduce or eliminate both absenteeism and late attendance to meetings thereby maximizing productivity, improving collaboration and promoting a positive work environment

Purpose of the study
This study explored the implications of growing trends of absenteeism in meetings with reference to School B at one of the public university in Zambia.

Objectives
i)   Examine the attendance levels of meetings in the School B of the university.
ii) Investigate the possible reasons of not attend meetings in School B of the university.
iii) Analyse the implications of absenteeism to meetings in School B of the university.
iv) Explore strategies of handling of virtual and physical meetings in order to reduce absenteeism in the selected School.

Significance of the study
By conducting this research, we aimed to provide valuable insights and data-driven recommendations to our organisation's leaders, enabling them to establish policies, guidelines, and mechanisms that might foster a culture of punctuality and enhance the efficiency of meetings. Ultimately, our goal was to optimize resources, improve meeting outcomes, and create a more productive and cohesive work environment. Additionally, the study might impact on team dynamics and overall job satisfaction.

Theoretical framework
This study was informed by Allen, Lehmann-Willenbrock & Sands (2016) 'Five theoretical lenses for conceptualizing the role of meetings in organisational life' which focuses on how organisations can make meetings effective and achieve their objectives. In this study, for a person not to miss the meeting, he/she must believe the importance of the meetings. A person must have in mind that meetings represent opportunities to realize goals. These goals can fall in three categories: personal, relational, and collective. In this study, chairpersons of meetings should align behaviours in team meetings and express these behaviours in alignment with the meeting setting whether virtual or face-to-face. It should be stated that during meetings, the participants' contributions or decision to attend is also influenced by their meeting mindsets, the meeting setting, and prior experiences with their chairperson. The match/mismatch mindset combinations of chairperson–attendees in meeting affect their behaviour in a meeting (Allen et al, 2016). In some cases, you can be in a meeting and realize that your idea of how the meeting conversation should be approached did not align with the chairperson's understanding. This is a common experience in meetings between managers and their employees. According to Allen et al (2016), the interplay between chairpersons' leadership claiming behaviour and their participants' contributions shapes the decision as to whether someone attends the meeting or not. This is because this relation impact the meaning of meetings. While we understand much about the importance of meetings, we know less about what motivates attendees to communicate in certain ways in meetings. People's understanding of meetings can be driven by one of three purposes. These are to: strategically position and promote themselves (which reflects a personal meeting mindset),

shape collaborations and to ensure reciprocation (which reflects a relational meeting mindset), or
strengthen the team identity and increase the willingness to go the extra mile for the team (which reflects a collective meeting mindset) (Allen, et al, 2016).

If meetings are viewed positively, then all staff may attend and contribute to the effective operation of an organisation. This study therefore, explored the growing meeting absenteeism trends and its implication on the organisation. The study aimed at suggesting best practices in handling meetings in order to promote high attendance of meetings by staff.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of meetings

Meetings are an easy mark for identifying an active organisation in the community and nation at large. According to Tracy and Dimock (2003), meetings are the major ways of communication that organizations use to implement their goals, make adjustment, demonstrate power, and agree on new ideas. In other terms, meetings provide an essential focal point for all members of a functional entity. It is therefore imperative that members attend all meetings in order to be up-to-date of organisational direction. It has been empasised that no two meetings are alike, each one is unique and worth attending (Cohen, Rogelberg, Allen and Luong, 2011).

While there is endless debate on the ideal design of meetings, duration of meetings and frequency of meetings administrators can call for in an organisation, scholars (Rogelberg, 2010; Lungu and Daka, 2022) agree that meetings keep the organisation going. Rogelberg (2010) submits that meetings are a central part of the work environment that can affect many different aspects of one's job, such as job satisfaction. As added by Chiwoya and Daka (2022) who also found job satisfaction as a product of meetings, periodic meetings extend to employees an opportunity to air their grievances to management. So meetings are a motivation factor to the employees. If

meetings are motivation factors for employees, Chizyuka and Daka (2021) further noted that meetings serve as a breathing valve in an organisation. They observed that through meetings members of the organisation have an opportunity to air their grievances and that this promoted amicable ways of resolving misconstructions without tempering with service delivery.

