

How the Office Can Boost Energy with Benjamin Laker (Transcript)



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Chris Congdon: Do you hate meetings? Those 30 or 60 minute blocks of time that chew up your day can be frustrating. But sometimes those meetings make a valuable impact on your work. So today we're asking: When do meetings do more harm than good?

Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon alongside our producer, Rebecca Charbausk.

Rebecca Charbausk: Hi Chris.

CC: Rebecca, tell us about our guest today.

RC: Benjamin Laker is a Professor of Leadership at Henley Business School. He studies the societal impact of leadership and is the author of Too Proud to Lead and Closing the Service Gap. We wanted to talk to Benjamin about his research on meetings and his ideas about reframing the way we use the workplace.

CC: He has also studied the four-day work week and we got a chance to ask him if he thinks we're headed in that direction as a society.

RC: We want to remind our audience – If you like this podcast, we would appreciate it if you rate and review it which helps others find it.

CC: Benjamin joins us from the UK. Thank you for joining us at Work Better today Benjamin.

Benjamin Laker: Thanks for having me.

CC: Benjamin, so much of your work is focused on leadership and yet when I've looked at the work that you've done, it feels like the underlying issue really is kind of grounded in employee well-being and inclusion and topics like work life balance. Is that a fair assessment of what's been a big motivator for you?

BL: Yes I believe it is and I've heard people coin it as a study on the workplace or indeed the future of the workplace and believe me it never started out as clean cut as that. I just started to involve myself in research studies that I found particularly interesting.

CC: You've spent a lot of time thinking about how people are spending their time at work in particular around meetings. When I was doing a little background research I started thinking about years ago when I was going through a leadership training program and I was shown a film that starred John Cleese that was called "Meetings. Bloody Meetings." I actually went and looked it up because it was old when I saw it and the film was made in the 70s and so people have been complaining about meetings for a really long time. I'm sure they were complaining before his film ever came out and so I'm just curious. What is it that's different now about meetings that caused you to want to study them or to understand them more deeply?

BL: Well, I didn't realize how much I personally dislike meetings until the pandemic and I know that's a terrible admission for a researcher because it would definitely suggest bias but it's true and I don't mind admitting that for me – I think the pandemic was an escalation of a number of things and specifically in relation to meetings – what I felt and what I personally experienced was an increase, an acceleration, of a littering of the calendar with activities. They may have had the title of a meeting because typically if you're using Outlook or other types of devices, these things will be classified as a meeting but once within the meeting it's becoming increasingly apparent this is not a meeting. This is definitely not that. This is something for a different purpose and typically the beneficiary of that meeting is the person who's organized it. So I started to think I'm stuck inside an engagement that doesn't really have purpose. I think what happened was the huge shift into remote work and suddenly exposed the situation for what it was and naturally it exacerbated the situation. This led me to start asking some deeper questions about whether there is an increase in the volume of meetings. What's causing this and I started to theorize that this might be a psychological response from people because for many inadvertently and subconsciously they didn't realize how much they relied on human face-to-face connection. That cannot be easily replicated with technology and so what started to happen certainly in my world that I saw and felt was persons who seemingly struggled with this were the ones who were creating more meetings for everybody else because they were using it as a way to fill the void.

CC: There's a lot of work that people do – I don't know whether it counts as a meeting so I'd love to hear your perspective on what you think a meeting is, per se, but there's a lot of times that we work together with colleagues that again I might be sitting in the office and somebody will come up to me and we'll have a chat about something we're working on. It could end up turning into a half an hour conversation sometimes, but that's a form of collaboration in the form of co-creation that our work requires us to do. So, I want to understand more deeply how you think differently about what is a meeting and what's not.

