How Dynamic Decision-making can Improve Strategic Execution in Complex Organizations

Complex organizations often struggle with ineffective decision-making and subsequent lack of strategic execution. Excessive amounts of meetings and employee disengagement are symptoms of complexity. Improving the organizational capability of dynamic decision-making is relatively easy and has a huge impact on organizational agility.

By Mikkel S. Dickenson, founder of DecisionCaddy, October 2016

DECISIONCADDY
ENABLING EFFECTIVE DECISION-MAKING

This white paper explains how a dedicated two-step approach can reduce the negative effect of organizational complexity and improve decision-making across the organization. The approach is based on knowledge deriving from 59 interviews with executives and employees in 39 different organizations in Denmark.

The interviews were conducted in 2016 by Mikkel Stærk Dickenson, founder of DecisionCaddy, who specializes in helping organizations improve dynamic decision-making, reduce meeting volumes, and enable effective strategic execution.

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DYNAMIC DECISION-MAKING AND STRATEGIC EXECUTION – GETTING THE CONTEXT RIGHT

Not surprisingly, 95% of the respondents in the conducted interviews (representing among others Lego, Velux, Carlsberg, Grundfos and Mærsk [1]) identified effective, strategic decision-making as a key capability influencing the success of strategic execution.

In the context of this white paper, *strategic decision-making* is the aggregated ability of the organization to define and formulate important decisions and make these decisions in an effective manner. Effectiveness refers to the pace of the process, and the degree to which the decisions are executed as decided. *Dynamic decision-making* is a collaborative process of making decisions which impact across multiple departments or business units of the organization and this typically takes place in formalized meetings as opposed to decisions which are made by individual leaders or employees. Dynamic decision-making is particularly relevant when dealing with strategic decisions, i.e. decisions required to drive the strategic execution of the organization. These decisions are often made in what can be referred to as (strategic) *decision-forums*, often known as board-, council-, and committee meetings in the organizations.

Strategic execution is defined as projects, initiatives, and process changes which aim at improving what the organization produces or delivers, i.e. the value it creates for its customers and stakeholders, often referred to as business model, or significantly changes how the organization delivers the value, often referred to as the operating model. "*Strategic* execution" is used rather than "*Strategy* Execution", since a project can be considered "strategic" without it being called out by the organization's formal strategy.

Delivering a multi-million-dollar drilling rig to an existing customer, for example, is not considered strategic execution in this context when considered "business as usual". Whereas a large project aimed at driving out cost from the supply chain, in order to be competitive in a new customer segment, is considered strategic execution, whether it being part of the strategy or not.

The more complex the supply chain of an organization is, the more difficult it is to make decisions, and to make them stick. For example, what are the consequences of replacing a long-time supplier with a new, low-cost supplier? If this is unclear, the decision is harder to make. Furthermore, if replacing a large supplier will impact several links of the supply chain, many internal stakeholders may have to be part of the analysis and in turn the decision. More stakeholders will make it more difficult to get to a decision, and make it stick, since more people have to align their perceptions and commit to the decision. In this way tough decisions can generate huge volumes of meetings at various levels in the organization as stakeholders will be discussing alternatives and lobby to earn support for a decision.

The 59 interviews with executives and employees in 39 different organizations were conducted to determine the connection between different organizational capabilities and strategic execution. The following model derives from the findings.

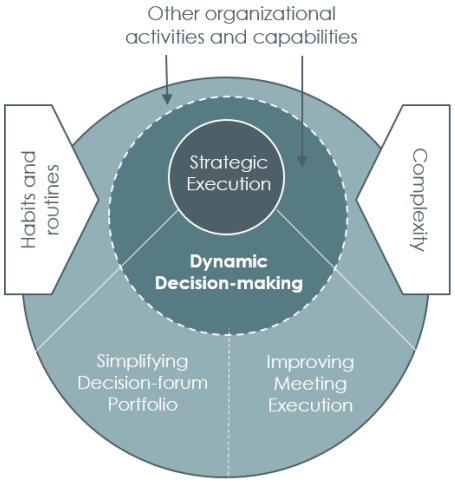

Fig. 1: Organizational capabilities supporting strategic execution
Strategic execution is the ultimate organizational capability which ensures that the organization will remain relevant, e.g. stay in business, as the world and markets change. The model shows the connection between capabilities and activities and the two impediments influencing both capabilities and activities.

