IT'S ABOUT TIME

Some overtime often can't be avoided, but project leaders—and their organizations—must work to maintain the delicate work/life balance.

BY NEAL WHITTEN, PMP, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

The subject of working overtime is a common, and often emotional, topic. Views can differ from person to person and organization to organization. As project, program and organizational leaders, we need to come to terms with this valuable, yet often misunderstood and abused tool, and ensure it is appropriately handled. This includes understanding what overtime means to the business, to ourselves and to those we lead. Here are some thoughts that can serve as a baseline for consideration and discussion of this important topic in your organization.

Most organizations rely on and expect some overtime from their employees in order to meet business objectives. But every organization has its own overtime work culture. Some want overtime to be a rare occurrence, others require approval from higher-ups. Some organizations compensate their employees for overtime and some are subject to collective bargaining rules.

How Much?

A team member should typically expect to work up to 10 hours a week of overtime—sometimes for many weeks or months—if needed. And there will likely be times when a he or she must work more than that in a given week.

If the situation continues for extended periods of time, however, something may be amiss. Team members might be unreasonably overloaded, require additional training, have unproductive work habits or be in the wrong job. Working excessive overtime—more than 10 overtime hours on average per week—can contribute to burnout, personal hardship and other negative outcomes. If team members believe they're clocking too much overtime, they should talk with their leader or boss—and propose solutions.

Working excessive overtime may be justified, however, if it's required to save a job, company or satisfy personal objectives. There are also some people who choose to work the extra time because of their love for the job.

Although overtime can cause a person's productivity and quality of work to suffer, it can have the opposite effect for team members who are highly motivated and focused.

A Safety Net

Overtime is one form of buffer contingency. It should function as a safety net to ensure the necessary work gets done. The point to working overtime is not to work more hours, it's to achieve results, whether it's to fulfill commitments or to meet emerging business needs.

Forcing people to put in overtime typically shouldn't be planned into long-term projects or they will likely be at greater risk because of the loss of overtime as a buffer contingency. But on very short projects of only days to a few weeks, it may be planned to meet the business needs.

A host of organizational ills can be behind all those extra hours: an overzealous sales and marketing staff, inadequate or misunderstood requirements, poor estimates, weak planning and tracking, weak leadership. But overtime is not necessarily a sign that anyone has made a mistake. And the best-run projects are not necessarily those that finish without overtime required. On any project, it may be periodically required as project members scurry to reach a major milestone.

Working overtime to achieve more than is expected or because you volunteered to "save the day" can help your career, but it shouldn't be a requirement. The importance of team members achieving a healthy balance between their personal and professional lives cannot be overstated—and a good leader makes sure that happens. PM

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