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# Span of Control

## Multnomah County

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### Final Report

Central Human Resources

Classification & Compensation Unit

January 2026



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# Span of Control report

December 31, 2025

<b>Overview</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Process</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Research Methodology</b>	<b>2</b>
Positions included as supervisory	2
Positions included as non-supervisory	2
Types of positions counted in calculations	2
How the average span of control was calculated	2
<b>Findings</b>	<b>4</b>
Positions reviewed	4
Overall average span of control	5
Overall supervisor to non-supervisor ratio	6
<b>Considerations Beyond the Numbers</b>	<b>7</b>
Factors that impact spans	7
Example org charts and impacts	8
<b>Best Practices</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Next Steps</b>	<b>12</b>

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## Overview

This report is in response to Budget Note #6 from Commissioner Meghan Moyer, which states:

Budget Note #6  
Commissioner Meghan Moyer

### Span of Control

The ratio of management-to-staff is often guided by the principle of "span of control." Best practice generally suggests a 1:5 to 1:10 ratio of managers to staff, with each manager leading approximately 5-10 direct reports. However, the ideal ratio can vary based on the nature of the work, the experience of employees and managers, and the level of interaction between them. That being said, on an organizational level it is important to maintain a management-to-staff ratio in line with our objective of maximizing the number of employees whose primary responsibilities are delivering direct services to the community.

It is vital that Multnomah County maintains the ability to deliver high-quality services in a leaner environment. An important step toward this leaner operating model is an evaluation of the span of control and a tighter adherence to maximizing the number of frontline employees while learning to manage that work in a more efficient management structure.

This budget note states the Board's expectation that policy compliance will be demonstrated by January 2026 in the following manner:

A written report will be provided to the Board of Commissioners on achieving an average management-to-staff ratio of 1:7 or greater. The report should include organizational charts and an implementation strategy.

## Process

Central Human Resources led the data collection and review process for this study, reporting trends and findings to the COO's Office and department leadership. Below is a timeline:



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## Research Methodology

### Positions included as supervisory

Positions that were considered supervisory for the purposes of calculating average span include those in non-represented jobs that require supervision of staff. We have job profiles that *may* supervise staff, though since it is not a requirement of the job, positions in these job profiles were not considered supervisory positions in the analysis.

Excluded: positions filled by employees on leave with 0 reports in the system, Labor Relations managers (positions are in a job profile based on market and internal alignment of work to HR Managers based on complexity of work & risk to the organization, but primary role is contract negotiations where direct supervision is not a requirement)

### Positions included as non-supervisory

Positions that were considered non-supervisory for the purposes of calculating average span include those in all jobs other than non-represented jobs that require supervision of staff.

### Types of positions counted in calculations

Position types included in span calculations are regular status, limited duration, temporary, on-call, and interns. Contractors and volunteers were excluded from the analysis.

The decision to include temporary, on-call, and intern employee types was based on the supervisory lift that exists for all position types beyond regular status and limited duration. Tasks involve hiring, performance management, scheduling, assigning and monitoring of work, and adhering to collective bargaining agreements (when applicable).

A secondary analysis of span with only regular and limited duration employee types showed that the county remained in an overall positive average for span in this more limited view.

### How the average span of control was calculated

Data was analyzed using two calculations. First, looking at spans of control or number of direct reports, by position, averaged out. Second, the non-supervisor to supervisor ratio. The ratio analysis shows a smaller number than actual average spans of control because supervisors who report to higher level managers are not accounted for in the numerator.

1. Span of Control: org chart reviews

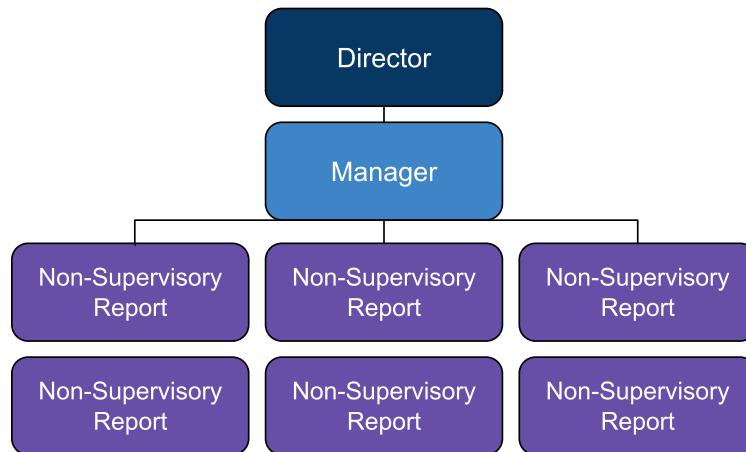
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The number of direct reports to each position in a job profile that requires supervision averaged out. Data was broken into two analyses: span of control based on all employee types and span of control based on regular and limited duration employee types only.