Several capabilities make up the organizations' ability to execute strategy. Examples brought up in the interviews were capabilities in raising capital, product innovation, and leadership development. The most determining capability was the ability to make and execute cross-organizational decisions, in fig. 1 labelled "Dynamic Decision-making". The activities most effectively enabling this capability is "Simplifying Decision-forum Portfolio" and "Improving Meeting Execution".

In Fig. 1 "Habits and routines" and "Complexity" are illustrated as impediments affecting both capabilities and activities of the organization.

Habits and routines

Habits and routines serve the purpose of preserving energy. Take your morning routine from you wake up until you leave home. If this was different every day, you would get out of the door significantly later than you do. Most people eat the same things for breakfast each morning (if they eat at all) as it preserves energy knowing what to shop for and how to prepare the food in the morning.

When an organization collectively adopts a "certain way of doing things" (organizational habits and routines) this is considered part of the organization's culture. In much the same way as your morning routine these habits ensure efficiency. But when dealing with strategic execution and change, those same habits can suddenly get in the way of efficient decision-making.

Dealing with human habits and routines in an organizational context is often referred to as change management. It is well documented in management literature how failing to deal with the habits and routines in a (strategic) change effort, will obstruct execution.

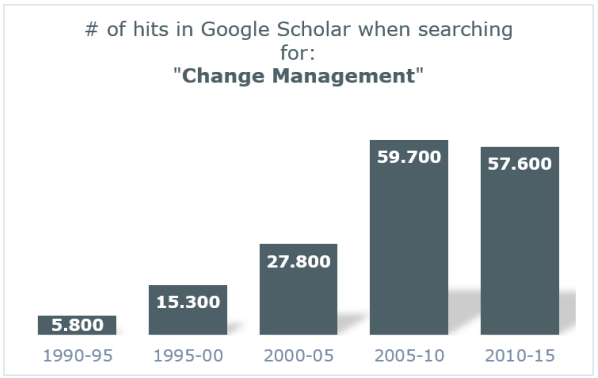

Fig. 2: "Change Management" hits on Google Scholar
Challenges around change management are well described in management literature and peaked around 10 years ago. But the challenges are as relevant as ever, according to the respondents of the interviews.

Even though the steps to enable dynamic decision-making are fairly simple, it can require significant effort to change the habits and routines of the organization, for example with respect to how to conduct meetings.

Complexity

When discussing complexity in the 59 interviews, both internal and external factors causing, or representing, complexity were mentioned. These factors can be divided into the following categories:

1) Complex product portfolio, e.g. extremely specialized products and services
2) Global footprint and advanced sales channels including partners
3) Global and complex supply chain
4) Frequent re-organizations, Merger & Acquisitions and increased employee turnover rates
5) Global functions and departments resulting from cost savings and efficiency initiatives
6) Temporary organizational entities e.g. programs, projects, must-win battles established to drive strategy execution
7) Global and/or virtual teams, enabled by increasingly advanced communication technologies
8) Silo-thinking, sometimes supported by bonus metrics preventing collaboration

As this list illustrates there are many factors causing complexity within an organization [2]. Ad 1-3 complicates decision-making because it simply becomes difficult to comprehend all the criteria in a given decision and their relative importance. Ad 4-8 complicates decision-making because it becomes unclear who should be part of a cross-organizational decision, i.e. who should have a decision-mandate, when the structure of the organization changes. The typical tool for sharing

information about formal decision-mandates in an organization is a digitized representation of the hierarchy, in the classical sense, i.e. the reporting structure, often referred to as an organogram. But when considering authorities and mandates of newly acquired companies, global, cross organizational functions, temporary forums and virtual teams, the traditional organogram is insufficient in visualizing the structure of the organization. Figure 3 illustrates the complex structures which most large organizations are facing today.

