Understanding Workplace Meetings:

A Qualitative Taxonomy of Meeting Purposes

Meetings are a pervasive workplace activity that continues to receive increased interest from researchers and practitioners (MCI, 1998; Allen et al., 2008; Beck and Keyton, 2009). Some estimates suggest that managers in larger organizations (more than 500 employees) spend over 75% of their time preparing for, attending, and leading meetings (Van Vree, 1999; Romano and Nunamaker, 2001). Meetings are a location where organizations accomplish much of their work (Rogelberg et al., 2010; Tracy and Dimock, 2003). In fact, Schwartzman (1986), in her call for research on “the meeting”, suggested that the meeting is a microcosm for the organization itself where the power, structure, and function of the organization is manifested, legitimized, and perpetuated.

Meetings, whether considered an organizational tool or a genre of organizational communication (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992), are used for a variety of purposes. These purposes include information sharing (McComas, 2003), training (Clark, 1998), brainstorming (Reinig and Shin, 2003; Volkema and Niederman, 1995), problem solving/decision-making (McComas et al., 2007), and socializing (Horan, 2002). Tracy and Dimock (2003) state that in meetings, “Groups solve and create problems, give information and misinformation, develop and rework policies, make retooled decisions, and while doing these focal activities build or fracture sense of community among participants” (p. 127). Their work suggests that meetings can be used for various purposes and that those purposes influence the impact meetings have on employees in building organizational culture and community.

Although researchers often list the purposes for meetings or acknowledge that meetings can be used in many ways that serve a range of organizational functions, few researchers have systematically categorized the range of meeting purposes (e.g., Schwartzman, 1986; Bilbow, 2002). Doing so would allow researchers and practitioners to identify the types of meetings that are more or less prevalent in organizations, how these types of meetings are manifested at different levels within organizations, and how particular types of meetings affect meeting attendees differently. Further, knowing the range of potential purposes might illustrate the reason for the prevalence of meetings, allow researchers to target particular meeting types with their research efforts, and help practitioners identify the most productive meeting types for a given context or situation.

The purpose of this study is to develop a taxonomy of meeting purposes that will allow researchers and practitioners to accomplish many of the aforementioned ideas. We begin with a review of the various attempts at classifying meetings, and consider why a systematic look at meeting purposes is absent from the literature. In this review, we discuss the differences between typologies and taxonomies and suggest that a taxonomy is most appropriate for beginning the study of meeting purposes. We then proceed by developing a taxonomy of meeting purpose inductively via qualitative analysis of unstructured meeting descriptions. Next we analyze the taxonomy of meeting purposes across organizational employment levels and across organizational types and also investigate the frequency with which a representative sample of working adults engages in meetings with the varying purposes identified. We conclude with a discussion of how this taxonomy of meeting purpose advances theory and research on meetings in organizations.

Literature on Meeting Purposes

Recent research on meetings provides an initial look at the various purposes, types, and structures for running meetings in organizations (e.g., Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008). Various research related to meetings includes such topics as face-to-face versus sit-down meetings (Bluedorn et al., 1999), meetings as organizational memory (Ballard and Gomez, 2006), strategy meetings (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008), and public meetings (McComas, 2003). Focusing on meeting type, Romano and Nunamaker (2001) provide base-rates for various kinds of meetings in a variety of organizations -- 45% of all meetings in organizations are staff meetings, 22% are task force meetings, and 21% are information sharing meetings. Romano and Nunamaker's summary of meeting types actually captures aspects of structure (stand-up versus sit-down), types relative to who's attending (staff meeting), and purposes (decision-making, information sharing, etc). Although useful, their summary does not provide a comprehensive view of meetings because it does not incorporate previously suggested meeting types or meeting purposes; nor does it follow current procedures and thinking concerning typical classification processes (Hambrick, 1984). Romano and Nunamaker (2001) focus on meeting prevalence rather than theory building or comprehensive meeting purpose taxonomy development.

Other researchers do provide lists of possible purposes or functions of meetings in organizations. For example, Leach et al. (2009) state that meetings are used "to accomplish goals such as information sharing, decision making, and problem solving" (p. 2). Although the focus of their paper was on meeting effectiveness as an outcome of design characteristics, it illustrates the point that researchers in the meetings domain appear to overlook the purposes of meetings even as they attempt to understand how meetings affect employees and organizations. This lack of specificity on the range of perceived meeting purpose suggests an opportunity for further inquiry into this area. For example, knowing the types of meetings would provide a useful foundation for research that considers which types of meetings are rated as more effective and identify the characteristics of the highly effective meeting types.

Classification of Meeting Purpose

Two major approaches exist for classifying phenomena in organizational studies (Hambrick, 1984): typologies (e.g., Barczak et al., 1997) and taxonomies (e.g., Dixit et al., 2008; Kim and Lee, 1996). Classification scholars distinguish between these two approaches based on how they are derived (McKelvey, 1982). According to Hambrick (1984) typologies are typically conceptually derived schemes whereas taxonomies are empirically derived. Thus, typologies often reflect scholarly agendas more than an empirical understanding of the phenomenon (e.g., Breazeale and Lueg, 2011; Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004). Typologies are typically proposed in a theoretical format with propositions and postulations concerning the relationships between the typology and organizational outcomes (Doty and Glick, 1994).

In contrast, taxonomies are empirically derived classification schemes (McKelvey, 1982). Taxonomies in the organizational sciences are often derived using statistical methods such as factor analysis (Miller and Friesen, 1977; Zahra, 1993). However, taxonomies that are analyzed using factor analysis must begin with some sort of ratable classification scheme (i.e., set of items). These items are then rated by participants in a research study which allows for the estimating of various statistical models using confirmatory factor analysis. Qualitative methods also provide a rigorous method for developing these ratable items but often attempt to do so inductively while maintaining a connection to empirical data-analytic processes (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Although some researchers suggest that taxonomies must be numerically derived (e.g., Hambrick, 1984), empirical approaches include qualitative methods involving thematic analysis that enable the analyst to develop categories inductively from field data (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). For example, Larsen (2003) developed a taxonomy of antecedents to information systems success using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Larsen's research followed a series of steps including data gathering, thematic analysis, reliability assessment of coders, and then subsequent application of the taxonomy to various dependent variables.

