

The Ideal Span of Control

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The concept of [span of control](#) arose from the assumption that managers have finite amounts of time, energy, and attention to devote to their jobs (Venkatesh 2018). It is important to note that all managers experience a decrease in effectiveness as their span of control exceeds the optimal level.

Many organizations chase the notion of finding and using one ideal universal span of control. Some practitioners have attempted to identify the “right” number by industry or segment, using benchmark or peer comparison methods. However, analytical evidence indicates that while a peer-benchmark approach may seem appealing, it often causes new problems (Mckinsey 2019). Adopting structures that work for the strategy of other organizations may lead to an organisation inheriting undesirable inefficiencies. The top-down assignment of the managerial span of control, based on external comparisons, misses the specificity critical to designing something that is right for each organisation’s context and strategy. It does not take into account how each department and team perform their work to accomplish their collective performance goals.

Before identifying the ideal span of control for your organisation, it is important to interrogate the following factors.

Related: [Types of Span of Control](#)

The Capacity and Ability of the Executive - The characteristics and abilities such as leadership, administrative capabilities, ability to communicate, to Judge, to listen, to guide and inspire, physical vigour e.t.c. differ from person to person. A person having better abilities can manage effectively a large number of subordinates as compared to the one who has lesser capabilities.

Competence and Training of Subordinates - Subordinates who are skilled, efficient, knowledgeable, trained and competent require less supervision, and therefore, the supervisor may have a wider span in such cases as compared to inexperienced and untrained subordinates who require greater control.

Nature of Work - Nature, and the importance of work to be supervised is another factor that influences the span of control. The work involving routine, repetitive, unskilled and standardized operations will not call for much attention and time on the part of the supervisor. As such, the supervisors at the lower levels of an organization can supervise the work of a large number of subordinates. On the other hand, at higher levels of management, the work involves complex and a variety of Jobs and as such, the number of subordinates that can be effectively managed should be limited to a lesser number.

Time Available for Supervision - The capacity of a person to supervise and control a large number of persons is also limited on account of time available at his disposal to supervise them. The span of control would be generally narrow at the higher levels of management because top managers have to spend their major time on planning, organizing, directing and controlling and the time available at their disposal for supervision will be lesser. At lower levels of management, this span would obviously be wide because they have to devote lesser time on such other activities.

Degree of Decentralization and Extent of Delegation - If a manager clearly delegates authority to undertake a well-defined task, a well-trained subordinate can do it with a minimum of supervisor's time and attention. As such, the span could be wide. On the contrary, if the subordinate's task is not one he can do, or if it is not clearly defined, or if he does not have the authority to undertake it effectively, he will either fail to perform it or take a disproportionate amount of the manager's time in supervising and guiding his efforts.

Effectiveness of Communication System - The span of supervision is also influenced by the effectiveness of the communication system in the organization. Faulty communication puts a heavy burden on manager's time and reduces the span of control. On the other hand, if the system of communication is effective, larger number of managerial levels will be preferred as the information can be transmitted easily. Further, a wide span is possible if a manager can communicate effectively.

Control Mechanism - The control procedures followed in an organization also influence the span of control. The use of objective standards enables a supervisor 'management by exception' by providing quick information of deviations or variances. Control through personal supervision favours narrow span while control through objective standards and reports favour wider span.

There are advantages and disadvantages to different spans of control. A narrow span of control tends to give managers close control over operations and to facilitate fast communication between managers and employees. On the other hand, a narrow span of control can also create a situation where managers are too involved in their subordinates' work, which can reduce innovation and morale among employees.

A wide span of control forces managers to develop clear goals and policies, delegate tasks effectively, and select and train employees carefully. Since employees get less supervision, they tend to take on more responsibility and have higher morale with a wide span of control. On the other hand, managers with a wide span of control might become overloaded with work, have trouble making decisions, and lose control over their subordinates.

Establishing the optimal span of control for managers is one of the most important tasks in structuring organizations. Finding the optimal span involves balancing the relative advantages and disadvantages of retaining responsibility for decisions and delegating those decisions. In general, studies have shown that the larger the organization, the fewer people should report to the top person. Managers should also have fewer direct reports if those subordinates interact with each other frequently.

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