Transcript

Episode: 188
Title: Meeting Makeover: Treating Your Meetings Like a Product
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Guest: Dr. Rebecca Hinds, Head of the Work AI Institute, Glean

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[00:00:00] **Announcer:** You're listening to The HR Mixtape, a podcast for leaders who want to understand people, strengthen culture, and navigate change with clarity. Today's conversation starts now.

[00:00:16] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** Joining me today is Rebecca Hinds, author and researcher at Glean. Rebecca studies organizational behavior and the future of work with a sharp focus on collaboration and how teams use time. Rebecca, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me.

[00:00:37] **Rebecca Hinds:** Thank you so much for having me.

[00:00:39] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** We are talking all things meetings today. I keep thinking about this because I've had some really great conversations recently with people in the AI space and people in the engagement space, and a lot of them come back to that concept in one way or another. You've studied modern work for years. What made meetings the thing you were willing to go all in on?

[00:01:10] **Rebecca Hinds:** It's interesting, because so much of how we work and why we work and who we work with is powered by human psychology. When we think about meetings in particular, they're unique in that they're a very visible form of work. Most work in organizations is highly invisible. It's very hard to see someone thinking carefully or rewriting that email for the tenth, eleventh, twelfth time. But meetings are highly visible, and we know that as humans we have a visibility bias. We associate what's visible with what's valuable. Because we can see meetings on people's calendars, we see people huddled around the conference room or leaning into their Zoom screen, we associate meetings with status. A packed calendar reads as busy and important. And you get into this rut where people start to think meetings should happen to show work, as opposed to actually move work forward. I think at the heart of it, it's this visibility bias that is so difficult to disassociate.

[00:02:19] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** It's so true. When you look at somebody's calendar to schedule something and you think, oh my gosh, I can't meet with them for three weeks, they must be important. I actually do a lot of calendar blocking myself, so my own calendar might look a little deceptive to others. You talk about something called meeting junk drawers. I'd love if you could tell us a little bit more about that and how it's hiding in organizations.

[00:03:02] **Rebecca Hinds:** It's very much related to the visibility bias. Because meetings feel like a status symbol, they feel like a way to move work forward regardless of whether we actually do anything meaningful. We start to use meetings as the knee-jerk reaction for everything. We have a problem, we schedule a meeting. We need alignment, we schedule a meeting. We have a status update to share. Sometimes we just want to hear our own voice in a large group. Meetings become the junk drawer. They become the thing we use to accomplish anything: information exchange, alignment, decision-making, building culture. When we need to recognize that meetings are also the most expensive form of collaboration in our organization. There's no other form of collaboration that requires synchronous real-time back-and-forth coordination. Because of that, we over-index on meetings when really they should be the last resort. A very important, essential last resort, but not the default knee-jerk reaction.

[00:04:06] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** I am sure those listening have done that exercise where you're sitting in a meeting and you look around the room, and because you sit in HR you have a good sense of people's salaries, and you think: oh, this is a $10,000 30-minute meeting that should've been an email. You have

this idea about changing our mindset to think about meetings as products. What does that mean in practice?

[00:04:39] **Rebecca Hinds:** That is the premise of YOUR BEST MEETING EVER. We need to treat meetings like a product. Meetings are the most important product in our entire organization. They're where decisions get made, alignment gets set, culture gets built or broken. And yet they're also the least optimized because we use them as a junk drawer. If we're going to treat meetings like a product, we should apply the same product design principles that make great everyday products great. The first principle in the book is around meeting debt. Just as we have technical debt in our products, we have meeting debt. Legacy meetings pile up on our calendar and we feel guilt and fear about canceling them. Sometimes wiping the slate clean is the best way to reset. Then user-centric design: just as we design products for the user, we need to be designing meetings for the attendees at large, not for ourselves as the organizer or for the most powerful person in the room. And then technology: just as great products are built through continuous innovation, the same should be true with our meetings. The fact that our meetings look largely the same as they did two or three decades ago is a sign that we don't apply intentional iteration to them.

[00:06:26] **Rebecca Hinds:** One of my favorite strategies is to measure, after about 10% of the meetings you run, what's sometimes called return on time investment, a concept from my colleague Elise Keith. It's a simple zero-to-five scale. Ask your attendees: was this worth the time you invested? This does a couple of things. We know humans suffer from what I call the meeting suck reflex. There's so much evidence that we're socially conditioned to believe meetings are bad. If you ask people to rate their meetings publicly, they tend to do so more negatively than in private because we think we should hate meetings. So you can't ask employees if they enjoy meetings and expect an accurate answer. If you anchor on time, everyone has an intuitive sense of whether this meeting was worth the time they invested. You'll often get split ratings, with half the group finding value and half not needing to be there. That helps you start applying a more data-driven approach to designing these meetings.