Meeting Typologies and Base Rates of Meeting Purposes

It is important to note that a few researchers in the meetings domain attempted to build typologies of meeting type and purpose. The first proposed typology described meetings as two types, scheduled or unscheduled (Schwartzman, 1986). The unscheduled meeting is largely marginalized as most current research focuses on regularly scheduled, formal meetings of groups of two or more organizational members (e.g., Rogelberg et al., 2006). Schwartzman's typology was an early attempt to categorize two large groups of meetings and provide a means for differentiating between formal versus informal meeting settings. More recently, Bilbow (2002) distinguished among cross-departmental meetings, weekly departmental meetings, and brainstorming meetings as a typology of meetings. These are likely to fall within Schwartzman's "scheduled" meeting category and provide a slight increase in nuance for different meeting types.

Unfortunately, these existing typologies offer limited analytic usefulness and would likely not pass critiques by typology researchers as described by Doty and Glick (1994) for at least two reasons. First, these typologies do not propose theoretical relationships between the typology and various related constructs. That is, they do not identify multiple constructs, the relationships between the constructs, or provide recommendations on how to falsify the proposed relationships (Doty and Glick, 1994). Second, these typologies actually appear to represent general classification schemes rather than typologies (i.e., they appear to be systematically categorized domains that are meant to be mutually exclusive and exhaustive sets (Doty and Glick, 1994). Schwartzman's (1986) classification scheme (scheduled vs. unscheduled meetings) appears to satisfy the criteria for rigorous classification.

Other researchers have provided base-rates of a proposed set of meeting purposes (e.g., Romano and Nunamaker, 2001). In a study by Monge et al. (1989), general base-rate percentages were provided concerning the purpose of meetings at 3M. Their findings summarize the prevalence of various meeting purposes across a sample of 903 meetings. The most common meeting purposes that occurred in this sample included reconciling conflict (29%), group decision making (26%), and problem solving (11%). Although this selection of meeting purposes provides mutually exclusive categories, the study was designed to help understand meeting effectiveness and to discover the prevalence of particular purposes rather than developing an exhaustive list of potential meeting purposes in a typological or taxonomic manner. Additionally, the focus on a single organization necessarily limits the breadth of meeting topics and meeting purposes.

Towards a Taxonomy of Meeting Purpose

The extant meeting typologies may be limited because the typological approach may not be suited for a research domain that is as nascent as the meetings literature (i.e., initial research started in 1986 with Schwartzman). Typologies, because they are a form of theory building, typically require a literature base that is rich with ideas, tested hypotheses, and possible links to meaningful organizational outcomes (Doty and Glick, 1994). In terms of meetings, the literature base is rather limited. Although meetings are not a new phenomenon (Van Vree, 1999), researchers have only recently directed their attention to the meetings domain. As a result, the development of a typology of meeting purpose proves difficult without artificially stretching the meeting construct to encompass other domains that are incongruent with the phenomenon (e.g., group dynamics) as defined by Schwartzman and others (Rogelberg et al., 2006).

Thus, the first step in more comprehensively describing meeting purpose is to develop a data-driven taxonomy. Beyond the limited amount of scientific literature on meetings, there are other reasons for proposing the development of a taxonomy versus typology. First, meetings are a rather common feature in organizations. People talk about, relish, and revile this common-place activity (Rogelberg et al., 2007), and readily provide information and opinions about their experiences in meetings. Also, this type of data is amenable to analysis using quantitative or qualitative approaches. Second, a taxonomy by its very nature utilizes an inductive approach to develop a classification scheme (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). This approach involves an established methodology that relies on data to drive the inductive development of theory or of potential explanations for why relationships exist between ideas, concepts, and constructs that may be further validated through variable analytic research (Johnstone, 2008). Whether using qualitative thematic analysis of text (i.e. discourse analysis, Schriffrin, et al., 2008) or using exploratory factor analysis of numerical ratings, a taxonomic approach asserts that categories of phenomenon are derived from the data and not from a priori beliefs, postulations, or agendas. With a general lack of theory and guidance from previous research, the taxonomic approach seems best suited for exploring meeting purpose in organizations.

Methods

This study employs discourse analysis of qualitative meeting descriptions to develop inductively a taxomomy of meeting purpose. This approach follows a series of steps (described below) that allowed us to produce an emic taxonomic structure using the data rather than using a system of categories based on a priori conceptualizations alone (Johnstone, 2008). Schriffrin, Tannen and Hamilton (2008) assert that discourse analysis includes the study of social practice that includes linguistic, nonlinguistic, and nonspecific instances of language. In our study, open-ended questions were used to elicit these textual data that served as the foundation for discourse thematic analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Sample and Measures

An online survey was administered to a panel of working adults. Before recruiting participants, IRB approval was obtained at the authors' respective institutions. The panel sample was accessed through StudyResponse.com, an online research panel that facilitates survey study research for scholars and managers in organizations. A total of 994 participants completed the survey which included a variety of questions focused on participants last workplace meeting (e.g., agenda usage, start/end times, lateness of participants, structure of the meeting, and communication processes in the meeting) and their work experience in general (e.g., job title, total hours worked each week, organizational type, and job level). The focus on participants last work meeting is similar to recent work investigating workplace meetings in general (see Leach, Rogelberg, et. al., 2009 for an example). Some of these items were closed ended (e.g., Was an agenda used? Yes or No) while others were open-ended (e.g., What, if anything, did you like about this meeting?) and participants took approximately 30 minutes to complete the survey. Given the length of the survey only 587 provided responses to the open-ended question about their last meeting's overarching purpose as it appeared closer to the end of the survey. Additionally, some of the responses to this open-ended question were not actually purposes of the meeting (e.g., "can't talk about that" or "can't recall") and were thus removed from further analysis (n = 91). Thus, the final usable sample included 491 participants. Our sample was 54% female and the average age was 37.3 years. The majority of the sample considered themselves full-time employees (74%) and had worked an average of 4.5 years with their current organization. Slightly more than half the sample (53%) indicated that they supervised others. Previous research suggests that meeting leaders are often supervisors in the organization (Brinkerhoff, 1972); suggesting that half of the participants in our sample were likely more aware of the purpose of the meetings partly because of their role within the meeting (i.e., likely called the meeting and facilitated it). In terms of education, 49% of the sample indicated they have a four year college degree or more education.