Generally, if job satisfaction exists, productivity and efficiency follow naturally. This view is well exemplified by Chen (2011) who found that there were positive relationships between job satisfaction and job performance. Musisi (2010) investigated the role of staff meetings on teachers' situation in secondary schools in Butambala District, Uganda. He focused on the role played by meetings on improvement of the level organization of teachers, teachers' regularity and remuneration of teachers. He found that staff meetings played a great role in teachers' level of organisation, checking teachers' regularity and improving teachers' remuneration. Meetings in general motivate members of organisations to keep working for the system. From this study, findings show that employees can be motivated to attend meetings if meetings are attached with benefits.

Reasons for absconding Meetings

Literature suggests that some people do not like meetings, and that they resort to abscond meetings for varying reasons. For example, Mafa (2016) who looked at 'Perceptions of Teachers towards Staff Meetings' observed that seven in ten members of staff complained about the number and duration of most meetings. From this study, it is clear that number of meetings should not be too many and the the duration should be not be too long. Major findings were that teachers disliked staff meetings due to school heads' management styles especially on planning and conducting of meetings. In addition, Mafa's (2016) study reported that teachers absconded meetings because they felt that in most cases time spent in meetings did not

translate into improved performance on the part of pupils.

Resource conservationists (Hobfoll, 1989; Diener and Fujita, 1995) submitted that workers generally shunned meetings as they considered them a threat to time resource. In meetings, people can experience a threat of loss of resources through meetings that might run long, or indeed an actual loss of resources due to time spent in meetings. Hobfoll (1989) described resources as objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued in their own right or that are valued because they act as means to the achievement or protection of valued resources. However, the loss of this specific resource (time) may affect certain employees or organizations differently because how resources are ranked and valued is a reflection of the organizational culture (Hobfoll, 2001). In other words, meetings absorb an important finite resource of employees' and managers' time. When people are required to attend more and more meetings, they have less time to do other important aspects of their jobs, and may feel stressed to get their other work done on time. Elsayed-Elkhouly et al. (1997) found that 8 percent of respondents of their survey indicated that over 50 percent of time spent in meetings was unproductive. Five years later, 35 percent of managers in the same field reported meetings being a waste of time and unproductive. This study therefore endeavoured to come up with ways of making meeting more productive by reducing number of meetings and reducing the time spent in the meetings.

It is, however, important to state that literature cited above do not necessarily crusade for removal of meetings. The works are an eye opener to meeting leaders and managers. As advised by Cohen et al. (2011), meeting leaders can learn to effectively use meetings in a way that improves employee well-being and potentially enhance meeting effectiveness. As indicated in Nixon and Littlepage's (1992) findings, procedural characteristics of meetings are related to meeting effectiveness including open communication, focus on tasks and agenda integrity.

Virtual and physical meetings

To date, research has examined the capabilities and limitations of virtual meetings in comparison to physical designs. Gail (1995), one of the pioneer researchers on virtual meetings, noted that the use of technological applications such as video conferencing added value on the effectiveness of meetings. According to this study, the model did not only overcome the challenge of distance but also proved to be time saving, reduced expense and increased the level of understanding between members of the organization. Years later, Kalimaposo, Moono, Daka, Mulubale, Kaumba and Mphande (2023) findings supported this submission as they observed that digital technological devices such as tablets and android supported minutes presentation faster and more efficient.in addition, the study revealed that holding meetings virtually was paper-saving and saved cost and time of paperwork. This study also revealed similar recommendations on the advantages of virtual meetings.

Furthermore, Shirmohammadi et al. (2012) noted that virtual participation is a valuable addition for conference hosting, but informal social interactions were still missing and that further support was required. In the same vein, recent studies focused specifically on the challenges and outcomes of the increased use of videoconferencing systems due to forced work from home mandates during COVID-19. Applying Gibson's (1977) affordance theory perspective, Waizenegger et al. (2020) used interview data to identify the positive and negative effects of technology on team collaboration. Their results suggest that videoconferencing provided a social affordance or the opportunity to communicate with others and share ideas. They also noted that while virtual meetings were generally welcomed by individuals living alone who craved social contact, working parents complained more of Zoom fatigue and having too many meetings or perceiving meetings as

intrusive, with some noting increased role conflict due to the blurring of work-life (Waizenegger et al., 2020). This study also investigated on the fatigue of virtual meetings. Similarly, Sarfraz, Daka, Zubair and Sarfraz (2022) also used an affordance theory perspective to analyse Twitter tweets regarding the use of videoconferencing systems (for example, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom) during COVID-19. Their findings suggested five major affordances and five constraints of videoconferencing. The use of videoconferencing allowed users the opportunity to communicate with social groups, engage in shared social activities with family and friends, attend events, pursue hobbies, and consume non-recreational services such as webinars. Constraints included incompetence in setting up the videoconferencing system, fear of being on camera, Zoom fatigue, exposing one's private living space, and lacking security and Zoom bombing).