BL: If you start with the purpose, people understand why they are in the room and they understand why other colleagues have been invited into that room so they understand the contribution that themselves and others can make. There's nothing worse than being invited to a meeting where you don't know A.) why you are here or B.) you don't know why someone else is here. You don't know what the contribution is. It has to have a purpose. Then the second thing that we learned was it has to have a minimum and a maximum number of persons. Now there's no hard and fast rule for everybody because organizations are different but my personal preference is a maximum of 6 ideally. If you have boards then clearly there's a regulatory reason why you have increased that number and that will therefore be customized and personalized to an organization. But typically an organization has to make a choice. How many people do we want the maximum to be within meetings held within our organization? Someone said to me recently, "But what about a town hall when our Chief exec speaks to everybody?" My response then was, are you freely able to talk during that event? Or if you are in person, do you have a microphone and if you are on Zoom or equivalent are you muted? So do you have the option of unmuting yourself at any point and speaking and more often than not, the response is no I can't do that." So okay, can you chat anything in the chat or is that also restricted? They say well yes, it's somewhat restricted. So, yeah, it's not a meeting. That's a communication gathering exercise. That's a town hall. That's not a meeting.

CC: You said earlier that some organizations are trying to eliminate meetings altogether. I certainly hear a lot of conversation about trying to reduce the number of meetings and to try to allow people to have more time where they can do their focused work within their workday. But can we just eliminate meetings – is that possible?

BL: Some organizations have – and within our research we studied organizations who had reduced the number of meetings across various parameters – some more than others. I believe there's an organization who has eradicated meetings entirely. We studied to various degrees organizations that have taken out 20%, maybe 40%, 60%, 80%, or 100%. So we've looked at them all and for us the most interesting thing was that to a certain point there is a law of diminishing returns. So yes, we all benefit if we have fewer meetings but that's not a hard and fast rule for all meetings. What we found typically is if you eradicate them entirely, there's a danger that you can eradicate too much connectivity which we know is true because if you remember that to the pandemic and as we discussed earlier people have a need for connection and so I don't think it's possible nor do I think it is worthy to destroy all meetings. But I think what you find is if you have blocks of time during a week where we have either days or mornings or afternoons depending on how you structure it – of what I would call no meeting days – because I think it works better if you have a full day. But some people have asked me well does it have to be a day or can it be equivalent to a number of hours? I think that's fine. I think the point being is, it's a fight back against being on call continuously 24/7. Definitely if you have at least two days a week during which time you do not have to be involved with a meeting as we know it to be. Productivity increases. Wellbeing increases. Satisfaction increases. The impact is huge.

CC: Isn't that about people feeling a sense of control over their days and feeling like some agency in their work – is that what's going on there? You think why are people pushing back?

BL: I think it's exactly what's going on. Yes, I think it is exactly that and it was interesting. I had a conversation yesterday on this same subject about why people seemingly want a four day work week. And I think deep down I can't speak for everybody but my theory is people don't want a four day work week per se what it is a cry for is more agency and autonomy over their life and I think this is where the four day work week, at an abstract level, is interesting but actually I think giving people more power and autonomy to have flexibility over their work such as when and where to work from and when and where to meet people and engage and collaborate. I think that's a far better solution than mandating people to work four days a week but nothing is going to be different. You're going to have no agency. No autonomy over your working week. The only difference is you now have an extra day off.

CC: Let's talk about this four day work week work week thing because there's been momentum in terms of the conversations. You've done some research on this as well as other organizations have been looking into it and so what is the driving force for organizations who are starting to explore that because it's a pretty radical shift.

BL: I think the five day work week was set up a long time ago really for the benefit of manufacturing purposes and using human labor within a factory setting and thinking about human labor really as a machine to produce, as opposed to a creative mind to produce and to add value and to seek purpose and to have meaning. But if we question him much at the moment as we are a society, why not also question the very mechanics of what it means to work because is it wrong that I can still produce the same quality output but don't conform to the standardized 9 or 5 or 9-6 Monday to Friday if I can produce the same output and actually work 1 hour on a Monday but choose to work on my weekend, who is to say that I can't do that because if the output is the same then what that raises is a question from an employer's perspective. The employer is looking to retain control not just over the output that a worker produces but also how they spend their time.