## 2. Non-Supervisor to Supervisor Ratio

The number of non-supervisors is divided by the number of supervisors to reach the ratio between the two categories. Data was broken into two analyses: span of control based on all employee types and span of control based on regular and limited duration employee types only.

*Hypothetical organizational chart*



*This org chart has two supervisory positions and six non-supervisory positions.*

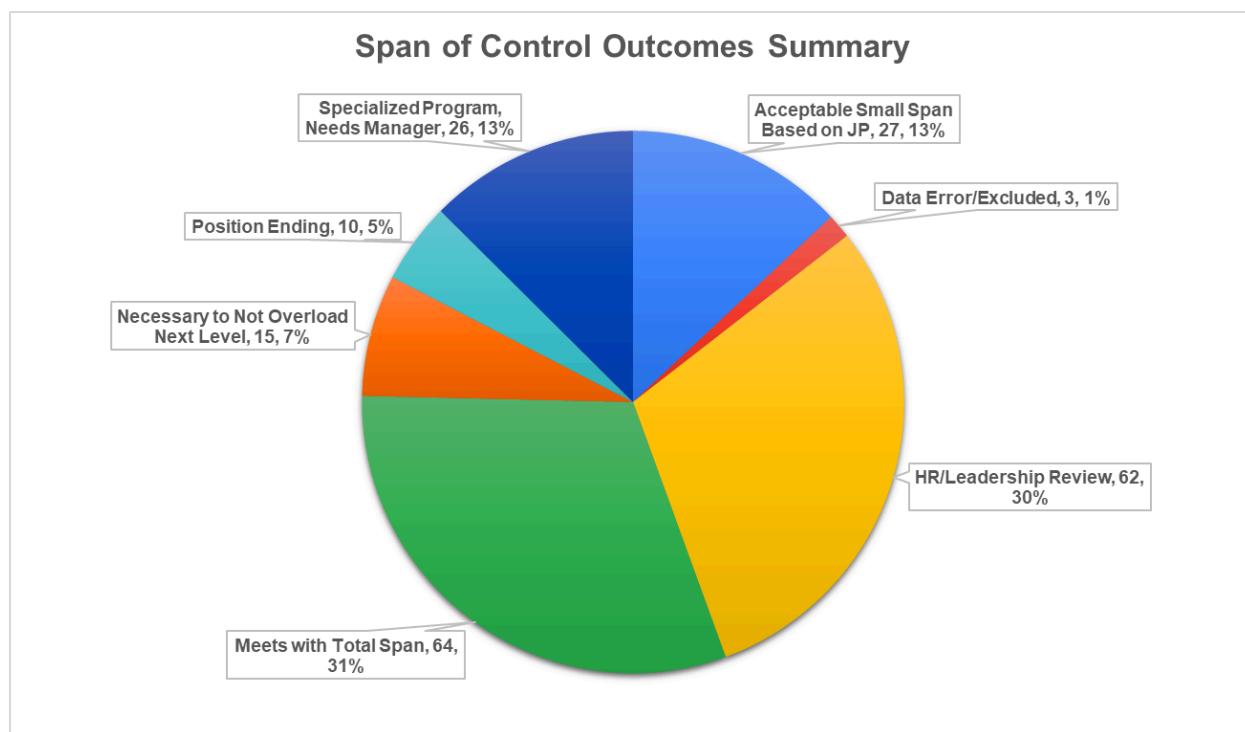
1. Span of Control of each supervisory position
  - a. Director's Span = 1
  - b. Manager's Span = 6
  - c. Average Span:  $(1 + 6) / 2 = 3.5$
2. Non-Supervisor to Supervisor Ratio:  $6 / 2 = 3$

## Findings

### Positions reviewed

Overview of Supervisory Positions				
Data Effective Date	Managers Reviewed	At or Above 1:7	Below 1:7	Below 1:5
September	667	67%	33%	23%
December	663	68%	31%	22%

Positions that fell below a span of 1:7 were analyzed by Human Resources and county leadership. In many cases, span sizes were explainable based on common themes:



- **Acceptable small span based on job profile (13%):** Some jobs are commonly associated with smaller spans based on the nature of the jobs. *Example:* Assistant County Attorneys, practicing Medical Directors, Project Managers.
- **Data Error/Excluded (1%):** A small percentage of positions were categorized as a data error and position that should be excluded. *Example:* leaves, retirements, etc.