A study by Isaacs and Tang (1994) submitted that compared to physical meetings, virtual meetings tended to be more task-oriented and less social in virtual conferences than those in face-to-face meetings. This finding was shared by other studies, showing that virtual conferences were more formal, orderly, and polite than face-to-face meetings, having less conflict and showing a reduction of back-channelling and interruptions (Sarfraz, Daka, Zubair and Sarfraz (2022).

Studies above are supported by the findings of a more recent study 'Virtual Versus Face-to-Face meetings: A study regarding the Perceptions of the Romanian Managers during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic' conducted by Pinzaru and Stioca (2022). The scholars noted that virtual meetings had an impact on positive behavioural change of attendees. Their results showed that there was change in behaviour when using only virtual conferences tools, they became conscious of time and made use of it by following the agenda for almost all types of virtual meetings. They further confirmed that a hybrid solution was seen by most of the managers as being optimal by reducing time lost between face-to-face meetings. Their results also showed replacing face-to-face meetings with virtual meetings was not a remedy as direct interaction between individuals cannot be replaced with the use of virtual tools (Pinzaru and Stioca, 2022).

Karl eta al. (2022) also noted that while virtual meetings maximised the effectiveness of most meetings across disciplines as they were not hindered by distance and scarcity of stationery, constraints still abound. They noted that demands of virtual meetings such as multitasking during meetings negatively affected some in attendance as they could not give utmost attention to the proceedings. They recommended that as it was in the case of physical meetings, ground rules were needed when setting up such meetings. For example, time to join, procedure when commenting, screen sharing in addition to avoidance of activities unrelated to the topic of discussion (Odermatt et al., 2018). Literature equally suggests that if well set with good technological support, attendance in virtual meetings outnumber physical meetings. Virtual meetings make universal access possible hence covering larger audiences (Sarfraz, Daka, Zubair and Sarfraz, 2022).

Recommendations for Effective Meetings
Concerning effectiveness of the meeting, and how to successfully have it, literature (Drucker, 2004; Cohen et al., 2011; Hassan, 2018) suggests that it is one which addresses problems an organisation is wrestling with in addition to achieving goals. For example, Drucker (2004) noted that meetings could be a waste of time if none of the fundamental issues affecting an entity are addressed. He argued that a meeting for meeting's sake was unlikely to be productive. According to him, before a meeting is called for, it is important to think about whether there is any novel information or updates. This view agrees with Cohen et al., (2011) who argued that each meeting should be different from the other, meaning that new items should characterise each meeting. In other terms, meetings should not be traditional but rather transformational.

Hassan (2018) who looked at 'Influence of Meetings on Academic Staff Performance in an Islamic University in Uganda' noted that meetings had weak significant influence on improving staff regularity and moderate significant influence on improving staff teamwork. The study recommended that the administrators needed to regularly organise meetings focussed on addressing staff performance challenges for better results. For Salacuse (2007), an effective meeting should be centred on open communication, critical deliberation, and negotiations. Salacuse (2007) submitted that leaders were required to lead by negotiation; they needed to communicate effectively by appealing to the interests of the followers.

Additionally, the study by Vincent et al., (2015) stated some of the key factors that affected the effectiveness of meetings. These included organizational policies, unproductive meetings and contextual factors. With regard to organizational policy related to the meeting, it involves the expected number of members, quorums, agenda items, meeting procedures and methods used to make decisions. Conversely, Vincent et al (2015) study asserted that unproductive meetings were as a result of but not limited to reasons such as, agenda of the meeting not followed consistently, choice of inappropriate meeting place, unwelcome layout of the arrangement, unspecified meeting period and the lack of references. Contextual factors affecting effective meetings comprise family, community and national events, infrastructure, weather changes, economic situation and internal facilities (Vincent et al, 2015).