CC: I want to poke it a couple of the things that you said there and the first one I'm going to poke at is just the factory reference because one of the things I worry about with conversations about a four day work week is equity. The nature of my work is such that I could in theory work from anywhere and do you know four days a week but yet my colleagues who are making the products that our organization makes here, they can't do that. There are production schedules to meet and they have to be at work because the work happens in a physical place where they create a physical thing and the same is true for health care or all kinds of organizations. So how do organizations that are exploring this 4 day schedule think about equity between different parts of the organization? Like, why is it fair that I can work four days a week with my colleagues in a plant can't?

BL: I think this is the fatal flaw in the theory and in 2019 I wrote in Harvard Business Review whether Europe would seemingly take up on this idea enmasse and were not able to say yes. Now, what I think you will find is pockets will and not just within Europe but pockets across the world will but unfortunately for the very reasons that you've articulated here, some people will benefit from this and I think others will not. I think the hard truth will be the people on the – I think this is a bit of a generalized statement – but the people on the whole that already benefit from the revolutionized world of work, will benefit. For example, those who can choose where they work from and they can use collaboration tools to do their work and they already have the freedom and the flexibility to structure their working hours. Because they are not physically at a machinery plant or they're not caring in the community or they're not teaching children or they're not driving buses or they're not sweeping streets. Those people are already benefiting from the revolutionary working world and so they're already one up. With then a four day work week which if they are to be paid the same they would benefit again and so you would therefore see a bigger divide between the world of work and I think therefore that should raise questions around equity.

CC: That's Interesting. The other thing I wanted to poke at is the idea of people working you know, asynchronously. Maybe part of my autonomy means I'm not working during normal hours, but the rest of the organization is. But I choose to do these other hours on the weekend or whenever and it seems to me like that works fine if you're doing individual work exclusively. My work doesn't require collaboration or interaction with other people. But what happens in a different situation where we need to be able to access each other to share information to share ideas, but you've chosen that you're not going to work during the same hours that I'm working and so you're no longer available to me. How do you navigate that as a leader?

BL: I really do think organizations must make a decision and a ruling on this and it would have to be quite a senior ruling. Otherwise you will have departments doing their own thing and I think we are approaching mandated office time or if it's not an office a hub if you think about hub and spoke model where this is the hub, these are the hours. These are the days of the week in which you are present. A bit like a doctor. These are my office hours, these are the hours in which I will be on the site and then it's a blended approach so we know that face to face happens but we also know that online can occur and I know it's going to be different the mix for everybody but speaking personally I find it great to come together to collaborate with people and then to go away. And do the work and then bring it back.

CC: Which I think is an important point because we know that this feeling that working from home is a right is something that varies pretty dramatically around the world. As you mentioned of course in the UK it's very strongly accepted in the US as well. Other parts of the world, people are working in the office a lot more often and actually even more than what their leaders necessarily expect. So I think you're right that it is going to be very tricky based on what country you're in, the culture of your organization. There's a lot of variables to navigate so in thinking about that, I'm just interested in your perspective about the office in whatever way that manifests itself. You were just talking about this need to come together and I was wondering if you could just talk from your research and experience - what are some of the things that we should be thinking about differently for those of us who are involved in thinking about workplaces?

