

## Span of control: Everything you need to know

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Almost no organizational question is asked more often than ‘what is the ideal span of control?’ Evaluating the span of control is a good health check for all organizations. By visualizing spans and layers, organizations can quickly see where there might be opportunities for improvement or where the problems lie. Simply put, a **span of control** refers to the number of subordinates under the manager’s direct control. The span of control refers to the number of subordinates that can be managed effectively and efficiently by supervisors or managers in an organization. As an example, a manager with five direct reports has a span of control of five. Too many or too few direct reports is a good way to view how efficient an organization is as long as it is looked at in the context of the company’s [organizational structure](#).

### How many direct reports can a manager have?

When looking at the span of control there is no general optimal number for different companies. This is because the nature of work, size of the organization, and the attention each subordinate requires need to be considered. For example, in a Call Center, a manager can have over 100 direct reports, while executive functions – with high degrees of collaboration and interaction – could productively tolerate no more than three or four direct reports. So the nature of the work being performed, and how much attention it requires should govern the assignment of personnel to a manager, and not some industry ideal goal.

**Related:** [The Ideal Span of Control](#)

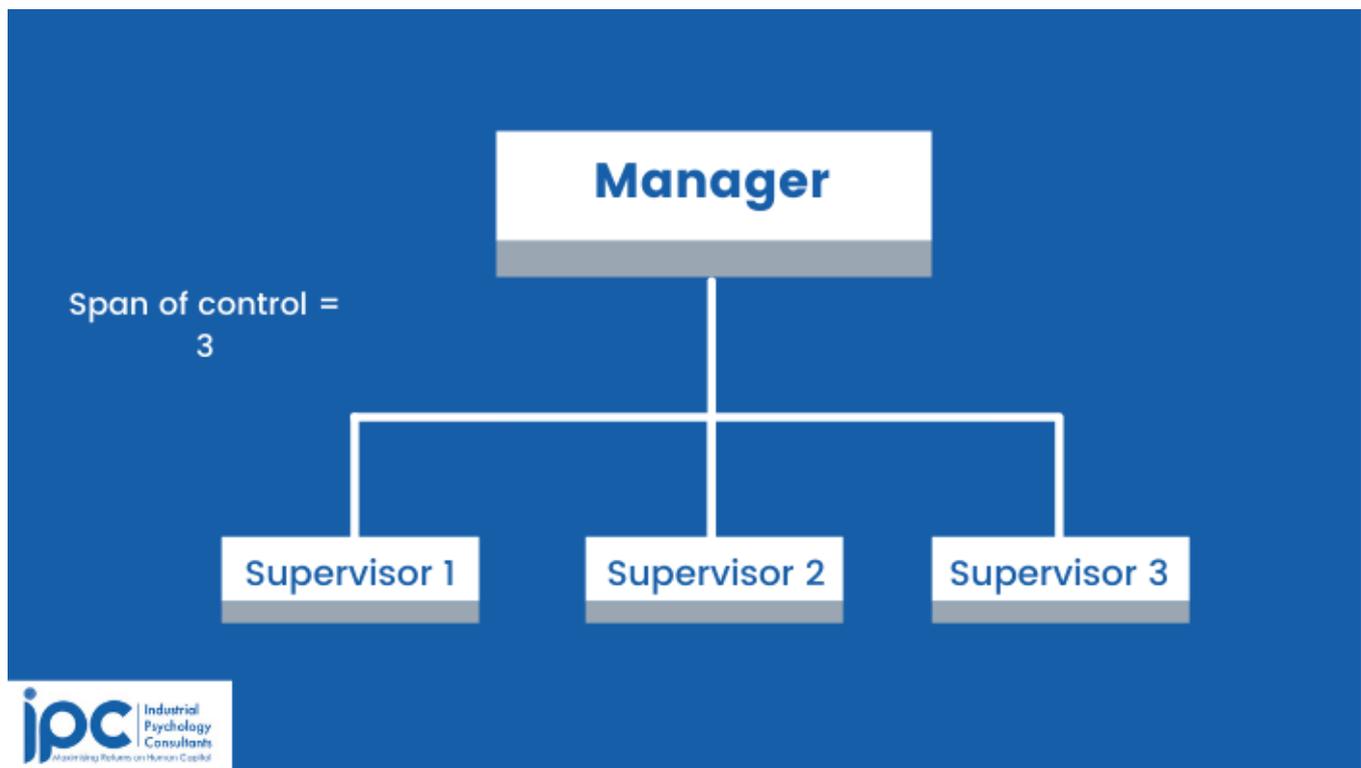
### What is the ideal span of control?