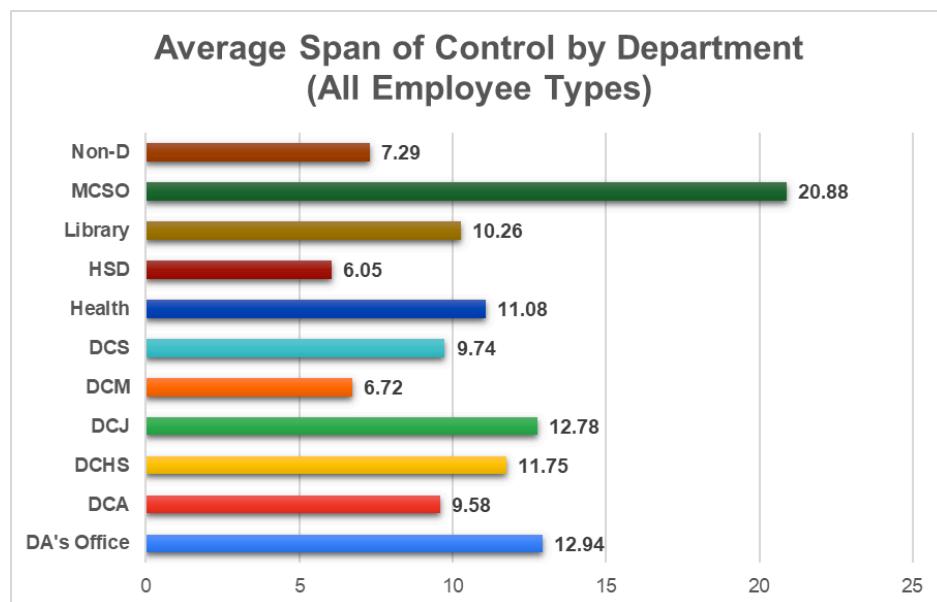
- **HR/Leadership Review (30%):** Just over 60 positions were reviewed by Human Resources, the COO's Office, and Department Directors to discuss structures, needs, and if alternative structures are possible.
- **Meets with Total Span (31%):** Positions who have reporting supervisor and/or managers and who meet with their total span were deemed appropriate. *Example:* Manager Senior with 5 reporting Supervisors who all supervise 10 people = total span of 55.
- **Necessary to not Overload Next Level (7%):** The next level manager could not reasonably assume the direct reports and the position is seen as necessary. *Example:* Program Supervisor with 6 reports who reports to the Deputy Director of a department - it would not be reasonable to have 6 more reports roll up to a Deputy Director level role.
- **Position Ending (5%):** Positions that have a planned end date. *Example:* Library bond positions.
- **Specialized Program, Needs Manager (13%):** Positions that oversee a specialized area and work cannot be combined or moved elsewhere. *Example:* Workplace Security Director (3 direct reports, but the top level over a critical function and external/contractor responsibilities that do not count toward span).

## Overall average span of control

The number of direct reports to each position in a job profile that requires supervision, averaged out.