Advisory (2015) noted that while it was acceptable for an organization to have emergency and sudden meetings, effective meetings were those which occurred after a notice of the meeting. Such meetings prepared attendees psychologically as they equally received items and agenda of the meeting for premeditation. Furthermore, Amin (2015) who focused on meetings in learning institutions suggested that the success of staff meetings was contingent on what happened before, during and after the meeting. The scholars guided that the head of institution should define the purpose of the meeting before circulating a memo calling members for the meeting, and later develop an agenda to be shared with anticipated attendees. According to Amin (2015), such arrangements lead to full engagement of the staff during the meeting. During the meeting, it is necessary that the institution head manages the discussion and keeps it on track while at the end of the meeting follow-ups and task tracking should be undertaken. The aforementioned guidance is well summarised by Musisi (2010) findings in which he submitted that factors contributing to effective staff meetings underscore the fact that effective staff meetings did not just happen by accident, but rather by design (Musisi, 2010).

Managing meetings can also help motivate staff attend meetings. Before calling for the meeting, there is need for the organisers to ask themselves the purpose of the meeting or whether the purpose could be achieved through a memo (Nixon et al, 1992). This is because some meetings are unnecessary and waste people's time. In some cases members come out of the meeting wondering what the meeting was about. According to Nixon et al (1992), when inviting people for the meeting, it is important to invite those who have an item on the agenda, whose views are specifically needed to make a decision or those who will carry out an action. Avoid inviting people for the meeting just to form a quorum. The agenda of the meeting should be sent in advance for the attendees to prepare. Nixon et al (1992) further stated that the agenda should inform people of what the purpose of meeting, where it will take place, who will attend and how long it will take. It should also include the items to be discussed and who to present them. This might help the invited members to anticipate and prepare well for the meeting more effectively. All documents to be discussed must be sent to participants in advance. The organisers should avoid putting Any Other Business (AOB) as it encourages

people to not to let you know in advance what they want to discuss (Nixon et al, 1992).

According to Hassan (2018), it is important for the organisers to choose the venue that is free from distractions and easily accessible to participants. Meetings should not be held on Monday morning and Friday afternoon. On Monday morning people reflected on past weekend activities and also thought about what was coming up in hat week. Friday afternoon people are thinking about finishing up things getting home (Hassan, 2018). Musisi (2010) gave the following guidelines for effective meetings: During the meeting, start the meeting on time and do not wait for the people as they will always know you will wait for them; those with the habit of coming late won't bother being punctual in the future; when latecomers arrive, acknowledge their presence and continue; do not give updates as this encourages people to come late; always stick to the agenda and timings against it; keep control of the meeting by constantly asking the minute taker to summarise the agreed points and always end the meeting at a good note and thank everyone for their contribution.
In conclusion, make sure that after the meeting the chairperson should follow up action points. Send out minutes highlighting the actions that they agreed to do. This must be agreed in the meeting and must be kept by the secretariat.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design
The study was qualitative using phenomenological research design so as to explore the everyday experiences of members of staff in the selected School, to gain deeper insights into how they (staff) regarded absenteeism to meetings in the School. The social phenomenon in this study emerged from the chosen design characteristics adopted. This study utilised Allen et al's (2015) Five theoretical lens to help explore the persistent problem of absconding meetings in School B of the university. Using a phenomenological approach yielded descriptions that provided the basis for reflective analysis from the essence of the university workers' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In the conceptual phenomenon, the lived experiences of the workers were critical in understanding the problem of absenteeism to meetings.

In this study, a qualitative phenomenological approach was found appropriate because the researchers sought to tell the personal stories of the University's School B staff through one-on-one semi-structured interview sessions guided by a set of questions. It is appropriate to use qualitative research when a "problem or issue needs to be explored" (Creswell, 2007: 51). So we found the qualitative phenomenological approach appropriate, as the problem was one in which it "was important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of the phenomenon," (Creswell, 2007: 60). This design was further appropriate to this study for two additional reasons: firstly, phenomenology is concerned with the totality of the picture or its "wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essence of phenomenon or experience is achieved (Moustakas, 1994). Secondly, phenomenology design seeks to generate meanings and essences through reflection of conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts, judgments and understandings. Apart from interviews, data was also collected using observations and document and content analysis.

