

Career Compass No. 20: They've Oversized My Job!

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest reviews some steps you can take to handle additional work that's landed on your desk during periods of economic belt-tightening.

I work as one of two purchasing agents in the Finance Department of a medium sized city. I have enjoyed my position and am committed to the organization. However, as part of recent budget cuts, the Finance Director has eliminated one of the purchasing agent positions and now I am doing the work of two people. Expectations have not diminished; I feel that I am always behind; and I am stressed to the max. They've oversized my job. What can I do?

With several straight years of budget and staffing cuts, most local government employees have taken on more work. Our jobs are much more demanding and we all feel stressed. However, I can suggest a few approaches to make your situation more tolerable or better yet to use the situation to your career advantage.

Before I explore potential strategies, you must understand that you are in a position of strength as you take on addition work and duties. Management cannot get out the work with fewer resources without skilled and committed people like you. Therefore, you need to leverage this opportunity.

Ten Strategies

STRATEGY 1: IDENTIFY PRIORITIES

As a first step, you should meet with your manager, acknowledge together that your workload has dramatically increased, and mutually agree on some priority projects or assignments. It is also important that you discuss these priorities with the departments that you serve and the your larger Finance Department team. Based on these discussions, you and your manager may decide on tweaking the priorities.

STRATEGY 2: NEGOTIATE TIMELINES

In conjunction with your manager and your customer departments, it is imperative that you negotiate and agree upon some realistic timelines for both priority and non-priority assignments.

STRATEGY 3: REDESIGN THE SERVICE

Since management has oversized your job and the same service delivered with fewer staffing resources may be untenable, you need to redesign how you do the job. For instance, is some self-service a realistic option? With some training and technical support, can smaller purchases or contracts be handled by the staff in the customer departments? Can the departments handle

several steps in the process? Can you and the departments eliminate a few steps and streamline the process to make some self-service a viable alternative?

STRATEGY 4: SECURE ADDITIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT AND COACHING

In the discussions with your manager, you should request more administrative support from other Finance Department staff in order to handle some of your lower-level tasks. It is also legitimate to request coaching for any challenging tasks or assignments.

STRATEGY 5: SUBTRACT

As you add more work to your plate, you have the opportunity to take some work off as well. When you review your additional assignments with your boss, you should come prepared to discuss what you can subtract or shift to someone else, especially if the delegated assignment is a development opportunity for the other person. Delegating may include some reporting or other administrative work. Subtracting could focus on ritualistic non-value-added work that can be totally eliminated.

STRATEGY 6: ADD

To complement your subtraction efforts, you may seek ways to add. Could you add resources from another department, a part-time employee, an intern or even a volunteer?

STRATEGY 7: KNOW YOUR LIMITS

Once you have explored priorities, reasonable timelines, opportunities to redesign the work, subtracting work and adding resources, you must identify your limits and stand firm on what you can accomplish and what you cannot. Of course, you want to help your agency and support other team members as much as possible in dire times. However, you have a responsibility to yourself and to others to insist on a do-able workload. You are not doing anyone a favor if you are overwhelmed and therefore ineffectual. Assert yourself!

STRATEGY 8: NEGOTIATE MORE CONTROL OVER YOUR WORK

While you may wish some assistance in one area or another, including help from your boss, you may also relish less over-the-shoulder supervision. If so, you can agree with your boss when it is reasonable to check in and report progress and any problems but basically you can handle your job without daily or weekly supervision. In other words, you can use the oversizing situation to create less reporting and more freedom in how you do your job.

STRATEGY 9: SECURE HIGHER-LEVEL ASSIGNMENTS OR MORE ENJOYABLE TASKS

Amidst all the new work, you need to identify some higher-level “stretch” assignments that would provide new experiences, promote learning and new skills, and create new relationships. As you accept more tasks, you must ensure that a few are developmental opportunities. Likewise, you can negotiate a few more enjoyable tasks to be included in your expanded portfolio.

STRATEGY 10: NEGOTIATE SOME KEY BENEFITS

After acknowledging with your manager that the organization is making many more demands on you and significantly increasing your workload, you can legitimately negotiate some important benefits. For instance, how about a better working title that would help you secure a higher-level position in the future? Or, after you have demonstrated that you have risen to the

challenge, how about negotiating a promotion? The organization is still saving a substantial amount of money by eliminating the other purchasing agent position even after giving you a raise. Another option is negotiating a flex schedule or working from home one day per week where you can do more work in an uninterrupted environment. At the very least, you should indicate that you would like some more visibility in the organization as you seek advancement. You may agree with your boss that you will make some presentations to the City Council or Department Head team or serve on a high-visibility taskforce representing the Finance Department.

Whatever agreements you make with your boss or others, it is a good idea to make them as explicit as possible and put them in writing.

Take Care of Yourself

As you undergo more stress, you need to take care of yourself. Some suggestions include:

- Eat well
- Exercise on a regular basis
- Take a weight control class
- Walk at mid-day or after work
- Take a yoga or meditation class
- Avoid self-medication through drinking or drugs
- Get adequate sleep
- Don't neglect your hobbies or friends
- Avoid isolation; connect with others
- Have a good laugh and blow off steam with co-workers (for example, joke about whose jobs got oversized the most)

To get some advice or guidance on employer-sponsored wellness programs, you can visit your HR Department. Your agency may also provide an Employee Assistance Program which can identify available wellness programs. Your health care provider is another source of prevention and wellness resources.

Use Your Leverage

Again, if your local government agency is oversizing your job, you have leverage. You should neither over-reach ("I want a promotion and more money or I won't take on the additional work") nor underestimate the opportunity. You can use your legitimate leverage in negotiating priorities, timelines, administrative support, coaching, and learning and development opportunities as well as other benefits.



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff, and appears in ICMA's [JOB newsletter](#) and online. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.