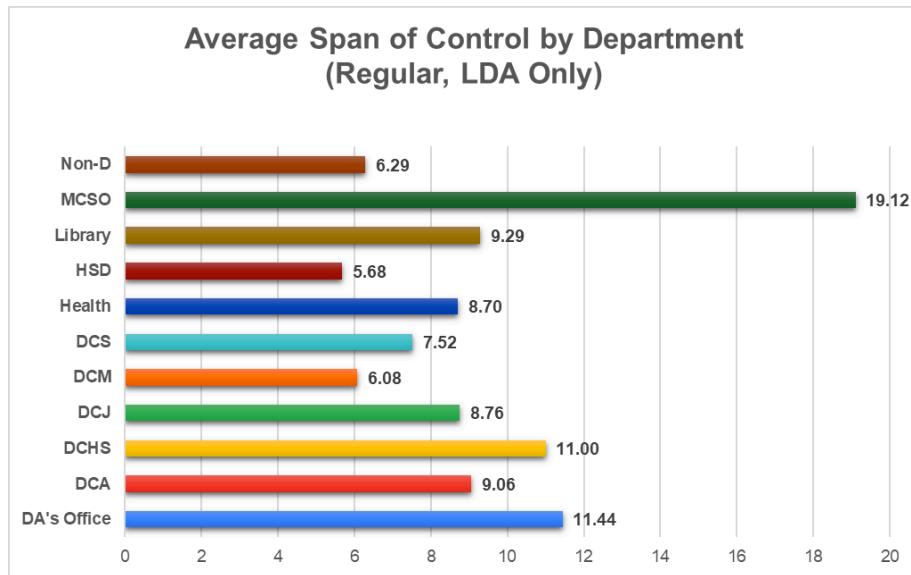
*Average Span of Control (employee types: regular, limited duration, on-call, temp, intern)*

### Countywide Average: 1 : 11



Average Span of Control (employee types: regular, limited duration)

### Countywide Average: 1 : 9



### Overall supervisor to non-supervisor ratio

The number of non-supervisors is divided by the number of supervisors to reach the ratio between the two categories.

#### Countywide Ratio Calculation (All employee types, excl. contractors)

$$6508 \div 666 = 10$$

*Non-supervisors ÷ supervisors in jobs that REQUIRE supervision = Ratio*

#### Countywide Ratio Calculation (LDA, Reg only)

$$5108 \div 664 = 8$$

*Non-supervisors ÷ supervisors in jobs that REQUIRE supervision = Ratio*

## Considerations Beyond the Numbers

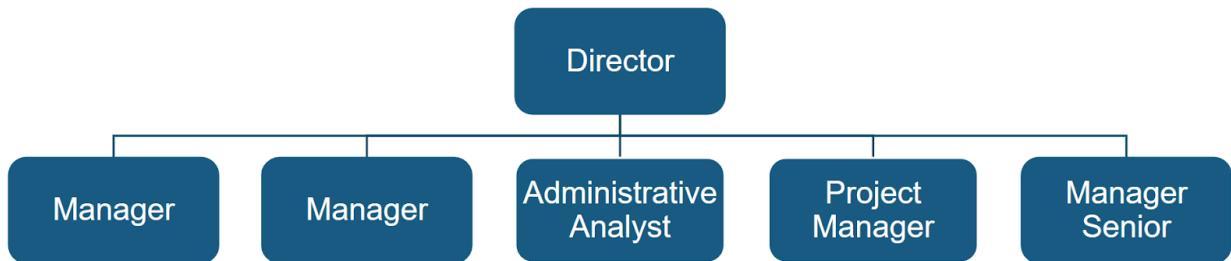
### Factors that impact spans

There are a number of factors that influence the span of each supervisory position. The chart below identifies major areas that can defend both a smaller-than and larger-than 7 span of control.

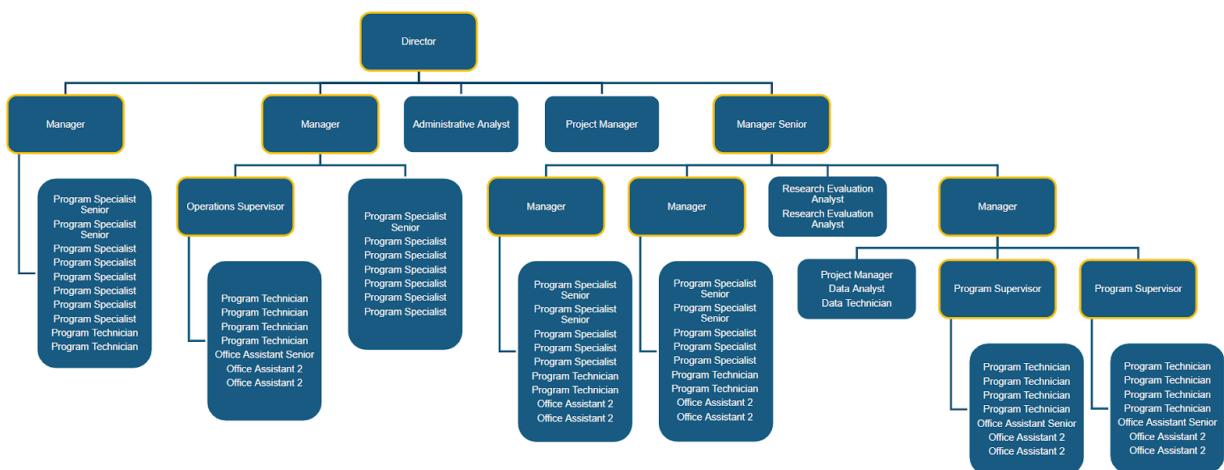
		Narrow Span	Wide Span	
Complex	<b>Nature of the work</b>		Not Complex	
Different	<b>Similarity of activities performed</b>		Similar	
Unclear	<b>Clarity of organizational objectives</b>		Clear	
Vague	<b>Degree of task certainty</b>		Definite Rules	
High	<b>Degree of risk in the work for the organization</b>		Low	
High	<b>Degree of public scrutiny</b>		Low	
Heavy	<b>Burden of non-supervisory duties</b>		Light	
High	<b>Degree of coordination required</b>		Low	
None	<b>Availability of staff assistance</b>		Abundant	
Dispersed	<b>Geographic location of reporting staff</b>		Together	
		More Supervisors	Fewer Supervisors	