With regard to the sample, it consisted of 22 respondents. These included 4 respondents from the Dean's office, 4 Heads of Departments (HODs), 14 lecturers: 8 level III to I lecturers, 4 senior lecturers and 2 professors. Purposive sampling was used to select members of the Dean's office as these were key informants. All meetings from the School are called upon by the Dean's office. In addition, the departments also conduct meetings and are called upon by the HODs. That is why the HODs were also sampled in this study. They were the ones who called for

meetings and took minutes. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the other academic members of staff, Heads of department and lecturers at different levels. These were included in the sample because they were part of the key players in the running of the School. Though there was acceptable representation of participants in this study, it was possible that those who were not interviewed might have had important and different views about the subject matter of study.

Data was analysed using the themes that emerged from the data. Constituents of the lived experiences were coded until the researchers arrived at the central themes that formed the structure of the phenomena. This enabled the researchers to make sense of the phenomenon and understand the ways in which the essential themes would answer the study's research questions.

Ethical Considerations

According to the philosophy underlying qualitative research, reality is relative to meaning that people construct within social contexts, (Maxwell, 2002). Qualitative research is valid to the researcher and not necessarily to others due to the possibility of multiple realities. It is upon the reader to judge the extent of its credibility based on his/her on understanding of the study. Therefore, the inclusion of member checking into the findings, that is, gaining feedback on the data, interpretations and conclusions from the participants themselves, is one method of increasing credibility.

This being a qualitative study, the researchers interacted with the participants, thus entering their personal domains of values, weaknesses, individual disabilities to collect data. Silverman (2000) reminds researchers that they should always remember that while they are doing their research, they are in actual fact entering the private spaces of their participants. Therefore, in the current study, appropriate steps were taken to adhere to ethical guidelines in order to uphold participants' privacy, confidentiality, dignity, rights, and anonymity. In view of the forgoing

discussion, the following describes the ethical issues addressed in the conduct of the research:

i) Informed consent was adhered to by informing the participants of the purpose, nature, data collection methods, and extent of the research prior to commencement. Further, the researchers explained to them their typical roles; in line with this, the researchers obtained their informed consent through email or in writing.

ii) Harm and risk: The researchers guaranteed that no participants were put in a situation where they might be harmed as a result of their participation, physical or psychological as stated by Trochim (2000).

iii) Honesty and trust: Adhering strictly to all the ethical guidelines served as standards about the honesty and trustworthiness of the data collected and the accompanying data analysis.

iv) Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity: The researchers ensured that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was maintained through the removal of any identifying characteristics before widespread dissemination of the study results. The researchers made it clear that the participants' names would not be used for any other purposes, nor would information be shared that revealed their identity and the identity of the School they belonged to.

v) Voluntary participation: It was made clear to the participants that the research was only for academic purpose and their participation in it was absolutely voluntary. No one was forced to participate.

FINDINGS

All the data collected from interviews was merged into one script. Content analysis through data coding was used to analyse the data from the script by creating specific codes

that partly served as main themes addressing specific issues. The findings are presented following the research objectives of the study. These were: (i) Examine the attendance levels of meetings in the School B of the public university; (ii) Investigate the possible reasons of not attend meetings in School B of the university; iii) Analyse the implications of absenteeism to meetings in School B and iv) Explore strategies of handling of virtual and physical meetings in order to reduce absenteeism in the selected School.

These objectives have been stated as themes alongside with other data generated themes.

Attendance levels of the Meetings

Attendance levels was the first research objective which sought to establish the attendance levels of members to meetings in the selected School. When asked about the frequency of the meetings, one officer from the Dean's office said, 'Meetings are scheduled yearly according to the Central administration calendar', while most Heads of Departments (HODs) indicated that the schedules for these meetings depended on issues to be discussed. One of the HODs said the following:

If there are urgent issues to be discussed the meetings are called immediately or at short notice. Sometimes members of the Department or lecturers in the School may feel there are issues that require urgent attention and will then ask for a meeting to be held.

A lecturer I respondent stated that there were many meetings depending on the call. Some meetings were called by the school, others by other departments. This response was supported by one of the senior lecturers who added that meetings were many as some required senior lecturers like professional meetings and Human Resource Meetings.

When asked how long it took members to receive the notice for the meeting, there were different responses. Those from the Dean's office stated that they gave 5 to 7 days' notice for departments to prepare for meetings except for items that came from Central Administration which required urgent information. Lecturers unanimously agreed:

Most meetings are called on short notice and it becomes difficult to plan in such a case. You just see from the WhatsApp group a message from the Head of department in the morning that they will be a meeting at 10 hrs on the same day. In case you were not online it is difficult to know.

