

# How to Do Walking Meetings Right

by Russell Clayton, Christopher Thomas, and Jack Smothers

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Fran Melmed is the founder of context, a communication and change management consulting firm. She spends her days performing communication audits for organizations and meeting with clients. Sounds like a recipe for a sedentary workday, right? On the contrary. Fran is part of a growing trend known as walking meetings or “walk and talk.”

A walking meeting is simply that: a meeting that takes place during a walk instead of in an office, boardroom, or coffee shop where meetings are commonly held. Nilofer Merchant wrote in HBR about her own transition to walking meetings after realizing that, like many Americans, she was sitting way too much while working. Merchant traded her coffee-shop meetings for walking meetings and immediately saw the benefits. Likewise, Melmed finds that merely holding some of her meetings while walking has given her the necessary “unplugging” time she needs in order to be an effective writer.

Recent research finds that the act of walking leads to increases in creative thinking. This certainly supports the usefulness of walking meetings. Plenty of anecdotal evidence also suggests that walking meetings lead to more honest exchanges with employees and are more productive than traditional sit-down meetings.

Based on this, we undertook an exploratory study of the benefits associated with walking. We surveyed a population of approximately 150 working adults in the U.S. to gather input about their walking meeting and work habits. In short, we find that those who participate in walking meetings are 5.25% more likely to report being creative at their jobs than those who do not. Additionally, the responses suggest that walking meetings support cognitive engagement, or focus, on the job. Those who participate in walking meetings are 8.5% more likely to report high levels of engagement.

What we found adds support to the notion of walking meetings being beneficial for workers. Is an increase in creativity of 5.25% likely to make or break a business? Most likely not. However, look at these findings through the lens of a cost-benefit analysis. The costs associated with regularly participating in walking meetings are next to nil. Keep in mind that walking meetings are *not* breaks from work. They are meetings that would have taken place regardless of whether they were held in someone’s office or while walking around your office complex. There may be no cheaper way to achieve moderate increases in creativity and engagement.

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Just how do walking meetings produce these positive benefits in the workplace? Ted Eytan, MD, Medical Director of the Kaiser Permanente Center for Total Health and a vocal advocate of walking meetings, has some ideas. First, from a

neurochemical perspective, Dr. Eytan emphasizes that our brains are more relaxed during walks due to the release of certain chemicals. This aids executive function, which governs how we focus on tasks and deal with unforeseen events, among other things. Open-ended responses to our survey seemed to back this up by referring to moments of

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creativity sparked by walking meetings.

Furthermore, Dr. Eytan believes walking meetings lead to better employee engagement by breaking down barriers between supervisor and subordinate or between coworkers. He sees the bonding achieved through walking meetings as a micro version of the bonding that can be experienced when coworkers travel together on business trips. David Haimes, a senior director of product development at Oracle, has experienced this in his meetings with team members: “The fact that we are walking side-by-side means the conversation is more peer-to-peer than when I am in my office and they are across a desk from me, which reinforces the organizational hierarchy.”

To be sure, not all meetings are suitable for walking meetings (and not everyone is physically able to participate in walking meetings). Sometimes it is valuable to have materials or a whiteboard close at hand, and sometimes, as in an intense negotiation, it is important to be face-to-face. The best candidates for walking meetings are ones where colleagues are conferring on decisions or exploring possible solutions. Indeed, in our survey, participants holding managerial and professional positions experienced more of a creativity boost from walking meetings than those in technical or administrative type jobs (though all categories realized some benefits).

If you are inspired to give walking meetings a try, here are a few tips that can help your walking meeting go well:

**Consider including an “extracurricular” destination on your route.** Dr. Eytan, whose office is located in Washington, D.C., often mentions the nearby Washington Coliseum as a place to stroll by, and notes it is where the Beatles played their first U.S. concert. Naming a point of interest, he says, provides more rationale and incentive for others to go for a walk.

**Avoid making the destination a source of unneeded calories.** One of the arguments in favor of walking meetings is the health benefit. However, this is easily negated if the walking meeting leads to a 425-calorie white-chocolate mocha that wouldn't otherwise be consumed.

**Do not surprise colleagues or clients with walking meetings.** It's fine to suggest a walk if it seems appropriate in the moment, as long as it's clear that you'll be fine with a "maybe next time." But if you're planning ahead to spend your time with someone in a walking meeting, have the courtesy to notify them in advance, too. This allows them to arrive dressed for comfort, perhaps having changed shoes. You might also keep water bottles on hand to offer on warm days.

**Stick to small groups.** Haimes recommends a maximum of three people for a walking meeting.

**Have fun.** Enjoy the experience of combining work with a bit of exercise and fresh air. Perhaps this is the one piece of advice that doesn't need to be given. Our data show that those who participate in walking meetings are more satisfied at their jobs than their colleagues who don't.

Based on our survey and the clear case to be made for walking in general as a key to good health, there would seem to be no good argument against making a habit of walking meetings – or at least giving it a try.

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