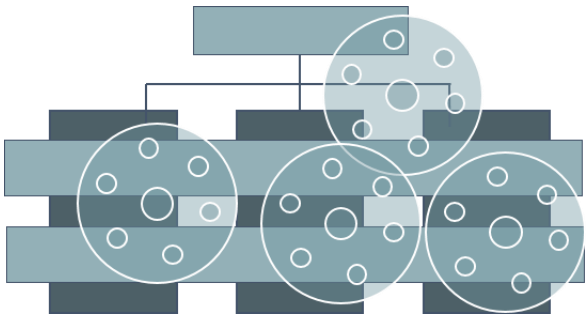

Fig. 3: Overlapping decision-mandates in a complex organization
Simplified illustration of how the traditional hierarchy of authority (vertical boxes) is overlapped by global functions (horizontal boxes). The third dimension of the organization chart is the projects, programs, and virtual teams (circles with dots).

Working in this kind of multidimensional organizational structure, sometimes simply referred to as matrix structure, has many implications. In some parts of the above illustration three layers of accountability is represented, which entails a huge challenge for decision-making.

During the interviews, numerous examples of unclear decision-mandate was brought up, even for smaller companies. For example in one company, which will be referred to as ABC Informatics in this paper. ABC Informatics was a company of 110 employees, developing, selling and implementing IT-solutions for analysis of biological data. The software platform had been expanded to include an increasing range of features, enabled by incorporating an increasing number of different programming languages. Deployment-options had grown from desktop software, over server-based software and most lately a failed attempt to deploy in the cloud. Sales channels comprised direct sales via web-shop and field sales, but in certain markets sales was handled by resellers and partners. The company was present in three sales-geographies; Americas, EMEA and Asia-Pac. Customers were segmented according to field of research (cancer, agro, heart disease, etc.), but also type of research, e.g. academic (explorative), discovery (pharma/academic) and testing (clinical labs).

The marketing (branding and external communication) department worked globally and recently product management had been introduced as a global function working across products and markets. As part of the strategy process, it was decided that ABC Informatics should pursue doubling its revenue from the Chinese market during the next three years.

So, faced with a concrete decision of which tradeshows to attend in China the coming year, the strategic execution suddenly lost momentum. It was a relatively simple decision, but who should be able to influence this decision and who could ultimately decide? Head of marketing owned the tradeshow budget. Two product managers had different opinions on which was the more relevant tradeshow. The project manager for the "Must-win-Battle-China" also felt that he should decide. And finally, the colleagues in China who reported to the sales department, would populate the booth at the tradeshow. The decision eventually ended up at the table of the executive management.

This example is from a small company, but it illustrates well the challenges mentioned across the organizations represented in the interviews. The challenge is that when there has been no agreement up front on who should be able to make different kinds of decisions even simple decisions can become difficult.

Excessive escalation of decisions is a clear symptom of ineffective decision-making, often caused by organizational complexity. This and other symptoms, which will be elaborated in the following, are thoroughly captured in some of the rapidly increasing management literature on "organizational complexity".

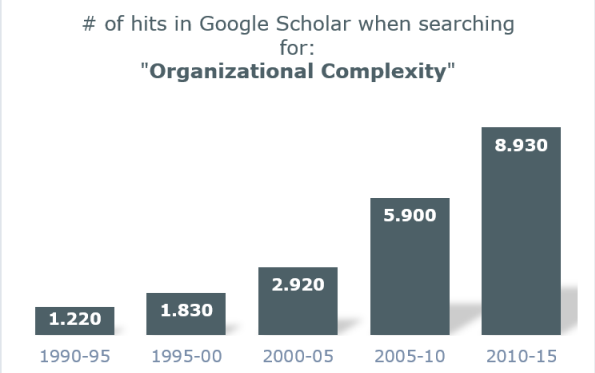

Fig. 4: "Organizational Complexity" hits on Google Scholar
Increasingly popular topic for scientific publications.

COST OF COMPLEXITY AND LACK OF DECISIONS

The main disadvantage, i.e. the most costly effect of ineffective decision-making is reduced strategic execution speed, e.g. longer time to markets, slow cost-out achievement, missed opportunities, etc.

There are, however, also other kinds of costs to an organization with low decision-making capabilities which should be considered. Respondents of the

interviews point to three kinds of cost caused by ineffective decision-making.