BL: I studied a couple of years ago this idea of hub and spoke and thinking what was the optimum model to have and of course like many of these ideas you go in naively thinking you're going to find exactly a really simple answer. And it's never quite simple, but what that revealed to me was the hub or hubs are vital and similarly to when we were talking about meetings reminding people that it's not meetings that are bad. It's poor hygiene around them. A meeting can be fantastic as it should be and believe you me I would rather my performance management be in a meeting than on slack where people are just piling in and I think the same thing needs to be said about the office. You have to remind people – this is the beauty. This is the value. This is why we are coming together. There's things that can be undertaken here that you cannot recreate at home even with the best asynchronous tools. There is a huge value. And as with the pandemic it becomes increasingly apparent to people. It could be an emotional thing. That's the rationale. It's about explaining to people that doing work isn't just what you produce. It's about how you get there and we are people and therefore the fuel inside you will run empty if you work on your own on the whole if you are not accessing people. If you're not accessing the hub you will run dry. You will run empty. So think of this as a fuel like a gas station or a petrol station so to speak. You're coming in to refuel, to revitalize, to build up your energy source so that then you can go. For some people that would be huddling at home, other people it would be huddling on Skype with other people. It might be staying in the office because that's where they get their energy source from and then we bring people back again and I think if you reframe the office as the source. The energy source the lifeblood for our organizations and therefore positioning people at home as working in satellites and to almost use that language where yes, you're out there far out in the world. But you're on your own you have to come back in to be updated, to refuel, to be revitalized, to be reenergized, to think about the next mission. To use the space analogy then I think suddenly it becomes increasingly clearer to people that it's quite a binary process. It's not just one or the other, it's both. I need to do both because both have value.

CC: Right? Yeah I love the idea of the workplace becoming an energy source. I think that's a great analogy and maybe a way that people haven't thought about before. Maybe they've thought about the office as draining. Just like maybe they've thought about meetings as being draining. But maybe they can be rethought in a way that a good meeting and a good day at the office could be a source of energy. So before I let you go there's one question that we've been asking all of our guests this season because we're very focused on people and organizations who are making an impact in the world and thinking about how people can re-energize at work is an important part of that conversation. I would love it if you could tell me a story about something you or someone you know – such as an organization that you've worked with – how they have had a positive impact on people or the planet in recent years.

BL: That's a really good question and I guess this is one of the hard ones where everybody else before now has given really really good answers and now I'm pressured to have to come up with something particularly insightful. Well for me as the researcher I think organizations – and I've seen a couple who were very willing to bite the bullet on some of the things we've talked about so – TheSoul Publishing which we've mentioned the company that eradicated all meetings – from my understanding – actually then went on to to think about “well, we do need some meetings because it's for the interest of our people and what they did was then bring in some rules where we've talked about a couple so this is our manifest within inside a company. This is what we mean by meetings. This is how we're going to run them. So, some rules – they said if you want to meet it has to be arranged within 24 hours from now, so you can't have it on the same day. It has to have between 2 and 6 people. You have to have an agenda, you have to have a purpose. It has to have a specific time, has to have an outcome, has to have a minute taker, has to be reviewed. What you're seeing now I think with shopify and other apps is you can then see what that will cost. For me, it's then the justification. Why are we doing this? Then extrapolate I think that question “why are we doing this the way that we are” – not just meetings. But if an organization is considering the four day work week. That's the question to ask. Why? Not just because it's a fad, not just because people have asked it, but truly why. Why are we implementing this when actually we could get the same effect or even a greater rapport from people if we were willing to offer them autonomy and mastery and purpose over their work week.

CC: I would think that any organization that is thinking about seriously thinking about ways for meetings to be better and for people's work experience to be better is having a positive impact on people. Thank you for that story and thank you for joining me today Benjamin. It's been a really interesting conversation.

BL: Well, thank you.

CC: Thank you for being here with us. Rebecca, who is our guest next week?

RC: Next week, we are talking to Moira Fischbacher-Smith, Vice Principal at the University of Glasgow. The University of Glasgow is so interesting – it's the fourth oldest university in the English speaking world – and it's incredibly forward-thinking. We asked Moira about their very intentional strategy to create more inclusive learning environments. She shares how they are doing it and the impact it's making.

CC: Whether our audience is in the education field or not, there's a lot to take away from that discussion with Moira. If you enjoyed this conversation – share this podcast with a friend or colleague and visit us at steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox. Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.