

2.3: Major Characteristics of the Manager's Job

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the characteristics that effective managers display

Time is fragmented. Managers have acknowledged from antiquity that they never seem to have enough time to get all those things done that need to be done. In the latter years of the twentieth century, however, a new phenomenon arose: demand for time from those in leadership roles increased, while the number of hours in a day remained constant. Increased work hours was one reaction to such demand, but managers quickly discovered that the day had just 24 hours and that working more of them produced diminishing marginal returns. According to one researcher, “Managers are overburdened with obligations yet cannot easily delegate their tasks. As a result, they are driven to overwork and forced to do many tasks superficially. Brevity, fragmentation, and verbal communication characterize their work.”²⁰

Values compete and the various roles are in tension. Managers clearly cannot satisfy everyone. Employees want more time to do their jobs; customers want products and services delivered quickly and at high quality levels. Supervisors want more money to spend on equipment, training, and product development; shareholders want returns on investment maximized. A manager caught in the middle cannot deliver to each of these people what each most wants; decisions are often based on the urgency of the need and the proximity of the problem.

The job is overloaded. In recent years, many North American and global businesses were reorganized to make them more efficient, nimble, and competitive. For the most part, this reorganization meant decentralizing many processes along with the wholesale elimination of middle management layers. Many managers who survived such downsizing found that their number of direct reports had doubled. Classical management theory suggests that seven is the maximum number of direct reports a manager can reasonably handle. Today, high-speed information technology and remarkably efficient telecommunication systems mean that many managers have as many as 20 or 30 people reporting to them directly.

Efficiency is a core skill. With less time than they need, with time fragmented into increasingly smaller units during the workday, with the workplace following many managers out the door and even on vacation, and with many more responsibilities loaded onto managers in downsized, flatter organizations, efficiency has become the core management skill of the twenty-first century.

What Varies in a Manager's Job?

The Entrepreneur role is gaining importance. Managers must increasingly be aware of threats and opportunities in their environment. Threats include technological breakthroughs on the part of competitors, obsolescence in a manager's organization, and dramatically shortened product cycles. Opportunities might include product or service niches that are underserved, out-of-cycle hiring opportunities, mergers, purchases, or upgrades in equipment, space, or other assets. Managers who are carefully attuned to the marketplace and competitive environment will look for opportunities to gain an advantage.

So is the leader role gaining importance. Managers must be more sophisticated as strategists and mentors. A manager's job involves much more than simple caretaking in a division of a large organization. Unless organizations are able to attract, train, motivate, retain, and promote good people, they cannot possibly hope to gain advantage over the competition. Thus, as leaders, managers must constantly act as mentors to those in the organization with promise and potential. When organizations lose a highly capable worker, all else in their world will come to a halt until they can replace that worker. Even if they find someone ideally suited and superbly qualified for a vacant position, they must still train, motivate, and inspire that new recruit, and live with the knowledge that productivity levels will be lower for a while than they were with their previous employee.

Managerial Responsibilities

An important question often raised about managers is: What responsibilities do managers have in organizations? According to our definition, managers are involved in planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. Managers have described their responsibilities that can be aggregated into nine major types of activity. These include:

1. Long-range planning. Managers occupying executive positions are frequently involved in strategic planning and development.
2. Controlling. Managers evaluate and take corrective action concerning the allocation and use of human, financial, and material resources.

3. Environmental scanning. Managers must continually watch for changes in the business environment and monitor business indicators such as returns on equity or investment, economic indicators, business cycles, and so forth.
4. Supervision. Managers continually oversee the work of their subordinates.
5. Coordinating. Managers often must coordinate the work of others both inside the work unit and out.
5. Customer relations and marketing. Certain managers are involved in direct contact with customers and potential customers.
6. Community relations. Contact must be maintained and nurtured with representatives from various constituencies outside the company, including state and federal agencies, local civic groups, and suppliers.
7. Internal consulting. Some managers make use of their technical expertise to solve internal problems, acting as inside consultants for organizational change and development.
8. Monitoring products and services. Managers get involved in planning, scheduling, and monitoring the design, development, production, and delivery of the organization's products and services.

As we shall see, not every manager engages in all of these activities. Rather, different managers serve different roles and carry different responsibilities, depending upon where they are in the organizational hierarchy. We will begin by looking at several of the variations in managerial work.