## Example org charts and impacts

In the hypothetical organizational chart below, we see a span of control of 5, which would flag the Director position for further review. Beyond the 5 direct reports, the Director has a total span (direct and indirect) of much larger than 7. This example shows that org charts are only a small piece of the picture when analyzing positions.



*This hypothetical director has a direct span of control of 5, falling below the desired countywide standard of 7. What does their full span look like?*



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## Best Practices

There are varying levels of the “ideal” span of control in published articles and in most we found that the proper span of control varies based on a number of factors and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Below are some resources that were helpful:

- *Metro span of control report (2024): highlights include that there are different opinions about the optimal span of control, using the analysis to evaluate organizational structures would add value. Grouping organizational units with similar business needs together to establish appropriate benchmarks may be beneficial. As of January 2024, the average manager in central and government service departments supervised between five and six employees, while a manager at the visitor venues supervised between six and seven.*
  - *Metro has established guidelines on about 15 supervisory jobs, generally ranging from 3-5 and establishing that if span is below 3 but total span is above 20 it can be acceptable*
- *The City of Portland Auditor’s Office produced Span of Control studies in 1994 and 2011. The City of Portland’s HR and Budget team updated the span of control study in 2025, which included the following findings and chart of considerations and ratios:*
  - *All available literature on span of control, including the City’s prior reports, agree that there is no single target span of control that will work for all situations. The ideal span of control is a function of multiple variables that are hard to measure and can frequently change. Generally, a lower (narrower) span of control supports better control and coordination within the team. For higher (wider) spans of control to be effective, authority must be delegated throughout the organization to prevent bottlenecks at the supervisor level. While wide spans of control are often viewed as more efficient and nimbler than more hierarchical organizations, they may be more prone to inconsistency and lack of accountability. Ideally, the nature of the work should drive the decision regarding appropriate span of control.*
    - *March 2025 citywide ratio: 7:1*
    - *Minimum span on many supervisory jobs: 4*
    - *Action items: citywide policy development, classification review process that enhances span, reclass or reorg positions as needed, include span in budget analysis process*

← Narrow Spans →		
	Nature of the work	Wide Spans
Complex	Not complex	
Different	Similarity of activities performed	Similar
Not clear	Clarity of organizational objectives	Clear
Fuzzy	Degree of task certainty	Definite rules
High	Degree of risk in the work for the organization	Low
High	Degree of public scrutiny	Low
Weak	Supervisor's qualifications and experience	Strong
Heavy	Burden of non-supervisory duties	Light
High	Degree of coordination required	Low
None	Availability of staff assistance	Abundant
Weak	Qualifications and experience of subordinates	Strong
Dispersed	Geographic location of subordinates	Together

← More Supervisors →

- SHRM - [All Industry](#) Human Capital Report (2022) – no public sector specific report

Level	n	25th Percentile	Median
Exec	1,138	3	5
Middle Mgmt	1,107	4	8

- This report notes that “Each table in the report contains benchmarks in aggregated form. There may be discrepancies between your organization’s benchmarks and the average or median numbers for a particular category. It is particularly **helpful to communicate to stakeholders that just because your organization has benchmarks that are different from the average or median, it does not mean they are favorable or unfavorable**. Rather, they may be the result of a particular total organizational strategy, special circumstances or other business initiatives.”