Ideally in an organization, according to modern organizational experts is approximately 15 to 20 subordinates per supervisor or manager. However, some experts with a more traditional focus believe that 5-to 6 subordinates per supervisor or manager are ideal. In general, however, the [optimum span of control](#) depends on various factors including:

- **Organization size:** The size of an organization is a great influencer. Larger organizations tend to have wider spans of control than smaller organizations.
- **Nature of an organization:** The [culture of an organization can influence](#); a more relaxed, flexible culture is consistent with wider; while a hierarchical culture is consistent with narrow. It is important to consider the current and desired culture of the organization when determining.

- **Nature of job:** Routine and low complexity jobs/tasks require less supervision than jobs that are inherently complicated, loosely defined, and require frequent decision-making. Consider wider for jobs requiring less supervision and narrower for more complex and vague jobs.
- **Skills and competencies of manager:** More experienced supervisors or managers can generally be wider than less experienced supervisors. It's best to also consider to what degree supervisors and managers are responsible for technical aspects of the job (non-managerial duties).
- **Employees' skills and abilities:** Less experienced employees require more training, direction, and delegation (closer supervision, narrow); whereas more experienced employees require less training, direction, and [delegation](#) (less supervision, wider).
- **Type of interaction between supervisors and employees:** More frequent interaction/supervision is characteristic of a narrower. Less interaction, such as supervisors primarily just answering questions and helping solve employee problems, is characteristic of a wider. The type of interaction you want your supervisors and managers to engage in with their employees should be consistent with the control they are given.

## The Concept of Span of Control



It is important to look at the concept of span of control in the context of the organizational structure levels of hierarchy. There are 2 factors in particular that are of interest, that is the width and height of the organizational structure:

- **Width:** Organization structures can be described as wide (with a larger span of control) or narrow

(with a smaller span of control.)

- Height: As there are levels of management or hierarchy, an organization may be tall (with many levels) or flat (with fewer levels.)

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[Flat organizations](#) have a ‘wide’ span of control and [Tall organizations](#) have a ‘narrow’ span of control. While there are pros and cons with both tall and flat structures, a company’s structure must be designed to suit the business (the customer and markets) in a way that fits with the workforce’s capability.

## Tall span of control

### Advantages

- Have more levels of reporting in the organization, resulting in a more [hierarchical organization](#)
- Creates more development, growth, and advancement opportunities
- More rapid communication between small teams
- Groups are smaller and easier to control/manage
- There’s a greater degree of specialization and division of labor
- More and better opportunities for employee promotion
- Easy Access to Superior: the subordinate can quickly and easily speak to their superior whenever they need it. This can create a sense for the employee that communication is better than with a wider span of control.
- Closer supervision: and greater attention to the needs of the employee from the manager.
- Less Skill Required: than if a manager is trying to control a much larger group of direct reports, each with more autonomy.

### Disadvantages

- More expensive (high cost of management staff, office, etc.)
- More supervisory involvement in work could lead to less empowerment and delegation and more micromanagement
- Tends to result in communication difficulties and excessive distance between the top and bottom levels in the organization
- Communication can take too long, hampering decision-making
- Silos may develop and prevent cross-functional problem solving
- Employees may feel lost and powerless
- [Motivation](#): employees can feel under constant and close supervision which can be demotivating.
- Decreased Communication: with more layers communication will be not only slower, but it will be much more difficult for senior management to understand the issues being faced at the coalface of the organization

## Wide Span (Flat structure)

### Advantages

- Have fewer levels of reporting in the organization, resulting in a more flexible, flatter organization
- Ideal for supervisors mainly responsible for answering questions and helping to solve employees problems
- Encourages empowerment of employees by giving more responsibility, delegation, and decision-making power to them
- Encourages [delegation](#). Managers must better delegate to handle larger numbers of subordinates, and grant opportunities for subordinates to take on responsibilities
- Reduces costs. More cost-effective because of fewer levels, thus requiring fewer managers
- Helps prevent the workforce from disengaging by focusing on empowerment, autonomy, and self-direction
- Faster Decision Making: with fewer layers within the organization decisions can be made more quickly.
- Improved Communications: between managers and employees, with employees more likely to be able to interact with senior managers, and managers more likely to understand the issues at the coalface of the organization.
- More Freedom: typically employees will feel freer and less under a microscope than when the span is smaller.