After following up this argument with the office of the Dean, one member emphasised, "Most meetings are scheduled at the beginning of the year but members do not check the schedule". The Dean's office emphasised that only meetings which sought information and came from Central Administration were called on short notice. After probing whether Central Administration could be advised to avoid such scenarios, a respondent from the Dean's office said, "It is hard to do so as in some cases they are also asked by higher authority like the Government or other stakeholders". On the effectiveness of such meetings, a member from the Dean's office was quick to mention that attendance and participation at such meetings was always below par but the office appreciated the members of staff who attended and contributed positively.

Possible Reasons of not Attend Meetings

Members were asked how often they attended meetings. 'On rare occasion do I miss meetings' was the common response. A lecture III respondent said, "When meetings are called on Monday morning or Friday afternoon I sometimes have challenges to attend". When asked why, he stated that for Monday, there was always a weekend hangover and for Fridays the mind was already set for resting on the weekend or preparing for weekend activities. A member from the Dean's office, was quick to state:

We rarely call for meetings on Mondays, especially in the morning or Fridays, especially in the afternoon. It is really under pressure that such meetings can be called for and when this is done, the members receive explanations about the urgency of the meeting.

One HOD said, "There should not be any excuse for someone to miss meetings whether it is on Monday or Friday. We are supposed to be at work from 8 hrs to 17 hrs from Monday to Friday". After asking the same HOD how effective meetings held on Mondays and Fridays were, he complained by saying, "Most of the times people do not come and if they do, their participation is very low". Respondents were further asked whether they had reasons for missing meetings. There were various reasons ranging from social commitments to personal reasons. A lecturer I respondent indicated that she sometimes weighed whether to attend the meeting or go to lecture, as lecturers were employed to teach and all meetings were called during the day. So if she had a lecture she went to teach. Another lecturer I said, "When I look at the agenda and see that I may not have an input I just stay in the office and do other things". Furthermore, a lecture II added, "some meetings are time consuming so I would rather go and make some few coins that waste my time in the meeting. Sometimes in the meeting the chair will be talking throughout even things not on the agenda are brought in by members".

Other responses by the lecturers were as follows:
-Most meetings are not timed such that when you go for the meeting you do not know when it will end. A short agenda can take you up to over lunch and those chairing do not even care about the members' other commitments
-There are times when meetings start late because a quorum must be formed and even when those who come late join, the chair will start going through what has been discussed already. In some cases meetings do not commence because the quorum is not formed. In such a case the secretariat is advised to call for the meeting again.

One Senior lecturer also added saying, "It is important that meetings are timed as to when they shall end. In other places, every agenda item is timed". When the HODs and the Dean's office were asked if meetings were timed, one of the HODs responded that it was

difficult as discussions could not be stopped. A member from the Dean's office also added:
We have not done that before where we state the end of the meeting. It is a good idea and worth exploring it. We only try during quarterly review meetings where each HOD is given stated duration though it is not followed. The researchers further probed the HODs and Dean's office whether members waited until the end of the meetings. One HOD said, "If meetings prolong, members start leaving and by the end of the meeting you may end up with less than half the quorum." A respondent from the Dean's office proposed that it would be better to time meetings in which the start and the ending time should be fixed. A Professor added that there were times that meetings clashed in the school. The Department called for the meeting which might clash with the Human Resource meeting or Postgraduate Examination meeting. As a professor he was supposed to chair or attend each meeting. In most cases he attended the School meeting and sent an apology to the HOD for missing the departmental meeting.

Implications of Absenteeism to Meetings
The study further explored the implications of absenteeism to meetings. Since 9 of the 22 members admitted that they did miss meetings, the question was 'what measures did the institution put in place to deter this habit?' One lecturer II after being asked if she was called after missing a meeting, said, "There is no such a thing here. Whether you send an apology or not, life goes on". Another lecturer said, "I have never been summoned by the Head or the Dean for missing a meeting. This is because I have not ever missed a meeting without tendering an apology to explain my absence at a meeting".
We further wanted to find out if the register was taken to which a member from the Dean's office said, "We do take a register in most meetings and attendees sign in the book but in some cases we overlook this". When asked what happened to those who did not send an apology but missed meetings, a member from the Dean's office bemoaned lack of a policy to follow up those who miss meetings and said, "There is no policy on that one. It can be good

to have something in place to deter such habits by some members who miss meetings at will."