Variations in Managerial Work

Although each manager may have a diverse set of responsibilities, including those mentioned above, the amount of time spent on each activity and the importance of that activity will vary considerably. The two most salient perceptions of a manager are (1) the manager's level in the organizational hierarchy and (2) the type of department or function for which he is responsible. Let us briefly consider each of these.

Management by Level

We can distinguish three general levels of management: executives, **middle management**, and **first-line management** (see Exhibit 1.3). **Executive managers** are at the top of the hierarchy and are responsible for the entire organization, especially its strategic direction. Middle managers, who are at the middle of the hierarchy, are responsible for major departments and may supervise other lower level managers. Finally, first-line managers supervise rank-and-file employees and carry out day-to-day activities within departments.²¹

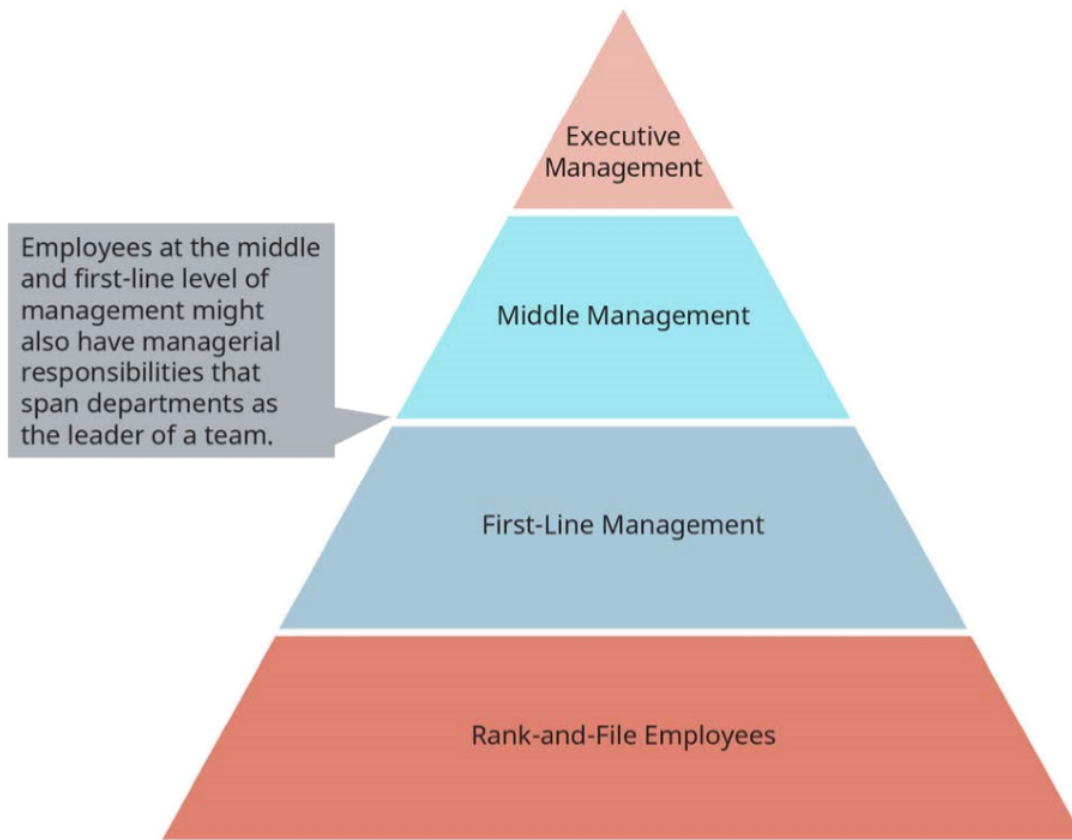


Exhibit 1.5 Levels in the Management Hierarchy (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC-BY 4.0 license)

Exhibit 1.5 shows differences in managerial activities by hierarchical level. Senior executives will devote more of their time to conceptual issues, while front-line managers will concentrate their efforts on technical issues. For example, top managers rate high on such activities as **long-range planning**, monitoring business indicators, coordinating, and internal consulting. Lower-level managers, by contrast, rate high on supervising because their responsibility is to accomplish tasks through rank-and-file employees. Middle managers rate near the middle for all activities. We can distinguish three types of managerial skills:

1. Technical skills. Managers must have the ability to use the tools, procedures, and techniques of their special areas. An accountant must have expertise in accounting principles, whereas a production manager must know operations management. These skills are the mechanics of the job.
2. Human relations skills. Human relations skills involve the ability to work with people and understand employee motivation and group processes. These skills allow the manager to become involved with and lead his group.
3. Conceptual skills. These skills represent a manager's ability to organize and analyze information in order to improve organizational performance. They include the ability to see the organization as a whole and to understand how various parts fit together to work as an integrated unit. These skills are required to coordinate the departments and divisions successfully so that the entire organization can pull together.

