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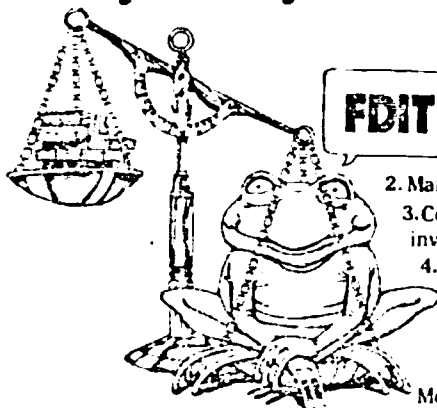
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portant role in organizations that run smoothly. Problems arise when organizations overemphasize incentives that rivet attention on expressed recognition and undermine regard for implied recognition. As a result, all the members of the "team" try to grab the ball and nobody blocks. They seldom win consistently. But why grab from others what they will give you voluntarily? When you make sure you get the credit you deserve, in the long run you get less of it than you would otherwise.

Japanese perspective provides a further insight. It reminds us that the real organization you are working for is the organization called yourself. The problems and challenges of the organization that you are working for "out there" and the one "in here" are not two separate things. They grow toward excellence together. The sense of the "implied" for accommodation and timing and the sense of the "expressed" for the jugular must be woven together like strands in a braided rope, alternately appearing and disappearing from sight but part of the whole. Good executives master the art and the science of management—not just one or the other.

### Staff assignments in accounting firms

*Staff assignment is a problem in all firms, including the smaller ones. Miklos A. Vasarhelyi, Ph.D., associate professor of business, Graduate School of Business, Columbia University, New York, N. Y. 10027, has made a study of the staff assignment systems used in 12 CPA firms; what he learned could be of interest to many of us.*

Staff assignment is a key factor in public accounting firm profitability, client satisfaction and auditor career development. This article is directed to the large number of accountants who are assigners or managers of accounting personnel. Its purpose is to propose some recommendations for improving the staff assignment system and to

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help users of accounting services to understand assignment problems. Even though 12 large offices of CPA firms were surveyed, the results are also applicable to the small practitioner. The assignment process, if well performed, increases firm profitability and creates the climate for a well-balanced and satisfied staff.

**The staff allocation-assignment problem**

There are two basic types of staff requests: experienced staff (more than two years of service with the firm) tend to be specifically requested to return to engagements while less experienced staff are usually requested in more general terms—no individual is requested by name. The key difficulty with experienced staff is that they—or the schedulers—must “juggle” schedules to satisfy the requests, particularly as expanding staff responsibilities require increased time allotments to successive engagements. This problem can be eased by publicizing staff availability through long-range assignment predictions and allowing managers to pick and choose as well as to negotiate allocation.

The second type of request allows for more flexibility in that staff members are regarded as interchangeable. This permits the scheduler to consider such issues as engagement location, audit group composition and individual specialization skills and preferences.

Ultimately, the assignment process is a way to try to satisfy a series of conflicting requirements. The schedulers try to match client and staff needs with a hierarchy of objectives in scheduling. In order to improve the process, management can improve the quality of the scheduler's perceptions by adopting formal policies and obtaining better and more timely information. A series of methods and steps to reach these objectives will be described below. However, a consistent and homogeneous system is needed rather than a set of independent steps. These recommendations were developed and based on observation of CPA firm scheduling, consensus among CPA

firms of desirable procedures and systems analysis of the different processes observed.

**The proposed assignment procedure**

The assignment procedure should be used jointly with a good set of forms such as those described in the April 1977 Forum article by Daniel S. Goldberg, “New Light on Staff Scheduling” (pages 50-52). Figure 1, page 46, summarizes the proposed procedure.

1 Accountants in charge (AIC) of engagements will present a plan for the next year's engagement with their final reports. These plans encompass tentative dates, staff members to be involved (and available according to the master schedule), hours per task and a dollar budget at present billing rates. Dollar budgets prevent the “needed skills inflation syndrome” where an AIC requires highly skilled staff members in order to facilitate his task and to avoid having to train beginners.

2 Once this plan is reviewed by the manager or partner responsible for the engagement, it is forwarded to the scheduler to be incorporated into the master schedule.

3 On receipt of an engagement plan, the scheduler evaluates it for its reasonableness, conflicts in specific personnel request, technical requirements for the job and geographical location of the job in relation to the staff member's residence. Conflicts and inconsistencies are resolved through negotiation with the AIC and adjustments to the engagement plan.

4 The scheduler will decide on the assignment of the unspecified personnel by following company assignment policies. The actual hierarchy of priorities on staff assignments are stated formally as the firm's policy guideline.

5 Decisions are entered on a master schedule, which maintains a one-year “lookahead.” This master schedule is posted for all staff members' perusal. At the end of each quarter, the expired three-month period is dropped from the master schedule and a new one is added.

6 The problems and shortcomings of the last quarter's scheduling, as

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well as of the ones expected for the coming quarters, are evaluated. This entails an examination of staff utilization levels, promotions and turnover; decisions on the levels and timing of hiring; and planning for training and vacation scheduling.