### Disadvantages

- May lead to overloaded supervisors if employees require much task direction, support, and supervision
- May not provide adequate support to employees leading to decreased morale or job satisfaction
- High managerial workload comes with a high Span of Control
- [Role confusion](#) is more likely
- May cultivate distrust of management
- Fewer Opportunities for Employees: with fewer layers within the organization there is less opportunity for employees to be promoted.
- Poor Discipline: with so much autonomy given to employees these organizations can suffer from poor discipline.
- Poor Relationships: with so many employees to manage it may be difficult for the manager to form a strong and close relationship with each of their subordinates.
- Poor performance: with so little supervision of employees' performance, the overall performance of the organization may be poor.

## Frequently Asked Span of Control Questions

### 1. How can I [calculate the span of control](#)?

The span of control is the number of people reporting to each manager. We calculate this number according to the number of heads managed, whether full-time or part-time. So, someone managing 12 part-time workers still has a span of control of 12 and not the equivalent of managing six full-time employees.

### 2. What is the average span of control for my whole organization?

This is useful as a starting point, but it's only a stepping stone to comparisons with other organizations, in the same industry for example, or for making departmental comparisons internally. Ideally in an organization, according to modern organizational experts is approximately 15 to 20 subordinates per supervisor or manager. This forms the basis for a [manageable span of control](#). However, some experts with a more traditional focus believe that 5-6 subordinates per supervisor or manager are ideal.

The *average span of control* is measured using a ratio of the number of managerial nodes and the total population.

### 3. What is the trend with a span of control?

The trend in recent years has been to move toward *wider spans of control* to reduce costs, speed decision-making, increase flexibility, and empower employees (RfB, 2020). However, to avoid potential problems of *wide spans of control*, organizations are having to invest in training managers and employees and technology enabling the sharing of information and enhancing communication between and among managers and employees (RfB, 2020). However, over decades of supporting the world's leading organizations in their redesign experiences, [McKinsey](#) has found that there is no single magic number that fits all types of managers and the work that they do. Chasing one single number can reduce effectiveness (EPM, 2018)

### 4. What are the direct span and indirect span of control?

A direct span of control refers to the number of direct reports a manager supervises. An indirect span of control refers to how far up the chain of command a manager's direct reports report to them. For example, if a manager has 10 direct reports, then he or she would have an indirect span of control of 10. The differences in the span of control are that the direct span of control includes the manager's own

direct reports while the indirect span of control does not. In most cases, the direct span of control will be greater than the indirect span of control.

## 5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a high span of control?

High spans of control have several advantages. They allow managers to respond quickly to changing conditions, make decisions based on the best available evidence, and provide opportunities for learning new skills. Middle managers also get to know their direct reports well which makes them better able to support their development. The downside is that managers often feel overwhelmed by the volume of tasks and responsibilities. They may be unable to delegate effectively or manage their time efficiently. In addition, when working at a high level, managers tend to spend too much time trying to understand what others are doing rather than focusing on their own priorities.

## 6. How does a company determine its span of control?

Companies use various methods to determine the appropriate span of control for different situations. Some companies use surveys to find out how many employees report directly to each manager. Others use a combination of interviews, observations, and surveys. Still, others rely on experience and common sense to set the right span of control.

## Other Factors That May Affect the Span of Control

While early discussions of the *span of control* often centered on pinpointing the optimal number of subordinates, several factors may influence the *span of control* most appropriate for a given management position (RfB, 2020). Assuming that all other aspects of a manager's job are the same, these factors would likely alter the *span of management* as follows:

1. **Job complexity.** Subordinate jobs that are complex, ambiguous, dynamic, or otherwise complicated will likely require more management involvement and a narrower span of management.
2. **The similarity of subordinate jobs.** The more similar and routine the tasks that subordinates are performing, the easier it is for a manager to supervise employees and the wider the span of management that will likely be effective.
3. **The physical proximity of subordinates.** The more geographically dispersed a group of subordinates the more difficult it is for a manager to be in regular contact with them and the fewer employees a manager could reasonably oversee, resulting in a narrower span of management.
4. **Abilities of employees.** Managers who supervise employees that lack ability, motivation, or confidence will have to spend more time with each employee. The result will be that the manager cannot supervise as many employees and would be most effective with a narrower span of management.
5. **Abilities of the manager.** Some managers are better organized, better at explaining things to subordinates, and more efficient in performing their jobs. Such managers can function effectively with a wider span of management than a less skilled manager.

6. **Technology.** Cell phones, email, and other forms of technology that facilitate communication and the exchange of information make it possible for managers to increase their spans of management over managers who do not have access to or who are unable to use the technology.

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## Conclusion

The span of control in management has implications for workflow and influences directly the number of subordinates who are assigned to be working under a manager or a supervisor. Thus, a proper span for a manager or a supervisor is important to design the organizational structure and to set direction, and exercise control effectively and efficiently.

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