In addition to demographic information, we asked participants about the purpose of their most recent meeting (open-ended question), the type of organization they work for, and their level within their organization. Organization type and job level were selected as key group variables of interest to managers and scholars across management, strategy, and other areas of the organizational sciences (Scott, 2003). Specifically, we were interested in the possibility of differences in terms of the work tasks and processes at the various levels within an organization (Weber, 1968) as well as the differences that exist between sectors of organizations in terms of bureaucratic orientation (Mahoney, 1979). *Meeting purpose* was assessed by asking "Think about your most recent workplace meeting. Please type a description of the meeting here. What was the purpose?" Participants were provided adequate space to describe the purpose(s) of the meeting. It should be noted that meeting modality was not asked nor constrained. Thus, participants were allowed to provide meeting purposes for meetings that were face-to-face and/or distributed. This should allow for greater generalizability of the taxonomy given the varied modalities available for meetings in the workplace. Therefore, the meeting purposes sampled here likely include purposes from face-to-face as well as distributed meeting contexts (e.g., tele- and video-conferencing). *Organization type* was assessed by asking "What type of organization do you work for?" Response options included "Publicly Traded Firm (for profit)", "Private Firm (for profit)", "Non-profit Firm", and "Public (e.g., government)". *Job level* was assessed using a one-item measure commonly used to assess individuals' level within their organization (Rogelberg, Allen, et. al., 2010). Participants were asked "Assume there are 5 levels within your organization, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. What level is your job?" Upon performing frequency analysis, the five job levels did not appear to describe the sample well. The largest portion of respondents indicated that they fell at the mid-point of the job level scale (level 3; n = 212), with small groups falling above and below (level 1; n = 35, level 2; n = 96, level 4; n = 84, level 5; n = 31). Given this distribution, it appeared that three naturally occurring levels were emerging; low, middle, and high organizational level employees. Thus, we chose to constrain our analysis using these naturally occurring groups.

We reviewed the job titles for each employee in the sample and compared the job title to their level rating in order to confirm our choice to use three categories,. Job titles were obtained by asking participants on the survey "what is your main job title?". Low level employee job titles include sales representative, customer representative, security officer, administrative assistant, etc. Middle level job titles include manager, team leader, senior sales representative, etc. High level job titles include owner, plant manager, accounts manager, etc. Although these appear to agree with the levels derived, there is some overlap that appeared in the data including some who mentioned their job title as "manager" in each of the three levels. However, only two low level employees indicated their job title as manager.

Development of Categories

We performed discourse analysis to develop a system of categories based on responses to the open-ended meeting purpose question. Several steps were undertaken to accomplish this using qualitative analysis techniques found in other studies (e.g., Plowman et al., 2007). First, the entirety of the data was independently analyzed by two coders (one author and one research assistant) to develop an initial set of coding categories. The coders focused on what they considered the "main purpose" of the meeting as described by the open-ended responses. Because each meeting could have multiple purposes, the coders focused on what the participant indicated was the key or focal purpose of the meeting. For example, one respondent stated, "A kick off meeting for a new project, to determine time scales for the project, assign tasks etc." which clearly suggests multiple purposes. However, the overarching purpose was "to discuss an ongoing project". Further, if no single purpose appeared evident as the primary focus, the coders examined the first purpose mentioned in the participant's response. This initial theme development step required coders to determine the common themes repeated in the data set and to group sets of similarly themed comments into categories. This initial process resulted in 20 categories for coder 1 and 17 categories for coder 2, with 15 categories that were similar conceptually.

Second, upon developing their independent set of categories, the coders then discussed their coding categories with each other, combining and eliminating categories until they agreed upon a final set of 16 distinct codes (e.g., to discuss an ongoing project, to educate or train associates, etc.). Definitions for the agreed upon 16 categories were then developed and discussed by the coders to ensure comprehension and agreement before coding the data again.

Third, a second set coders (i.e., research assistants) were identified to receive training and then code a selected portion of responses (i.e., random selection of 20% of the data). Training consisted of studying of the categories, their definitions, and a selection of example responses identified by the original coders who developed the categories. Then, using the categories, the second set of coders independently coded the selected portion of the response data and the authors compared the results. Because of a high rate of initial agreement (91.2%), no further revisions to the coding scheme were deemed necessary.

Fourth, the second set of coders then coded the remaining responses. Inter-rater agreement was estimated by calculating percent agreement and Cohen's Kappa statistics. Initial agreement (73%; K = .72) was adequately high so as to suggest the categories were understood and applied similarly (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Fifth, the authors met with the second set of coders and discussed the responses that were coded differently until the authors and coders came to an agreement. Agreement was considered reached with three of the four members of the group agreed upon the category for the given response. However, in all but three cases, all four members of the coding team agreed after discussing the responses.

Sixth, the results of the coding were then analyzed in terms of frequency mentioned in the sample as well as compared across participant job level and organization type. These results are presented in the subsequent section.

Results and Discussion

We used an iterative process to develop our 16-category taxonomy of meeting purposes. A single variable chi-square analysis confirmed that the frequencies of the various categories were more different than would occur by chance ($\chi^2(15) = 82.16$, $p < .05$). Table 1 provides the 16 category labels, definitions, and several example responses from the open-ended question.