[00:07:53] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** As you go through that process, how do you end up with your list of meetings that you're like, hey, we need to kill this one, shorten this one, or turn this one asynchronous? And I'll add a caveat: often we're still working within the constraints of a C-suite leader who expects a certain thing. Those can be competing priorities.

[00:08:16] **Rebecca Hinds:** This is why leadership is so important. Almost every recommendation I give to an organization, the first question is: what is the culture, and does leadership have a vested interest in improving meetings? Because you can fix things either way, at least in part, but if leadership is on board you're able to have so much more liberty to make bold changes and do calendar cleanses, restart from scratch. If you don't have that, you have to tinker at the edges, and it can still be effective, but it's a much longer process and tends to be a lot less sustainable.

[00:08:56] **Rebecca Hinds:** What's exciting is that I'm increasingly using AI with organizations to make this determination. AI is not objective, but it has a perceivably objective quality. If you see a recommendation from AI, if it's backed by data and evidence, it can give you much more ammunition when you go to the C-suite. I'll often work with organizations to build meeting calculators that take into account various outputs. If AI knows enough about your organization, it can help you make that determination. Do we see that what's being said in the meeting is also being said in Slack and email? Well, maybe that meeting can be moved asynchronous. Or if we see that the executive is dominating 70 or 80% of the airtime, maybe that's an indication this can be a video update rather than a live synchronous meeting. Executives under pressure to use AI to drive real results tend to be more receptive to those kinds of recommendations than I've ever seen in my career.

[00:10:28] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** I love anchoring in ROI or a metric. How do you get around bureaucracy, even if you don't have AI? If you have somebody doing that mental math and you want to make sure egos don't get in the way of doing this work?

[00:10:52] **Rebecca Hinds:** It's hard. The more you can make it objective and research-backed, the better. We have overwhelming evidence, for example, that equal airtime is one of the strongest predictors of team performance. So if you go to executives with that lens, you might think you have a lot to say in the

meeting, but we know the meeting will be much more productive if all voices are heard or if we remove voices who aren't contributing. I've learned the single most effective way is to anchor whatever you're measuring in what the most powerful person cares about most. If you're working with a sales leader, anchor on customer satisfaction. If you're working with an engineering leader, anchor on focus time or lines of code written. It's never going to be perfect, but the more you can communicate that meetings drive value for specific groups and ask how much positive or negative impact they're driving for what matters most, the more buy-in you'll get from executive and powerful-type people.

[00:12:15] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** That's a conversation that keeps coming up when I'm talking to people about metrics: moving away from a generic view and getting really specific to not just your organization, but the intent of the thing. Every meeting and every group could be different.

[00:12:34] **Rebecca Hinds:** Exactly. And we're seeing this with AI more than we've ever seen before. There's no AI metric that will do you a service if you look across every single employee, because this technology is so malleable, just as meetings are so malleable. The more we can understand the nuances of the team and the KPIs that matter to them, the more effective the metric is going to be, and the more of a sense of ownership and accountability people are going to feel.

[00:13:12] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** For those who have listened to the podcast for a while, they know that psychological safety is super important to me. Any chance I get to ask somebody about how it's applied in their specific expertise, I always do. You've mentioned a couple things about paying attention to who's in the room and communication styles. What are some best practices to build psychological safety? I'll take it from the perspective of a new meeting, maybe a new group of people, a new team. How do you start right to create the right environment?

[00:13:54] **Rebecca Hinds:** It's so important, and it's one of the biggest dimensions I see make a difference in terms of can we fix our meetings, and how empowered do people lower down in the org chart or status hierarchy feel to push back on bad meetings. In the best cases, you have a culture of psychological safety where everyone feels empowered to raise their hand when they see meeting dysfunction, before, after, and during the meeting. Unfortunately, that's not usually the case. I've done a lot of research on status dynamics in organizations, and this is where we see them show up pervasively, because there are so many different dimensions of power and status in meetings.

