

## **Article Category: EDITORIAL**

### **How many projects can you juggle?**

*\*Terry Deacon*

*A question often asked is "How many projects can a project manager cope with simultaneously?" The answer is "It all depends."*

It would be ideal if a project manager could focus on only one project at a time. If the project is large, then a dedicated and competent project manager could be assigned.



However, there is usually a portfolio of various sized projects, a number of which for economic reasons have to be managed simultaneously by one person. But at what point does the workload become too heavy, thus jeopardising project objectives and leading to project manager burn-out? Organisations should have a methodology for assigning projects to their project managers. What factors should be considered when assessing workload?

The experience and competence of the project manager would surely be an important, if not the most important factor in determining workload. Similarly the intensity of the project in terms of how tight the schedule is should be taken into account.

Complex projects that involve many different professional disciplines, for example civil, structural, electrical, mechanical, architectural, information technology, etc would need close attention paid to communication and integration of effort.

What level of support is available to the project manager? If the management approach is to include a Project Support Office in the organisational structure then a project manager can handle more projects, because they are freed from becoming bogged down in project administration. In one case study, the Valeo company estimated that their project managers should spend 30% of their time with the client, 20% leading and interfacing with the product development team, 40% managing the project by reviewing progress on tasks, costs and quality, and 10 % inputting data into the computer software. In reality the project managers spent approximately 50% of their time working on computers, trying to make inputs and consolidate results into reports. A computer services specialist from the Project Support Office should do this work for the project managers, thus freeing them up to look at the "big picture".

Every project is unique, however some of them are of a repetitive nature. For example a township developer may have produced thousands of houses over the years, and although the next one is unique, it follows a tried and tested project life cycle with well-defined deliverables. In such cases, more of these projects could be assigned to one project manager. However, research and development type projects, by definition are innovative and have many uncertainties which require more planning and controlling effort. One project manager could handle fewer of these projects.

If projects' geographic locations are spread out over large distances, this could place an extra burden on the project manager in terms of travel time. A good management information system based on the Internet or video-conferencing facilities should help reduce commuting time.

Research carried out in California by Kuprenas, Jung, Fakhouri and Jreij, based on a survey of civil engineering design and construction firms, confirms many of the foregoing points (see the Project Management Institutes's *Project Management Journal*, December 2000 for full report). Their study analysed project manager workload at three levels: overall (for all survey respondents), by type of organisation (public or private), by size of project (construction value), and by phase of project (design or construction). Overall, they found that usually a project manager is responsible for between one to three projects (38% of respondents), or four to nine projects (also 38%). Fewer firms responded that their project managers were responsible for 10 or more projects (23%).

Successful organisations must have a methodology to determine what their manager's workloads should be in order to maintain strong project performance without over- or under-burdening their project managers.

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