Excessive amounts of meetings
When it is unclear who can make which decisions, the same decisions, i.e. agenda items, appear on multiple agendas around the organization, representing wasted time. Another culprit with respect to total meeting volumes in large organizations is that people are invited to too many meetings. Kevan Hall, CEO of Global-Integration, estimates that knowledge workers in complex organizations spend as much as 40% of their time in meetings, of which half could have been avoided. Looking at an example of a large organization with 2,000 knowledge workers (those considered to be taking part in most meetings), reveals the following numbers:

Number of employees:	2.000	employees
Meeting hours per week:	20	hours/week
Work weeks per year:	43	work-weeks/year
Hours invested in meetings:	1.720.000	hours/year
Cost per hour:	60	€/hour
Investment in meetings:	103.200.000	€/year

Fig. 5: Fictive example of estimated cost of excessive meetings in a large organization.
"Number of employees" only includes those who frequently attend meetings, i.e. most likely not production workers. "Cost per hour" includes social cost, facility & IT cost, etc.

If half of the meeting time could have been avoided, as estimated by Kevan Hall[3], the above example suggests that the organization could have saved €50M per year in meeting time.

But an even more important point is that the organization wasted 860.000 hours in one year. What would have been the value for the organization if this time had been spent on useful research & development, customer-facing activities or strategic project execution?

Stress and disengagement
According to Yves Morieaux[4], stress, burn-out and disengagement are at an all-time high in large and complex organizations. Employees don't get stressed from working a lot, they become stressed when they get stuck and cannot progress and meet deadlines. Not knowing who can make the decisions one needs to progress can create tensions and stress. Dutiful employees will struggle harder and harder, until they call in sick or they give up and stop caring. Those respondents from the interviews having worked both in a lean start up, and in a slow corporate organization, could provide several examples of this.

Brain-drain
Refers to organizations losing their most skilled and entrepreneurial employees. This was extremely evident in ABC Informatics when it was acquired. 1-2 years after the acquisition, when frustration over lack of strategic decision-making increased, the most skilled employees were the first to leave. Some even left despite having to give up generous compensation schemes introduced at the acquisition. It is evident that this is an unfortunate trend, as skilled and entrepreneurial employees are obviously critically important in innovation and strategic execution.

TWO-STEP APPROACH TOWARDS DYNAMIC DECISION-MAKING

During the 59 interviews, several examples have been provided as to how organizations, or parts of organizations, have successfully improved decision-making despite challenges of habits and routines and complexity. As mentioned in fig.1 these enabling activities can be grouped into two headlines: "Simplify and formalize decision-forums" and "Improve meeting execution". The findings have inspired the following two-steps approach.

TWO-STEP APPROACH TOWARDS DYNAMIC DECISION-MAKING:

1. Simplify and formalize decision-forums
   - Map current decision-forum portfolio
   - Reduce the # of forums and participants
   - Provide transparency - continuously
2. Improve meeting execution
   - Train and empower meeting facilitators
   - Start with high level meetings
   - Formulate own meeting-best-practice

Ad 1: Simplify and formalize decision-forums
In ABC Informatics the strategic intention of growing the Chinese market was obstructed by challenges in decision-making. There may have been alignment around the decision to prioritize the Chinese market, but the strategic execution depended on a number of subsequent decisions, e.g. which tradeshows to participate in, and it had not been decided how and by whom these decisions should be made. Setting up a steering group for driving the entry into China would have been one way of formalizing the decision-mandates with respect to which tradeshows should be prioritized.

All of the larger companies from the interviews have management teams, where membership is defined by the hierarchy. Most of those reporting to the CFO would be part of the finance management team, possibly meeting monthly or every 14 days. Those

reporting to the CEO would make up executive management. Beyond management teams, large commercial organizations often have a host of boards, committees, councils and steering groups, all launched to serve as decision-making forums. Those forums established to decide, discuss and share information across business units, can be less formal, i.e. invisible to those not in the meeting. First step when approaching the task of simplifying the decision-forums is thus to find out which forums are in operation and very simply list or **map the decision-forums**. Often, such a list will raise some eyebrows and discussions like "what are we actually doing in all these meetings?". Very pragmatically, the mapping can be done by looking for recurring meetings in outlook which include participants from senior management.