Insert Table 1 about here

In the process of analyzing the data and developing the categories, we noticed that the categories appeared orthogonal in terms of conceptual overlap, but not in relation to specific meeting instances. Some researchers (e.g., Doty and Glick (1994), among others) might assert that these categories are likely not mutually exclusive within the phenomenon of interest, the meeting. For example, a single meeting could accomplish more than one of the purposes listed in the table (e.g., brainstorming and discuss employment contract issues). However, our results are constrained to what appeared to be the focal purpose of the meeting based on coders' assessment of respondent descriptions. Although this coding rule constrained the number of meeting purposes derived from each case, we believe that the sample is sufficiently large to provide adequate coverage of a range of potential main purposes for meetings.

Additionally, research and theory concerning meetings suggests that the multipurpose nature of meetings is part of their utility in accomplishing work within organizations (Schwartzman, 1986). Organizations have a multitude of aims and purposes, and the meeting provides a location to actualize them. Research on the micro processes associated with individual meetings suggests that meetings often have written agendas (e.g., Cohen et al., 2011). It is quite typical for such agendas to reflect multiple goals even within a meeting that may have an ascribed over-arching purpose. Thus, the orthogonal nature of the categories we found refers only to the content/definition and not to the idea that meeting leaders typically view these as mutually exclusive aims or goals for a single meeting.

Results of the overall coding process are provided in the last column of Table 2. The two most prevalent meeting purpose categories in this sample are "to discuss ongoing projects" at 11.6% and "to routinely discuss the state of the business" at 10.8%. The two least common meeting purpose categories in this sample are "to brainstorm for ideas or solutions" at 3.3% and "to discuss productivity and efficiencies" at 3.7%. These results suggest that a good portion of the meetings in organizations are those that are ongoing and routine whereas those that are less common tend to be about change (e.g., brainstorming ideas) and workplace productivity issues that are often undesirable (e.g., productivity and efficiencies).

Insert Table 2 about here

Institutional theory as postulated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) provides some explanation for why routine meetings would be most prevalent in organizations[1]. Institutional theory suggests that

[1] We suspended the introduction of potential theoretical explanations for our findings until after our data and results were presented. We chose this reporting approach to emphasize that the theoretical approach and concepts emerged from our data and related analysis. We did not use existing theory to guide data collection and analysis; instead we adopted an interpretive approach (i.e. discourse analysis). We believe by reporting our data and theoretical explanations in this way, the reader can more easily follow our process and realize that these concepts actually emerged following our taxonomy development.

organizations engage in mimetic processes across organizations in an effort to counteract others' competitive advantages. In other words, managers and leaders in organizations watch what other successful managers and leaders do in other organizations and copy those processes in an effort to obtain competitive advantage. The findings suggest that effective meetings may be one process that managers' copy from other managers in organizations. For example, one common meeting feature in organizations is the daily, weekly, bi-weekly staff meeting (Romano and Nunamaker, 2001). It is likely that this meeting originated for various reasons (e.g., the need to coordinate activities, develop solutions to problems, resolve conflict, etc.), but after several instances the meeting itself became institutionalized. Newcomers to the organization are told about when regular meetings are scheduled, what time of day to keep themselves open for impromptu staff meetings, and how to plan their day after eventful meetings occur. Thus, the routine "state of the business" meeting may become institutionalized within one organization and then mimetic processes perpetuate the behavior across other organizations.

Meeting Purpose and Organizational Type

Table 2 also provides a summary of the analyses showing how the meeting purpose taxonomy differs across organizational type. It should be noted that only 412 participants answered both the meeting purpose question and the organizational type question. Thus, the organizational type groups do not sum to the total in the overall sample (see Table 2). *Publicly traded firm* participants most commonly identified meeting purposes related "to routinely discuss the state of the business" (15.9%) and "to discuss ongoing projects" (11.4%). This finding illustrates a general emphasis on coordination and maintenance of activities within publicly traded firms. The least common meeting purposes among this group were "to discuss employee benefits" (2.3%) and "to discuss employment contract issues" (2.3%). Although meetings discussing downsizing or job elimination are sometimes necessary, the reason they may be avoided is due to the general negative tone associated with them, or because this issue occurs with less frequency or regularity.

For *Private firm* participants, the most common meeting purposes were "to discuss ongoing projects" (14.3%) and "to discuss a client's needs or wants" (10.7%). The least common meeting purposes for private firms were “to discuss employment contract issues” (3.1%) and “to brainstorm ideas or solutions” (3.1%). One possibility for the differences between private for-profit firms and publicly traded for-profit firms may stem from the sources of power and decision making in private firms. Many private firms are still under the control and direction of the family that originated the firm (Schulze et al., 2004). It could also be that private firms are more oriented toward client needs rather than routine reviews of the state of the business because private firms are not subject to the same Securities and Exchange Commission quarterly reporting requirements as their publicly traded counterparts.

For *Non-profit firm* participants, the most common meeting purposes were “to routinely discuss the state of the business” (14.5%) and “to discuss quality, policy, and compliance” (10.9%). The least common meeting purposes include “to discuss an employee’s performance” (0%), “to discuss technology or system concerns” (1.8%), “to discuss productivity and efficiencies” (1.8%), and “to discuss new products or services being introduced” (1.8%). These findings for non-profit firms display a different pattern of meeting purposes when compared to profit seeking firms. That is, differences appear to emphasize how things are done within non-profit organizations from a bureaucratic standpoint (i.e., policy and compliance) and give limited attention to employee performance or productivity issues. Research on organizational types suggest that organizations that are not profit seeking engage in practices that are deemed important relative to their other aims, thus compliance and business maintenance take precedence over general performance issues (Hay, 1990). However, these results must be interpreted with caution as the non-profit group (n = 55) in our study was a relatively small sample of that organization type.

For *Government* participants, the most common meeting purposes were “to discuss quality, policy, and compliance” (17.8%), and “to educate or train associates” (12.3%). The least common meeting purpose was “to discuss productivity and efficiencies” (1.4%). These findings seem to confirm theories of organizational type and structural configurations, especially those of Weber (1968) and Mintzberg (1980) concerning bureaucratic organizations (i.e. organizations that are extremely hierarchical with an emphasis upon policy, compliance, and quality). Government is seen as the epitome of hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations and the emphasis on policy, compliance, and quality supports the work of others (Scott, 2003).