- National findings from the [Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey](#) in 2021 reflects that the governmental public health workforces are made up of 73% non-supervisory and 27% Supervisors, managers & execs. This ratio was consistent with 2017 findings. This PH WINS data is endorsed by the Public Health Accreditation Board (one of Multnomah County’s accrediting bodies) as a tool to benchmark workforce planning.

- State of Oregon: ORS 291.227 established a maximum supervisory ratio, however, a set number does not work for all State agencies.
  - [ORS 291.227](#) says the baseline ratio is 1:11

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- *Each agency over 100 employees will establish their own maximum depending on a number of factors (safety, geographic locations, industry standards, unique needs, use of contingent or non-agency employees, financial scope)*
- *The Department of Administrative Services may exempt an agency from the limitations if an additional supervisory position is reasonably necessary*
- *A [report is published quarterly](#), where differing spans by agency can be seen (examples below):*
  - *Department of Public Safety Standards and Training: 1:18*
  - *Department of Transportation 1:11*
  - *Oregon Housing and Community Services: 1:07*
  - *Public Utility Commission: 1:06*
- *Span is calculated by # of non-supervisory positions divided by the # of supervisory positions*
  - *This indicates that there is flexibility within State agencies where some positions are above the set ratio and others are below, so long as the average from this calculation is at the agency's established standards*

➤ *Survey of local jurisdictions: Central HR asked neighboring jurisdictions what their span of control practices and/or minimums are and responses include:*

- *3 jurisdictions have no minimum, each position is evaluated independently*
- *2 jurisdictions have a minimum of 2 direct reports*
- *1 jurisdiction has a minimum of 4 on many supervisory jobs*
- *1 jurisdiction has a minimum of 3-5 on select management jobs; with lower than 3 spans accepted if total span is greater than 20*

## Next Steps

While the county's average already meets the budget notes identified benchmark, this analysis has been a helpful review and discussion point for HR and is ultimately helping to solidify best practices moving forward as Central HR reviews and approves new and existing positions. We recognize that a consistent approach is valuable, while acknowledging the need to maintain our ability to give positions a full review beyond the number of direct reports. There are circumstances and unique programs that call for and need a managerial level to operate, and may fall below the 1:7 ratio. Alternatively, there are managerial positions who oversee much greater than a 1:7 span due to the program and staff being more narrowly focused. In conclusion, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to encompass all positions at the county, however, Human Resources and county leadership will continue to monitor that the overall countywide average remains in alignment with a 1:7 ratio benchmark. Positions which fall below this benchmark will be looked at in terms of scope, risk, complexity, and other factors that necessitate a managerial position.

Multnomah County edited and adopted the chart that the City of Portland developed in their span of control studies for reasons most applicable to the county. This resource can serve as a living document that is updated as we continue to learn more about span of control at the county and unique needs:

		Narrow Span	Wide Span	
		Nature of the work		
Complex				Not Complex
Different		Similarity of activities performed		Similar
Unclear		Clarity of organizational objectives		Clear
Vague		Degree of task certainty		Definite Rules
High		Degree of risk in the work for the organization		Low
High		Degree of public scrutiny		Low
Heavy		Burden of non-supervisory duties		Light
High		Degree of coordination required		Low
None		Availability of staff assistance		Abundant
Dispersed		Geographic location of reporting staff		Together
		More Supervisors		Fewer Supervisors

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**Moving forward, Central Human Resources will:**

- Utilize a countywide benchmark of 1:7 for supervisory positions that do *not* have reporting supervisors (where total span is greater than 7)
  - Positions not meeting this benchmark will be reviewed by HR and/or county leadership based on department needs, job profile, and operational factors including but not limited to: budget, scope and risk of program, next level of management span too large to absorb, multiple worksites supervised, etc.
- Analyze and report out average span of control to Department Directors and HR teams bi-annually.
  - Departments which fall below the 1:7 average will be reviewed in depth, ensuring there are no data errors and evaluating options with department leadership
  - Report timing will coincide with budget processes:
    - August - show the impact of the most recent budget adoption and begin planning for the next year
    - Early January (Dec data) - to aid in planning for the upcoming budget
- Evaluate span of control outcomes throughout shared services project rollouts