As part of the turnaround of Danfoss in 2009, the launch of the "Core and Clear" strategy was accompanied by a clean-up in the large number of legacy committees and councils (in this whitepaper commonly referred to as "forums") throughout the company, which had slowed the decision-making of the company[5]. The clean-up significantly improved the transparency regarding which decisions were taken where and when, it reduced the number of high-level meetings and it has been attributed a significant share of the credit for the successful execution of the strategy.

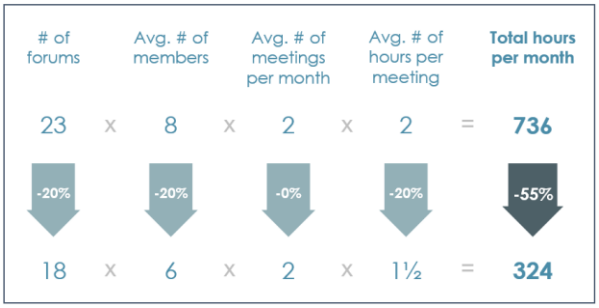

Fig. 6: An example of how relatively small adjustments in forum portfolio can lead to drastic reduction in total meeting time By reducing 3 of 4 factors (# of forums, Avg. # of members, and Avg. # of hours per meeting) by approx. 20% each, and keeping constant the meeting frequency of the remaining forums (Avg. # of meetings per month), a reduction of more than 55% in total meeting time is achieved.

The process of **reducing the number of forums and participants** can be very delicate. For many reasons, participation in meetings with other senior managers represent an important source of power for the individual. This process needs to be supported by top management in order to ensure that people are treated fairly, and to ensure people honor the agreements on who participates in which forums. Simply put, there are two different approaches to this task. The most drastic one is the "starting from scratch" approach. During a couple of workshops with top and/or senior management it is established which kinds of strategic decisions are most critical for the organization[6]. Then senior management decides who should take part in making those decisions and start to put together the puzzle of gathering decision makers and decisions into forums (recurring meetings). The old list of forums should be revisited to make sure no important decisions are left out, and then all old strategic meetings are cancelled.

The less radical way is to drive a process of formulating a charter describing the purpose of the forum, and which decisions the forum members believe they are mandated to make. As these charters are shared among leaders and meeting facilitators, tensions will appear, e.g. when two forums claim to be the place for making the same kinds of decisions, e.g. with respect to product roadmap or cost-out initiatives. The involved forums, chair-person and meeting facilitator can then adjust the charter (i.e. the meeting agendas) for the two forums to make sure they are not overlapping.

In both cases, it is important to design forums in such a way that the number of meeting participants remains as low as possible. The respondents of the survey generally reported that decision-meetings with 5-8 participants yield the most effective meeting. Bain & Company proposes "the rule of seven"; that every meeting participants beyond 7, reduces decision effectiveness by 10%.[7]

One way of limiting the number of meeting participants is to never allow two people from the same organizational entity, i.e. department or business unit in the same decision-meeting. This would entail rejecting the argument: "I need to be in the meeting in order to know what is going on…" For this latter purpose, arrange information sharing meetings and/or provide proper and relevant information in writing to those who need to be informed.

The final point to make about Step 1: Simplify and formalize decision-forums pertains to the importance of **continuously providing transparency** – both with regards to which formal decision-forums exist, and who participate in them. At the current rate of change and disruption in many industries, the demands towards strategic decision-making also change frequently. Therefore, everyone in the organization should be able to see who are responsible for deciding on e.g. global production footprint, also after organizational changes following mergers and acquisitions. Most importantly, the facilitators of the different forums should keep themselves informed so that they continuously align with facilitators of related forums on what is on the respective agendas to avoid overlap and to ensure proper planning sequence.

Surprisingly, this kind of transparency has been almost absent in all but one company of the interviews. Several of the respondents mentioned that it is frustrating not knowing who are deciding on a given, cross-organizational topic. The one

exception, Velux, however, has a dedicated system which provides information about which forums/meetings are put in place to connect employees in different parts of the well-defined matrix structure. This system is continuously updated as people leave and enter the organization, and when organizational structure is changed.