Strategies of handling meetings in order to Reduce Absenteeism

The study also investigated measures that could improve attendance and participation for both virtual and physical meetings. The study started with finding out which of the two types of meetings were well attended. Both the Dean's office and HODs unanimously stated that virtual meetings had high attendance. When asked on active participation, HODs and respondents from the Dean's office agreed that in virtual meetings only a few members were active while others joined but would be quiet until the end of the meeting. A HOD said, 'When you call on them for comments, they do not respond'. A lecturer III respondent said, 'It is advantageous to attend meetings virtually but the challenge is participation due to poor internet connectivity'. A proposal by one of the HODs was that all staff should have computers in their offices connected to the institutional internet though in some cases due to power challenges even this measure had been a challenge. A member from the Dean's office emphasised the need for hybrid meetings saying, 'There is need to have both virtual and physical meetings depending on what the members want to achieve'. When asked what should be done to improve both attendance and participation to meetings, the study revealed a lot of issues. Some proposals ranged from how meetings were conducted to what happened after the meeting. The respondents proposed some strategies as follows:

Meetings should start on time, minutes must be circulated before meetings for members to read and correct and in meetings focus should be on action points. Then during the meeting, if one comes late the chair should not go through what was already discussed. (Lecturer I).

Schedules of planned meetings should be planned together with sessional dates to avoid clashes. We should avoid at all means to include any other business (AOB). All minutes must be circulated for actions before the next meeting. (Senior lecturer)

Respondents from the Dean's office gave the following comments:

We rely on the secretariat to share the minutes before the meeting. The secretariat should be encouraged to come up with action points.

Lecturers should be aware that it is their responsibility to attend and participate in meetings, whether virtual or physical, because the continued development and well-being of the institution they work for depends on their active involvement in its affairs.

Items on the agenda whose documents are not submitted on time, should not be discussed as the members mostly do not have time to go through them.

DISCUSSION

This study anchored on Allen et al's (2016) 'Five theoretical lenses for conceptualizing the role of meetings in organizational life'. The first objective therefore sought to examine the attendance levels of meetings in School B at UNZA. From the results, the study revealed that meetings and items for discussion were called for by the Dean's office and were held for different reasons. Some meetings were called for specific groups of people to deal with specific issues. These findings agreed with the study by Cohen et al., (2011) who proposed that meetings should be called for specific items and to specific people. Calling for people who might not contribute anything would be a share waste of time to the members. Additionally, the results of the study showed that meetings in School B were sometimes called at short notice by the Central administration to seek urgent information. Such meetings were rarely well attended and participation was rather poor. Following this revelation, Advisory (2015) noted that meetings which occurred after a short notice were not effective. Meetings that were effective prepared attendees psychologically by administrators sending the agenda of the meeting in advance for member premeditation. In the current study, it was discovered that schedules for meetings were

shared with members of staff but that they took no notice. The School administration should take note of Amin's (2015) views that the success of staff meetings was contingent on what happened before, during and after the meeting.

With regard to the second objective, it was established that lecturers in School B had different reasons for not attending meetings. Meetings which were held at the beginning and end of the week were usually shunned because the fatigue attached to holding meetings on Monday. The findings showed that it was the same for meetings held on Friday. These findings were similar to Advisory's (2015) findings who recommended that managers should avoid Mondays' and Fridays' meetings. On the contrary, lecturers should not have preferences for days when they might attend meetings because as employees, they should be ready to attend meetings on any working day. They should emulate what happens in the Small Christian Communities (SCC) of the Catholic Church in which members of the SCC have a scheduled day and time, usually over the weekend, for meeting attendance and no excuse is given (except for unforeseen circumstances) for not attending the meeting (Ziwa and Simuchimba, 2019).