The differences we found in meeting purpose across organization types is consistent with existing theories concerning power and politics (Finkelstein, 1992). Power, though defined many different ways (Weber, 1968), typically refers to the degree to which individuals are able to exert influence and control over others (Scott, 2003). Concerning profit-seeking firms, the distribution of power in organizations is often relative to the positions that managers hold as well as other leadership-related factors, such as charisma (Pandey and Singh, 2001). Furthermore, bureaucracy concepts suggest that much of organizational life in large bureaucratic organizations is situated around the hierarchical structure of both power distribution and decision making (Weber, 1968) and control systems (Mintzberg, 1980).

The other two types of organizations, non-profit firms and government, may have a different pattern of meeting purposes in part due to the way power and politics manifest themselves within these organizations. For example, in highly bureaucratic organizations, new members must be trained according to appropriate policies and procedures to insure consistency across the vast number of policies (Scott, 2003). Researchers identify government organizations as the epitome of bureaucratic organizations (e.g., Weber, 1968; Scott, 2003), thus the finding of emphasis on policy-oriented meetings seems expected. For government organizations as well as non-profit firms, traditional financial performance indicators are less important and lower in priority to other goals and outcomes (e.g., providing services to the community, saving the environment, etc.). Thus, the political climate in a non-profit organization is situated around the goal-structure and orientation of the management as well as the overarching vision of the firm. As such, meetings about the state of the organization appear to be of a higher priority, in part because of the tendency for non-profits to be mission driven (Beck et al., 2008). Thus, non-profit managers likely check that current operations are achieving the mission and vision of the firm.

Meeting Purpose and Job Level

Additional insight results when we consider how the resulting taxonomy differs across job levels within organizations. It should be noted that only 458 participants answered both the meeting purpose question and the job level question. Thus, the job level groups do not sum to the total in the overall sample (see Table 3). Organizational hierarchy is often studied in the organizational sciences to understand the differences between the roles and functions that individuals perform within organizations (Scott, 2003; Mahoney, 1979). Since the activities performed by managers versus entry-level workers differ, it is likely that the meetings each attend will differ relative to their various work related activities. Table 3 presents a summary of the prevalent meeting purposes by organizational level.

Insert Table 3 about here

Interestingly, the meeting purpose taxonomy showed both similarities and differences across job level in organizations. Across all three job levels, one of the most common meeting purposes was to routinely discuss the state of the business (13.7% Low, 9.0% Mid-level, and 12.2% High). This suggests that at each level of the organization, discussions of the state of the business appear to occur with regularity. This particular category does not provide much indication as to the variation in content, but rather to the regularity of the meeting across levels. Thus, the meetings to discuss the organization are regular and routine at each level. This finding further confirms the usefulness of institutional theory in explaining the adoption of particular meeting purposes generally across firms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Mimetic processes may have occurred at some point historically that led to the prevalence of this particular meeting type/purpose. Interestingly, across levels within the organization, this particular type of meeting continues to be prevalent suggesting that mimetic processes may also occur within organizations.

In contrast, however, at each job level different meeting purposes were more common than others. For low level employees, the next most common meeting purpose was “to discuss quality, policy, and compliance” (12.2%). This illustrates a general emphasis on procedures and carrying forth the ground level activities of the organization; activities often completed by low-level employees responsible for the technical core (Thompson, 1967). Research indicates that low level employees tend to be a high-turnover category of employee (McEvoy and Cascio, 1985). Thus, at this level, the prevalence of this meeting type may simply be a function of the turnover and the subsequent continual need to reinforce policies and procedures. Also, the least common meeting purposes for low level employees include “to discuss employee benefits” (1.5%) and “to brainstorm for ideas or solutions” (1.5%). These findings are not surprising since lower level employees often have less comprehensive benefits packages (Lee, 1993), are not involved in discussions related to benefit options, or may not be asked for ideas concerning benefits.

Within the mid-level category, “to discuss an ongoing project” is the most common meeting purpose (12.7%) whereas “discussing new products or services being introduced” (2.8%) is the least common meeting purpose. One explanation for why mid-level employees have so many meetings concerning ongoing projects may stem from the growth of team-based project and cross-departmental initiatives (Barker, 1993; Morgeson et al., 2005). However, the finding that mid-level employees do not often discuss new products/services seems to contradict practical reality since in many organizations these employees play an important part in rolling out new product initiatives to lower level employees.

Within the high organizational level category, the most common meeting purpose is “to discuss client’s needs or wants” (17.4%) whereas the least common meeting purpose is “to discuss productivity and efficiencies” (1.7%). Research on top management teams (TMT; i.e., those at the highest levels within organizations) and organizational strategy suggest that TMTs are likely to make decisions about organizational strategy (Carpenter et al., 2004), including the organization’s orientation towards addressing customer needs and wants. However, as TMTs focus on organizational strategy, individual employee performance and efficiency are likely not premier concerns. Due to task specialization and separation of duties (Weber, 1968), TMTs may deliberately push the decision making concerning productivity issues to mid-level managers. As the high-level category also includes many firm owners, it is likely that high-level employees simply focus on more macro issues of strategy than micro issues of employee performance.

Although hierarchical structure (Scott, 2003) may serve as one explanation for the differences in meeting purpose that we found across organizational level, another complementary theoretical approach -- sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) – is also consistent with our findings. According to Morgan et al., (1983), sensemaking “focuses attention upon the idea that the reality of everyday life must be seen as an ongoing ‘accomplishment,’ which takes particular shape and form as individuals attempt to create order and make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves” (p. 24). In other words, sensemaking theory describes how groups of individuals collectively attempt to understand events that occur in their environment. The sensemaking process involves groups of individuals bracketing off some portion of the available information for further attention and interpretation (enactment), improvisationally proposing and refining interpretations of the information (selection), and applying the interpretive scheme developed in future contexts (retention) (Weick and Bougon, 2001).