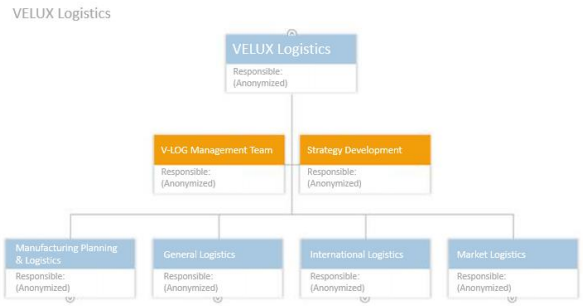

Fig. 7: A screenshot from the Velux' organigram showing meeting forums in orange as part of the classical hierarchy In the system, which is available for all employees in Velux, one can see who are participating in the meetings.

This transparency is critical for Velux in effectively executing on the strategy across the large, global and highly integrated organization and is considered best-practice.

Ad 2: Improve Meeting Execution

Initiatives to improve meeting execution are very common. In 32 out of the 39 organizations represented in the research for this white paper there had been at least one initiative within the last year. Few had been successful, and most were in fact little more than a few people taking a meeting facilitation course, subsequently producing a laminated "10 steps to an effective meeting" and placing it in the meeting rooms. Considering the amount of time and money invested in meetings – as suggested in Fig. 5 – it was surprising that almost no organizations had managed to implement successful initiatives for improving meeting execution.

The meetings that people attend are generally very different. It could be 1-to-1 meetings, brainstorming, workshops or highly formalized meetings. Therefore, it doesn't make a lot of sense to produce a laminated "10 steps to an effective meeting". In this context, we deal with meetings in which strategic decisions are (supposed to) being made. These meetings typically require a significant amount of work from various people in the organization, contributing with analysis and meeting material. Typically, these forums also have one dedicated forum facilitator who is responsible for the preparation of the meeting. This should be one person, and it should be transparent to everyone who this is. Due to the importance of this role, **meeting facilitators should be trained and empowered** to ensure they can drive the required decision-making in the meetings.

Before looking into the responsibilities of this very important role a few input on meeting culture in general. As several respondents testified, it can be very difficult to push improvements in one meeting forum if the meeting culture in general is not supporting this. Insisting on starting on time, for example, can be very difficult when other meetings don't end at the agreed time. Therefore, if the organization really needs and wants to up the game, it is important to select several meetings, and ideally the most **high-level meetings**, and invest in improving these. The new practices will spread out and down into the organization.

Two of the organizations from the research has positive experiences with gathering a group of forum facilitators and empower them to improve meeting facilitation practices in the company. The facilitators came up with a much more useful set of best practices than the laminated ten commandments described earlier, which pertain specifically to decision-meetings.

Such best practices should be very instructive and operational. There is endless advice to get on what a good default agenda should comprise, how many days in advance material should be distributed and how to do time management in the meeting. The most important thing, however, is to agree across the high-level forums, on best practice for the specific organization. This way there will be a consistent approach, and senior management will recognize the agreed changes across several of the meetings they participate in.

The best-practice is to address at least the following topics:

Fig. 8: Four important process steps in connection with meeting execution

Ad 2.1 Planning of the meetings. It is important to agree on the timing of the meetings throughout the quarters or year, particularly with respect to people's availability and dependencies and to topics being brought on the agenda in multiple meetings.

Ad 2.2 Preparation of the individual meeting. This entails being pro-active and transparent with respect to which topics are going on the agenda

and what preparation is expected from the meeting participants.

Ad 2.3 Execution of the meeting. This is where the outstanding facilitator can make a great difference. Best-practice depends almost entirely on which people are in the meeting. It is definitely easier to reach decisions if there are not too many people in the meeting, and typically it is easier to create a constructive environment in a physical meeting. One critical point here, which was also confirmed by the respondent from Danske Bank, is that it is critical to conclude each agenda item in the meeting, ideally formulating the decision/ outcome jointly in the meeting[8]. Approx. 80% of the respondents report on inefficient meetings where participants leave a meeting without having agreed on what was really the outcome of the meeting.

