



To BCG's network around the world,

There's a lot of talk these days about the future of work. With [vaccinations](#) offering a path to the end of this pandemic, and millions soon able to return to the office, we need to decide now how we can capitalize on, and not waste, what we've learned about work over the past year. One of the most important choices leaders have to make? How to conduct meetings.

Think of the pandemic as the ultimate centrifuge for meetings, which we've always used to try to accomplish a range of goals. COVID-19 separated the meeting into three distinct categories: 1) traditional meetings, for sharing information, discussing, and deciding; 2) workshop-type meetings for ideating, co-creating, and innovating; and 3) opportunities to connect and build personal relationships. Meeting nearly entirely online over the past year has meant a big step forward for #1, a mixed bag for #2, and a step back for #3.

Virtual meetings brought big improvements to traditional meetings. They flattened hierarchies; extended participation across levels and geographies; encouraged dialogue rather than one-way flows, with chat and polling functions; and even brought more order, as we used the hand-raising tool. Without having to manage travel schedules to get together, teams spread out around the world were faster and more agile. Coaching happened in real time to encourage colleagues to speak up, raise a tough issue, or create room for others.

Innovating when we weren't in the same place was more complicated. The digital natives and quick learners would argue that some of the newer tools allowed for far superior online brainstorming sessions. But many of us—slower to get comfortable with these tools—found creativity was reduced and innovation somewhat inhibited. In our post-pandemic world, how we conduct these types of sessions will likely depend on the topics, as well as the locations and capabilities of attendees.

About #3, the remote world left us longing for the richer connections and deeper bonds we get by being together. But the truth is that this mostly didn't take place in meetings anyway. It happened around the meetings: during breaks, over lunch and dinner, perhaps at a special event, or in our travels together. Returning to the traditional meeting format because we want to rebuild bonds would largely be a false narrative. What we need is to be more deliberate in setting aside time to connect around our meetings.

If this summary is roughly right, the last thing we want to do over the coming months is return to the old meeting format. It's a choice that would pressure everyone to sit around the same table, make those who have to dial in feel marginalized and left out, reduce participation given physical room sizes, add a lot more time on airplanes, and reassert old and less agile hierarchies.

Instead, let's at least test out new approaches. Segment our meetings and push most to virtual formats, such as Teams, WebEx, and Zoom, even when most participants are in the office. And create more room for longer breaks, lunches, and sometimes dinners to kick around ideas, socialize, and build bonds.

In the months ahead, CEOs and senior leaders will set the direction here. If we revert to old models, we can bet our people will, too. And that will make us less sustainable, less agile, and slower in dealing with many of our management responsibilities. But like you, I just can't wait to have lunch with friends and colleagues and spend more informal time together.

Deleting the traditional meeting while investing to build personal bonds is a win-win, a signal from leaders that we want to capture and build on what we've learned over the past year. If you want to [write me back](#), I would love to hear your views and stories about this, too.

Until next week,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Rich". The signature is stylized with a large, looped "R" and a cursive "Lesser".

Rich Lesser
Chief Executive Officer



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