Meetings appear to follow a retrospective sensemaking process as evidenced by the differences shown here in what employees at different levels enact. Employees’ work environment differs across levels and employees are likely to enact the environment in which they find themselves (Beck and Plowman, 2009). Based on the frequency distributions found in our data, our results suggest that low level employees enact the compliance nature of their environment in meetings, mid-level employees enact the project oriented focus of their environment in meetings, and high-level employees enact their concern for clients and the overall state of the business in meetings. The results we found based on job level provide a general indication of the types of events that require retrospective discussion, and meetings are a forum where this form of organizing is likely to occur in patterns consistent with and constitutive of organizational and institutional norms (Weick, 1995).

Second-Order Findings

As is typical with qualitative research in general and discourse analysis more specifically, we returned to our data and the resulting taxonomy to consider other patterns of results that might emerge from the 16 meeting purpose taxonomy categories. Specifically, the authors met with the coders and discussed whether the 16 meeting purpose categories fit together into a smaller subset of overarching aims or purposes. Through this discussion several different possible groups were considered. In the end, based on the theoretical frameworks discussed previously, our second-order findings suggest two meta-taxonomic categories: instrumental and content (see Tables 2 and 3). *Instrumental* refers to the focus found in the final three categories on viewing meetings as a tool to accomplish some task (e.g., brainstorming) (e.g., Simon, 1997). For example, some individuals commented on the types of activities accomplished in the meeting such as solving a personnel problem or resolving some conflict within the organization. In contrast, *content* refers to the focus found in the first 13 categories on viewing meetings as a location to discuss some topic (e.g., McComas, 2001). That is, participants responded to the question concerning the purpose of their meeting by providing a description of the types of things discussed (e.g., products and services, benefits, financial issues, etc.). Contrary to what previous research suggests (e.g., Romano and Nunamaker, 2001), participants focused less on how the meeting was run or the activities engaged in and more on the topic of the meeting. Previous research concerning meeting purposes typically provided base rates, but these base rates were often focused on instrumental purposes rather than content (Romano and Nunamaker, 2001). For example, Monge and colleagues' (1989) findings illustrate the general emphasis on how meetings are used (e.g., problem solving) as opposed to what they are about. In contrast, our taxonomy emphasizes the content of the meetings over the way the meeting is used.

Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) recognize that meetings are used to accomplish some organizational task (i.e., consistent with an instrumental view of meetings); although they question meeting effectiveness, but more importantly see meeting value as being derived through social exchange. They note that the role of meetings is not just to accomplish some task, but instead they represent routinized social practices and serve to stabilize the wider organization of which they are a part.
This latter idea of seeing meetings as "routinized social practices" seems to speak to the notion that people may focus more on the content of the meeting rather than the activities or processes used during the meeting. Our findings appear consistent with this view.

Additionally, sensemaking theory helps further substantiate the usefulness of this meta-taxonomy. Employees enact the environment around them, and this affects the types of meetings they would have in relation to the enacted environment (Weick, 1995). An important component of sensemaking theory concerns how individuals make sense of the ambiguity surrounding events enacted within their work group (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). Meetings are often called when the ambiguity in the environment reaches a critical level (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008). That is, when efforts to enact "what is going on" in the environment generate an excess of equivocal cues, organizational leaders need a method to help the group develop consensus about what appears to be occurring in the environment (Daft and Lengel, 1986). Meetings serve as one such method. Meetings provide a location for groups to make sense of ambiguous cues in the environment, potentially reduce the ambiguity, and develop action plans. From this meta-taxonomic perspective, employees attending meetings may view the meeting as a location to reduce ambiguity about a particular topic (content). The smaller group of instrumental concepts potentially illustrates the meeting facilitators' focus on the process by which ambiguity may best be reduced. Thus, the purpose of the meeting from a meeting facilitator's perspective could likely appear more instrumental than for those who are attending the meeting and seeking to make sense of their work environment.

Implications for Research and Theory Development

Although we entered this study without a priori hypotheses, our research interests were initiated by our genuine interest to understand the different types of meetings and their varied uses within and across organizations. Our results and findings suggest several important implications for theory development in the meetings domain. First, institutional theory may be a useful frame for understanding the adoption of different types of meetings across firms and across groups or departments within firms. We found evidence of common meeting purposes across types of organizations. However, further study is needed to better understand which variables negate these mimetic practices and under what conditions meeting purposes diverge. Discovering how to negate mimetic processes associated with meetings may help reduce the total number of meetings general, which is shown to be a source of daily fatigue (Rogelberg et al., 2006).

A second implication originates from the variance we found in meeting purpose across types of organizations As previously mentioned, theory concerning power and bureaucracy in organizations provide some explanation for the pattern of results. However, future researchers might consider whether certain types of related coordinating mechanisms found across different types of organizations may also drive the need for meetings. Mintzberg (1980) and more recently Scott (2003) suggests that different organizational structures (i.e., simple structure, machine bureaucracy, etc.) vary in how work is coordinated and designed. Bureaucratic organizations, such as the U.S. government, rely on greater use of action planning and control systems; thus firms adopting this structural configuration (e.g., military, para-military, etc.) likely require greater levels of coordination between managers within the firm, a function requiring more meetings to develop and sustain.

A third implication for theory and research is the methodology we used to develop our taxonomy. Although other researchers have used qualitative methods for developing categories, typologies, and taxonomies (e.g., Easton et al., 2003), our study is likely one of the first to apply this approach to the study of meetings -- a workplace phenomenon important to group, team, and organizational functioning. Our study is certainly the first to use quantitative and qualitative methods to understand meeting purposes across organization type and organizational levels. Thus, our findings provide further validation for the usefulness of this approach as well as the appropriateness of discourse analysis for organizational theory development.