Ad 2.4 Communication of the output. None of the respondents from the research believe that sufficient information is shared from the meetings in their organization. Typically, because senior management go from meeting to meeting during the day, they don't have the bandwidth to share the information to all relevant stakeholders. Decisions can only have effect when they are appropriately communicated in the organization, and hence even the most efficiently run meeting will not have any effect if decisions are not communicated.

Therefore, as an organization adopts best-practice meetings they should continuously evaluate whether they are bringing *both* efficiency AND effectiveness into the meetings.

	meeting EFFECTIVENESS	**meeting EFFICIENCY**
Measure	Did the meeting change anything in the organization?	Could we have obtained the effect of the meeting in a more efficient way? (time/people/cost)
Prerequisites	• Relevant participants • Trust within forum • Aligned understanding • Follow ups	• Few participants • Preparation • Clear purpose • Time-keeping

Figure 9: Highlighting difference between meeting effectiveness and efficiency

Finally, three out of the 39 responding organizations had positive experiences with **adopting tools and systems** specifically for improving the meeting execution process. Almost all respondents use outlook for meeting planning. Typically, what the respondents miss is a simple overview of the most important strategic meetings, also those for which they, themselves, are not invited. Therefore, a shared corporate calendar on SharePoint or similar can be useful. In most cases facilitators depend on local drives, SharePoint and emails for collaborating on production of meeting material. Two respondents mentioned positive experiences using a dedicated application for collaboration on meeting preparation and execution. This kind of purpose-build, cloud-based applications is useful for managing meeting specific agenda and content and can also be used during the meeting to capture the minutes and communicating decisions to relevant stakeholders. However, most respondents say they still use Microsoft Word and e-mails as primary tools for capturing and communicating decisions. This approach is not always secure, nor is it practical when the content of the minutes of meeting cannot be shared in whole, since some stakeholders should only be informed about specific agenda items while other items are off limit. It is definitely recommendable to look into adopting purpose build tools and systems to support the meeting execution since there are considerable upsides to improving the flow of information into and from the meetings.

CONCLUSION

Many large organizations today experience the downside of complex structures. Increased pace in industry evolution, employee turnover, M&As and cross-functional and global teams continuously challenge the organization's ability to make and execute strategic decisions.

This white paper is based on 59 interviews with respondents across 39 organizations, as well as years of experience with strategic decision-making and high-level meeting execution. The take-away message is that the more complex an organization, the more important it is to simplify and formalize the portfolio of strategic decision-forums as well as focusing on improving the quality of meeting execution. Getting this right will ensure the organizational capability referred to as dynamic decision-making, which in turn improve the strategic execution.

ABOUT DECISIONCADDY

DecisionCaddy was founded on the understanding that optimal use of digital tools makes a significant difference on meeting practice effectiveness. Mikkel Stærk Dickenson has worked closely with executive management's supportive staff, in several global and complex companies. He has extensive experience with Microsoft tools such as Teams, Outlook, SharePoint, and third-party meeting tools such as FirstAgenda and Decisions Meeting Management app.

Services include advising and training on digital meeting practice, as well as acting internally in the organization to drive adoption of new tools and practices. Find out more on www.decisioncaddy.dk

END-NOTES

[1] 59 interviews between January 11th and October 7th, 2016. The respondents worked in the following organizations [anonymity has been promised]: BDO, Biomar, Carlsberg, Cavi-Art, Copydan, COSOCO, Danfoss, Danish Crown, Dansk Supermarked Gruppen, Danske Bank, Danske Commodities, Digitaliseringsstyrelsen, DONG, DT group, EG, EnergiMidt, EWII, FOSS, Frederiksberg Forsyning, GN Group, Grundfos, Hildebrandt & Brandi, Implement, Jysk, KMD, LEGO, MAN Diesel, MHI Vestas, Mærsk Group, OMD Danmark, QIAGEN, Scholl Glass, Sekoia, Sepior, Sort&Co, Velux, Wartsila, Aarhus Kommune, Aarhus University

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[3] Hall, Kevan. "Why you should spend €50M improving your meetings". Global Integration, 20. June 2016. http://www.global-integration.com/blog/spend-e50m-improving-meetings/.

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