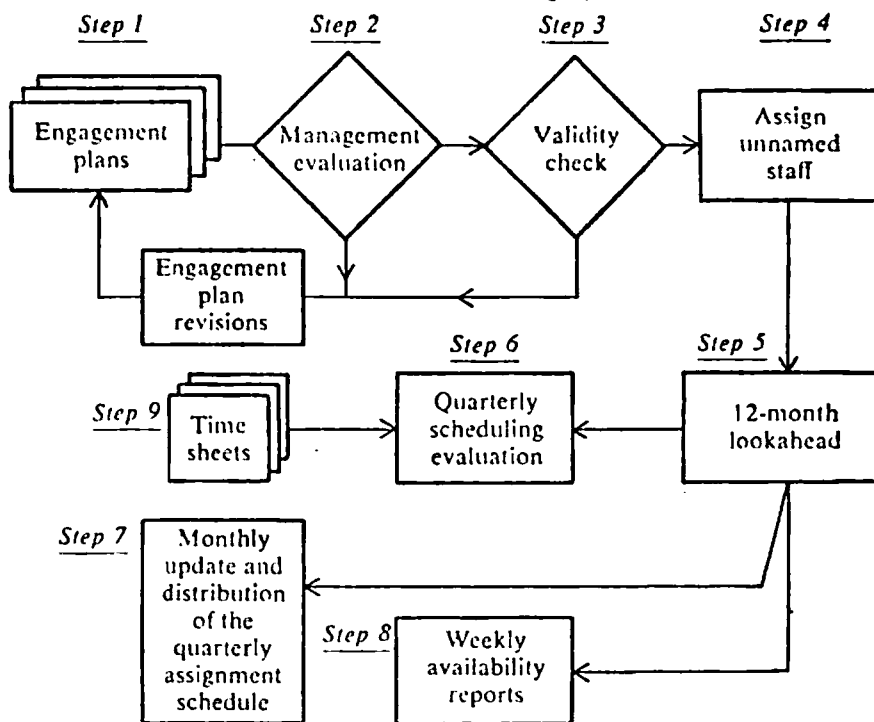
7 Every month an updated copy of the schedule for the following quarter, taken from the master schedule, is distributed to the entire staff. AICs are charged with calling up the assigned staff before the start of the engagement. If there are significant changes in the master schedule (such as an engagement shift), the reasons should be explained to the staff member as well as to the AIC. This sort of frank communication is necessary to avoid having staff members read unwarranted meanings into scheduling changes.

8 In order to deal with short-term adjustments, a weekly availability report is circulated through the managers for short-term requests. Managers are to use unassigned personnel rather than resort to overtime of scheduled personnel. All changes during the job are discussed with the scheduler, and those initiating such changes should give at least a 48-hour warning. These are treated as short-term changes and considered separately from the main assignment process.

9 The time-sheet reporting system is tied into job performance and budgets. A quarterly "performance" report is valuable, particularly for feedback rather than for evaluation purposes. "Anticipated overtime" is separated from "unexpected overtime," which is an uncontrollable variance.

A scheduling evaluation system allows the firm to establish its objectives on a quarterly basis and then examine how well these objectives are being met. For example, during the busy season, the firm may set goals of 15 percent overtime, four staff members slated to be hired and four to be terminated or to resign. These evaluation results are provided both to the scheduler and the partner in charge of the office. The scheduler is also supplied with feedback from the staff through an

**Figure 1**  
The proposed scheduling system



**Notes on selected steps**

- Step 1: Engagement plans are to be filed immediately at the end of the prior year's engagement.
- Step 3: Does the plan conform to policy? Does it provide desired experience to staff members? Is the staff still available?
- Step 4: Are the staff's desires being considered? Is the firm's staffing policy being followed?

item in their evaluation forms or through a separate form to be completed periodically.

**The scheduler**

The personality and job description of the scheduler is of major importance in this process. A scheduler should have the final decision about assignments. His or her decisions should not be overruled by a partner. A formal procedure for review of contested decisions is advisable.

The nature of the scheduler's job requires job continuity. Six months' notice is advisable in the change of schedulers. Another requirement is that a second person always be informed of major scheduling issues through the routing of key documents and committee participation. This person may be the eventual replacement of the scheduler and may be eased into the job by being placed in charge of short-term assignments.

The scheduler is a person who is experienced in auditing. However, audit experience may be replaced by long-term experience in personnel work. Schedulers must be aware of the staff's behavioral needs, sensitive to client's requirements and understand on-the-job pressures. Lack of common communication skills will inevitably lead to staff dissatisfaction and high turnover.

**Conclusion**

The benefits of these recommendations are applicable not only to scheduling but also to communications and promotions within CPA firms. Unfortunately, in spite of its importance, the scheduling problem has been taken too lightly by practitioners. It must be attacked in a systematic manner, with a competent and well-informed scheduler, and schedules should be communicated to all staff levels. ■