

Span of Management: Meaning, Factors and Theory

Meaning of Span of Management:

Depending upon the complexity of organisational activities and relationships amongst superiors and subordinates, it becomes important the superiors manage an optimum number of subordinates that result in optimum organisational output. All the subordinates cannot be managed by one superior. There has to be a limit on the number of subordinates who can be effectively managed by one superior.

In large number, managers faced problems like:

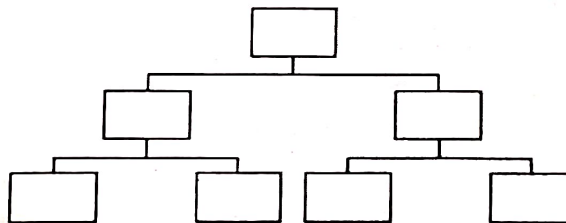
1. Overburdened with work.
2. Difficulty in coordinating the activities of large number of people.
3. Difficulty in controlling.

Depending on the number of employees that can be supervised or controlled by managers, there can be two kinds of structures in the organisation:

- I. Tall structures, and
- II. Flat structures.

I. Tall structures:

These structures are found in classical bureaucratic organisations. In this structure, a manager can supervise less number of subordinates. He can, therefore, exercise tight control over their activities. This creates large number of levels in the organisation. This is also known as narrow span of control. A tall structure or a narrow span of control appears like this.

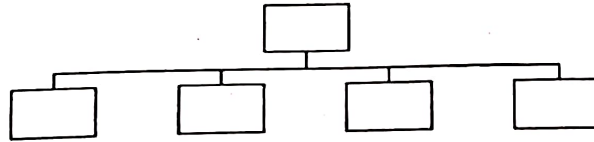


Merits of a Tall Structure:

1. Managers can closely supervise activities of the subordinates.
2. There can be better communication amongst superiors and subordinates.
3. It promotes personal relationships amongst superiors and subordinates.
4. Control on subordinates can be tightened in a narrow span.

II. Flat Structures:

These structures have a wide span of control. When superior supervises a larger number of subordinates, flat structure is created with lesser number of hierarchical levels.



Merits of a Flat Structure:

1. There is low cost as less number of managers can supervise organisational activities.
2. The decision-making process is effective as superiors delegate authority to subordinates. They are relieved of routine matters and concentrate on strategic matters. The decision-making is decentralised.
3. Subordinates perform the work efficiently since they are considered worthy of doing so by the superiors.
4. There is effective communication as the number of levels is less.
5. It promotes innovative abilities of the top management.

Factors Affecting Span of Management:

The following factors help in determining the suitable span of management:

1. Competence of managers:

If managers are competent in their jobs, they can have a wide span of management. Competence of managers is judged by their ability to make decisions related to motivational plans, leadership styles, communication channels and chains, techniques of control etc. Managers who rank high on these parameters can effectively supervise larger number of subordinates.

2. Nature of work:

If employees perform similar and repetitive work, managers can supervise large number of subordinates and, thus, have a wide span of control. Non-repetitive and challenging work requires narrow span of control. Changes in the nature of work also affects the span of management.

Frequent changes as a result of dynamic environment support a narrow span as superiors frequently have to direct the activities of subordinates. Stability in the nature of work supports a wide span of management as superiors' directions are not frequently required to carry out the work processes.

3. Assistance to managers:

If managers have access to technical or secretarial assistance, a larger group of subordinates can be managed. Span of control can, therefore, be wide. Staff assistance can be useful for collecting and processing information related to various decisions and issuing orders to the subordinates. Managers save time in communicating with subordinates, direct the activities of larger number of subordinates and focus on other strategic organisational matters.

4. Competence of subordinates:

If subordinates are competent to manage their jobs without much assistance from the superiors, span of control can be wide. Competent subordinates do not require frequent directions from the superiors with respect to various organisational activities. Superiors can thus, manage a larger group of subordinates.

5. Plans and policies:

If plans clearly define the organisational/individual goals and policies, superiors can supervise a larger group of subordinates and have a wide span of control. Clearly defined plans include well-formulated policies procedures, methods etc. Particularly, if standing plans are well defined, subordinates know the broad guidelines within which they have to make decisions in similar and repetitive situations.

6. Authority-responsibility structure:

If authority-responsibility structure is well-defined and understood, superiors can supervise larger number of subordinates. People work within the confines of their responsibility and take directions from superiors only when required. Lack of clarity in authority-responsibility structure will create confusion in the organisation. Jobs and who will perform which job, who is accountable to whom will not be clear. In such a situation, managers cannot supervise a large group of subordinates. The span of management will, thus, be narrow.

7. System of control:

Effective techniques of control can enable the manager to supervise larger number of subordinates. Effective system of control promotes decentralisation. Superiors do not actively involve in the decision-making processes as decisions are taken at the levels where they are required. There is extensive delegation, clarity of jobs, authority-responsibility relationships and freedom to take decisions. The span of control can, thus, be wide.

8. Financial factors:

Both narrow and wide structures have financial constraints. A narrow span requires more managers and is, thus, a costly form of structure. Wide span, on the other hand, may result into organisational inefficiencies. Proper balance has to be maintained between the costs and benefits of the span that a manager can effectively supervise.

These factors are situational in nature and the span of management is also, thus, situational. Sometimes it can be narrow and sometimes wide. For the same organisation, it can be different for different functional areas and different levels. The span is usually narrow in the finance department and wide in the marketing department for the same level. It may be different in different organisations for the same functional areas and levels.