[00:14:42] **Rebecca Hinds:** Thinking vertically through the org chart: how many executives versus individual contributors are in the room? Individual contributors are, on average, going to feel less psychologically safe to contribute and speak up. Gender is a big one too. How do you ensure women feel empowered to speak up? How do you call out behaviors like men taking credit for women's ideas, women speaking less than men, men interrupting women? We have so much evidence this plays out time and time again. Another big dimension is remote, hybrid, and in-person. In-person participants have higher status by default. They have the visibility bias and proximity bias working for them. So the more you can shift the center of gravity to remote folks, inviting them to speak first, giving them some physical proxy in the room, the more they feel part of the conversation. And if people feel their ideas, especially their ideas about improving the meeting, are heard and accepted, they're much more likely to be co-designers of not only the meeting, but better meeting culture in general.

[00:16:16] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** The term meeting dysfunction is one I absolutely love. What is some language that you've helped organizations adopt so they can surface that meeting dysfunction? Having shared language makes it come across differently when you can frame concerns with common terms.

[00:16:36] **Rebecca Hinds:** Terms and acronyms are important. When it comes to meetings, the more you can jolt people out of the status quo, the more they start to get out of routine business as usual. That's why I call the calendar cleanse Meeting Doomsday. It evokes the sense that meetings are a collective enemy to our time and focus, and we're not blaming the person who ran the bad meeting; we're collectively rallying around this idea. I also talk a lot about meeting minimalism: looking at the core dimensions of a meeting, the length, the cadence, the attendees, the agenda items, and thinking carefully about each one. Because meetings are rarely broken wholesale. They're usually broken in terms of specific components. I also use the rule: only invite stakeholders, not spectators. And the law of two feet: if you're not contributing value or getting value from a meeting, use your two feet and leave. If executives

use this language and bake it into meeting hygiene, people feel like they have something concrete, whether it's a rule or acronym or phrase, to push back on bad meetings. It no longer feels purely personal and individualized.

[00:18:29] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** You make me think of organizations that have moved away from PowerPoint presentations in meetings toward written Word documents or briefs. That concept really pushes whoever is leading to think about the content they're putting together and what they're expecting out of a meeting. What are some things you've helped leaders understand about how to switch meetings up so they become productive instead of just a report-out?

[00:19:07] **Rebecca Hinds:** Often it's the design of the meeting. Often we haven't done enough work or put enough effort into designing the meeting to be effective. That's the root cause of so much dysfunction. It's not that the meeting doesn't deserve to exist, but it probably doesn't deserve to exist right now when you haven't done enough preparation, or you're trying to use it as the junk drawer for everything that needs to be communicated. Moving toward asynchronous communication channels is part of it. Thinking about your communication system at large. One of the simplest and most important things organizations can do is give employees clarity on what deserves to be a meeting, what deserves to be an email, what deserves to be Slack, and how to use these channels. When do we use at-all mentions in Slack? When do we use direct messages? Because if you don't have that documented for employees, they're going to default to meetings over other channels because meetings start to feel like the most reliable way to move work forward.

[00:20:24] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** Having a document that outlines what tools to use to communicate what is a huge takeaway. I've used it in organizations and it solves so many problems right away because it brings clarity to how different methods are being used. You're not waiting on somebody to act because you used the wrong communication method. I love that you brought that up. As we wrap up, what is the one thing you want leaders to walk away with today? One thing they can change this week to improve their meetings.

[00:21:05] **Rebecca Hinds:** It's intentionality. None of this encompasses things we as humans can't do today. It's as simple as taking five or ten minutes before a meeting and thinking intentionally: have we designed this meeting for the attendees? I like to think about those four dimensions: the length, the cadence, the attendees, and the agenda items. Even if you're not ready for a full Meeting Doomsday calendar cleanse, everyone can look at a meeting they know isn't optimized, pick one of those four dimensions, and make a small tweak. I talk in the book about 27-minute meetings. That shift from 30 minutes to 27 minutes will jolt people out of the status quo. They'll start to take the time more seriously. We know that meetings suffer from Parkinson's Law: work expands to fill the time allotted. If we give a meeting 30 minutes, it takes 30 minutes. Those small changes are underappreciated in terms of how much they do in aggregate to jolt people out of bad meetings as business as usual.

[00:22:26] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** Rebecca, what a great conversation. So many great takeaways. For those listening, make sure you check out the show notes. I'll have a link to Rebecca's book there so you can check it out. Thanks so much for jumping on the podcast with me.

[00:22:38] **Rebecca Hinds:** Thank you so much for having me. That was a lot of fun.

[00:22:47] **Announcer:** Thanks for tuning in to The HR Mixtape. Like, share, review, and subscribe to support the show and help more people discover these conversations. Until next time, keep the conversation going.