Another reason for not attending meetings was that the meetings did not have specific time to end and took long because of prolonged discussions caused by meetings starting late due to delays in forming the quorum. It would be helpful to follow Hassan's (2018) proposal that members should confirm their availability a day before the meeting. Such actions helped in avoiding prolonging or cancelling meetings due to failure of forming a quorum. On the timing of meetings, Amin (2015) advised that all agendas should be timed so that presenters do not go beyond or discuss unnecessary things. This might help to reduce on the number of attendees who leave meetings before the end due to prolonged meetings. In addition, in cases where one person always take up the show in the meetings, the study proposed that the chair should be firm to advise such to regulate themselves or cut them off during the meetings. The study further revealed that meetings which clashed with other meetings compelled senior lecturers to decide to attend one meeting which they considered to be more important than the others. In agreement with these findings, Amin (2015) stated that senior lecturers should choose higher meetings than lower meetings it terms of where their contributions should be required more.

With regard to the implications of absenteeism to meetings, the results of the study showed that some members of School B missed meetings but no repercussions were given because there was no policy in the institution on this issue. It was revealed that HODs do not use the attendance register to assess the members at the end of the end as they fill in the performance appraisals. Mafa's (2016) study also proposed that administrators should have registers and follow up those who missed meetings without tendering an apology. The question is what should be done to such individuals. Studies by Drucker (2004) and Hassan (2018) proposed that during appraisals and awards this should be taken into consideration. Lecturers who miss meetings should not be given awards and that this should be included in the appraisal system tool.

Finally, the study explored strategies of handling virtual and physical meetings in order to reduce absenteeism. The results revealed that virtual meetings were favoured because there was more attendance, though participation was rather poor in these meetings. This was in agreement with Karl eta al. (2022) who noted that virtual meetings maximised the effectiveness of most meetings across disciplines as they were not hindered by distance. Amin (2015) also added in his report that more people attended virtual meetings as compared to physical meetings. Amin (2015) further proposed that some meetings required more physical than virtual, especially in times when an urgent decision had to be made on an issue and members were available. In the current study, hybrid

meetings were proposed to be useful. Those meetings which required change of policy direction or discussing results should be physical son that participation shall be high.

In order to improve on meeting attendance, the results showed that meetings should be planned and scheduled with the sessional dates, the agenda to be shared in advance, members to indicate their availability before the meeting, only items on the agenda should be discussed and lecturers to be aware that meeting attendance was part of the responsibilities they should be involved in. Most of the proposals above were in agreement with the views of scholars like Sarfraz, Daka, Zubair and Sarfraz (2022) who stated that for meetings to be effective, the managers should have the audience in mind about their wellbeing in terms of the duration of meetings. Though in this study it was revealed that some items come from Central Administration and Schools have no option apart from calling for an urgent meeting to respond to the requests requested. Salacuse (2007) also added that during the meeting the Chair should make sure that the meeting was centred on open communication, critical deliberation and negotiations. Cohen et al. (2011) advised members who contribute to the deliberations of the meetings to keep time and add to the debate on the floor rather than diverting from the discussion.

This study was informed by the five theoretical lenses for conceptualizing the role of meetings in organizational life which focuses on how organisations might make meetings be effective and achieve their objectives (Allen et al, 2015). It was established, form the various reviewed literature, that chairpersons of meetings should align behaviours in team meetings and express these behaviours in alignment with the meeting setting whether virtual or face-to-face, taking into consideration the point that the participants' decision to attend is influenced by their meeting mindsets, the meeting setting, and prior experiences with their chairperson. With this in mind, the study revealed that in School B, not all called up members attended meetings due to various reasons related to job commitments like lecturing and attending other institutional meetings to just absconding due to personal commitments and frustrations about how meetings were conducted. The study further revealed that there was no policy at the public University regarding measures to be taken to those who missed meetings without apology.

CONCLUSION

The study unearthed that after the meeting, minutes were rarely shared with members until the next meeting and that this prolonged the meetings. The study emphasised that action points should always be assigned to relevant staff so that in the next meeting reports should be given. It has been concluded from the study that virtual meetings were well attended as compared with physical ones though in terms of participation, there was more participation in physical meetings than in virtual meetings. With reference to the results, the study recommended that having many meetings in the same week should be avoided, agenda items should be sent to members in advance to allow the members to go through them, meetings should not be held on Mondays and Fridays, the items on the agenda whose documents were not shared should not be discussed during the meeting, measures to reprimand those who miss meetings without apology should be formulated to encourage all members to attend, meetings should be timed when to end in order to avoid unnecessary prolonging of meetings and, finally, hybrid of meetings involving both physical and virtual should be encouraged..

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