As shown in Exhibit 1.6, different levels of these skills are required at different stages of the managerial hierarchy. That is, success in executive positions requires far more conceptual skill and less use of technical skills in most (but not all) situations, whereas first-line managers generally require more technical skills and fewer conceptual skills. Note, however, that human relations skills, or people skills, remain important for success at all three levels in the hierarchy.

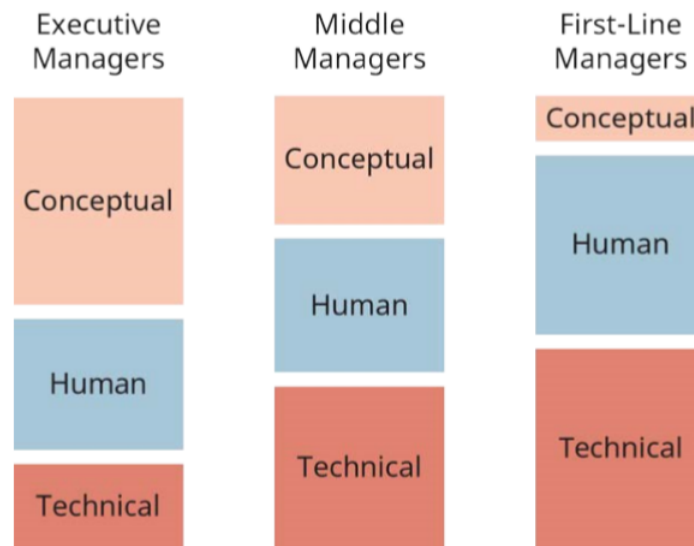


Exhibit 1.6 Difference in Skills Required for Successful Management According to Level in the Hierarchy (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC-BY 4.0 license)

Management by Department or Function

In addition to level in the hierarchy, managerial responsibilities also differ with respect to the type of department or function. There are differences found for quality assurance, manufacturing, marketing, accounting and finance, and human resource management departments. For instance, manufacturing department managers will concentrate their efforts on products and services, controlling, and supervising. Marketing managers, in comparison, focus less on planning, coordinating, and consulting and more on customer relations and external contact. Managers in both accounting and human resource management departments rate high on long-range planning, but will spend less time on the organization's products and service offerings. Managers in accounting and finance are also concerned with controlling and with monitoring performance indicators, while human resource managers provide consulting expertise, coordination, and external contacts. The emphasis on and intensity of managerial activities varies considerably by the department the manager is assigned to.

At a personal level, knowing that the mix of conceptual, human, and technical skills changes over time and that different functional areas require different levels of specific management activities can serve at least two important functions. First, if you choose to become a manager, knowing that the mix of skills changes over time can help you avoid a common complaint that often young employees want to think and act like a CEO before they have mastered being a first-line supervisor. Second, knowing the different mix of management activities by functional area can facilitate your selection of an area or areas that best match your skills and interests.

In many firms managers are rotated through departments as they move up in the hierarchy. In this way they obtain a well-rounded perspective on the responsibilities of the various departments. In their day-to-day tasks they must emphasize the right activities for their departments and their managerial levels. Knowing what types of activity to emphasize is the core of the manager's job. In any event, we shall return to this issue when we address the nature of individual differences in the next chapter.

Concept Check

1. Describe and explain the different levels of management.
2. Describe and explain the three types of managerial skills and how they relate to each level of management.

References:

20. Mintzberg, H. (1990). "The Manager's Job: Folklore and Fact." *Harvard Business Review*, March–April 1990, p. 167.
21. Katz, Robert L., (1974). "Skills of an Effective Administrator." *Harvard Business Review*, September–October 1974.

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