A final implication for theory and research is the possibility that different types of meetings may have different meeting processes and behavioral dynamics. Recent research by Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2012) showed that behavioral dynamics in team meetings impact team productivity. However, their study does not overtly focus on the overarching purpose of the meeting and investigate differences in the meetings observed relative to their purposes. The current study identified many different purposes for meetings and that some organizations have more or less of different meeting purposes and people at different job levels meet for different purposes. It stands to reason that perhaps these different purposes also have different processes that are necessary in order for the meeting to be successful (e.g., decision making in a meeting called "to identify problems and propose solutions"). Future research is needed in order to investigate if such differences exist and how they impact meeting outcomes and team productivity.

Limitations

Although this study provides a necessary first step to building a taxonomy of meeting purpose and furthering the research and practice of meetings, the study is not without limitations. First, the sample was rather small considering the prevalence of meetings. However, the sample was taken from a cross-section of working adults across numerous different organizations. Thus, there was considerable variety even within this sample. Since meetings are so prevalent, larger datasets should be used to confirm the current findings. Also, the prevalence of meetings suggests that accessing larger datasets should be relatively easy given the high base rate activity. Additionally, the data as analyzed cannot distinguish between meeting modalities (e.g., face-to-face versus distributed contexts). Thus, future research needs to consider under what circumstances meeting modality might indeed impact the purposes for which meetings are called. One way to investigate this might be by comparing the taxonomy across meeting modality to determine if some purposes are simply not done or less common (or more common) among different meeting modes and perhaps even of more interest on whether a single team across time uses particular modalities for particular purposes. (del Carmen Triana, et al., 2012)

Second, and similarly, the results may largely be driven by the position of individuals within their respective organizations. Although we showed the ability of the taxonomy to distinguish between job levels, the meeting purposes may also be affected by job type, title, and other structural aspects not captured in this study. Future research will need to confirm the usefulness of the taxonomy when evaluating these (or other) individual characteristics or organizational attributes.

Third, few respondents identified more than one key or main meeting purpose when they responded to our open ended question. However, most meetings have multiple purposes and this is typically reflected in the use of an agenda to help control the time spent on any given topic (Allen et al., 2008). It is possible that the wording of our measure (i.e., “what was the purpose?”) encouraged respondents to think about the main purpose of the meeting rather than report a description of the meeting that identified the various topics/purposes for the meeting. However, given the variety of purposes identified (i.e., 16 categories) this limitation does not seem overly problematic. Future research might consider clarifying the measure to allow respondents to provide several purposes, which may allow for the expansion and/or confirmation of the taxonomy presented here.

Fourth, this taxonomy was not derived in the traditional manner using variable analytic analysis. Some researchers suggest that taxonomies must be numerically derived using traditional statistical analysis (e.g., factor analysis; Doty and Glick, 1994). Instead, the categories were inferred and then confirmed using categorical analysis and qualitative methods (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Qualitative research certainly has important value in analyzing phenomena and the fact that the findings are consistent with theory concerning organizational type, hierarchy, and structure suggests that the proposed taxonomy may have great value for future research and theory development. However, our results could have been strengthened by concurrent analysis using quantitative methods. Thus, future researchers should consider factor analysis of the taxonomy developed inductively in this study and also consider the possible of higher-order multidimensional constructs representing clusters of purposes (Johnsonet al., 2011).

Implications for Practice/Managers in Organizations

First, our study provides a taxonomy that helps to explain why meetings are so prevalent in organizations and gives managers a tool for assessing the kinds of meetings they use. For example, a manager could simply take the taxonomy and ask their employees how often they attend meetings with the various purposes. This could be a frequency scale (e.g., a little to a lot) or it could be framed as a count (i.e., number of meetings with that purpose in the past week, month, etc.). Additionally, future research is needed to expand this taxonomy using larger and more robust sampling strategies. For example, a diary study that follows a sample of 900 individuals over a week's time would provide literally hundreds of additional meeting occurrences and potentially capture any missed purposes as described by our participants.

Second, the taxonomy provides an indication of what types of meetings are more prevalent in different types of organizations and at different levels in the organization. Managers can use this information to understand how they compare to other similar types of organizations. Future research can expand our taxonomy's utility at differentiating between organizations by utilizing the taxonomy to predict differences in meetings across organizations within different strategic groups or industry categories. Further, the taxonomy could be used to predict differences in organizational strategy (e.g., Miles et al., 1978) relative to the types of meetings occurring at the TMT level. This information could allow managers insight into the internal functioning of competitive groups. Additionally, managers may also be able to use meetings to implement strategies. In other words, if they recognize that particular types of meetings are useful in communicating and legitimizing changes in strategy within their firm, managers can encourage such meetings, thus enacting and reshaping the organization's overarching strategy.

Finally, managers can use the taxonomy to help assess how their different types of meetings are functioning and how to improve meetings in their organizations. Specifically, they could ask their employees to rate their meetings with each of the different purposes in terms of satisfaction with that meeting type/purpose (e.g., very satisfying to very unsatisfying). Then, managers could use the tool to predict meeting satisfaction differences across various meeting types/purposes. Previous research illustrates the importance of considering meetings as a component of job satisfaction (Rogelberg et al., 2010). If various meeting purposes are related differentially to meeting satisfaction, organizations may be able to capitalize on those differences to engage employees in the workplace and improve employee performance.

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Table 1: Meeting Purpose Taxonomy Categories, Definitions, and Examples

Meeting Purpose Category	Definition	Examples
To discuss new products or services being introduced	Employees discussing issues associated with new product line and services introduced at the firm.	It was to introduce a new product coming out in a week. All that happen was our boss told us about it asked if we had any questions and that was about all.
To discuss firm financial matters	Meeting that includes a discussion around the financial health of the company - current or future state.	Discussion involved around the Profit/loss for the preceding month
To discuss a client's needs or wants	Meeting to address an external or internal need of the client, customer, vendor, or contractor. This can include business partners as well as paying customers.	A customer wrote a letter of complaint about one of my co-worker's and we were all called to a meeting about how to treat customers.
To routinely discuss the state of the business	Daily, weekly, monthly, or annual meeting that's regularly scheduled or routine to discuss past, present, or future state of the business.	Weekly meeting with points of mention on procedures and weekly problems
To discuss productivity and efficiencies	Meeting to discuss how to be more productive and efficient with fewer resources with respect to improving people, processes, or tools used to execute a job.	Discussion about team productivity
To discuss an ongoing project	To hold a meeting to discuss any part/phase of a project; this includes any and all project updates.	Discussion of where a particular project was going and what could be done to speed the process.
To discuss employee benefits	Meeting to discuss/define employee benefits (e.g., vacation time, medical leave, pay, incentive/bonus programs, etc.).	It was a benefits committee, where we heard presentations from our health insurance companies. It was in preparation to help decide what health insurance company our organization should choose.
To discuss quality, policy and compliance	Meeting to discuss any audit, quality, or compliance checks including any and all regulatory matters.	Board Committee Meeting. To hear the Auditors report and perform the annual Quality Control review.
To discuss capacity and workload issues	Meeting to discuss issues associated with future production relative to current capacity/workload (i.e., ability of current team, processes, systems to handle future demands).	The meeting was to discuss the current and future weeks work load.
To discuss technology or system concerns	A meeting to discuss technology or system modifications or failures.	Meeting about a new computer system required. Please discussed requirements and options
To discuss a change in process	A meeting to discuss a change or modification to the current process or way of doing a particular task/job.	Meeting to discuss a change in some of the work practices, also to remind us of correct procedures and company policy for other procedures.
To discuss employment contract issues	A meeting to discuss reducing, re-allocating or increasing the workforce.	Meeting to discuss changes in our organization. Many jobs are changing and being eliminated and the supervisors were updated on who will be assigned to what.

To discuss an employee's performance	A meeting to evaluate staff's performance in a formal or informal manor; this includes recognition as well as reprimands.	Performance review for me. We went through a checklist, they explained what was coming up, answered my questions. I did well.
To educate or train associates	Meeting for education or training purposes concerning both new and current information.	The purpose of the meeting was for training in first aid.
To identify problems and propose solutions	To identify a specific issue and hold a meeting to come up with a practical solution to solve the problem.	To touch base with staff and identify problems. Staff attending generated a discussion about issues and together came up with solutions for the above.
To brainstorm for ideas or solutions	Meeting designed to motivate employees/managers to share innovative ideas/solutions to solve an issue, task, or work problem.	We had a staff meeting at work to brainstorm ideas for dealing with a difficult child's behavior.

Table 2: Meeting Purpose Taxonomy by Organizational Type

Macro Domains		**Meeting Purpose Category**	**Publicly Traded Firms (N = 88)** %	**Private Firms (N = 196)** %	**Non-Profit Firms (N = 55)** %	**Government (N = 73)** %	**Overall (N = 491*)** %
Content	1	To discuss new products or services being introduced	3.4	4.6	1.8	2.7	4.3
	2	To discuss firm financial matters	5.7	5.1	7.3	2.7	5.3
	3	To discuss a client's needs or wants	5.7	10.7	7.3	5.5	8.6
	4	To routinely discuss the state of the business	15.9	9.2	14.5	11.0	10.8
	5	To discuss productivity and efficiencies	4.5	4.6	1.8	1.4	3.7
	6	To discuss an ongoing project	11.4	14.3	7.3	11.0	11.6
	7	To discuss employee benefits	2.3	4.1	7.3	2.7	3.9
	8	To discuss quality, policy and compliance	8.0	8.2	10.9	17.8	9.6
	9	To discuss capacity and workload issues	4.5	4.1	9.1	4.1	5.3
	10	To discuss technology or system concerns	5.7	6.1	1.8	2.7	4.7
	11	To discuss a change in process	8.0	5.6	3.6	4.1	5.1
	12	To discuss employment contract issues	2.3	3.1	7.3	5.5	4.5
	13	To discuss an employee's performance	6.8	5.6	0.0	4.1	5.1
Instrumental	1	To educate or train associates	3.4	3.6	7.3	12.3	6.3
	2	To identify problems and propose solutions	9.1	8.2	7.3	9.6	8.1
	3	To brainstorm for ideas or solutions	3.4	3.1	5.5	2.7	3.3

Note. * the sum of the groups does not equal the overall sample because some participants provided a meeting purpose but did not answer the grouping variable question

Table 3: Meeting Purpose Taxonomy by Job Level

Macro Domains		**Meeting Purpose Category**	**Low (N = 131)** %	**Mid-Level (N = 212)** %	**High (N = 115)** %	**Overall (N = 491*)** %
Content	1	To discuss new products or services being introduced	3.1	2.8	7.0	4.3
	2	To discuss firm financial matters	4.6	4.7	7.8	5.3
	3	To discuss a client's needs or wants	6.1	6.1	17.4	8.6
	4	To routinely discuss the state of the business	13.7	9.0	12.2	10.8
	5	To discuss productivity and efficiencies	3.8	5.2	1.7	3.7
	6	To discuss an ongoing project	11.5	12.7	8.7	11.6
	7	To discuss employee benefits	1.5	5.7	2.6	3.9
	8	To discuss quality, policy and compliance	12.2	9.0	9.6	9.6
	9	To discuss capacity and workload issues	4.6	6.6	3.5	5.3
	10	To discuss technology or system concerns	5.3	4.2	5.2	4.7
	11	To discuss a change in process	7.6	3.8	4.3	5.1
	12	To discuss employment contract issues	4.6	4.7	3.5	4.5
	13	To discuss an employee's performance	8.4	4.2	2.6	5.1
Instrumental	1	To educate or train associates	6.1	6.6	2.6	6.3
	2	To identify problems and propose solutions	5.3	9.4	8.7	8.1
	3	To brainstorm for ideas or solutions	1.5	5.2	2.6	3.3

Note. * the sum of the groups does not equal the overall sample because some participants provided a meeting purpose but did not answer the grouping variable question