TYPICAL ACTIVITY PATTERNS IN MANAGERIAL WORK
(for our purposes here managers = supervisors; no references included)

To discover what managers do and how they spend their time, researchers have used descriptive methods such as direct observation, diaries, and interviews. The researchers attempted to find answers to questions such as how much time managers spend alone or interacting with different people (e.g., subordinates, peers, superiors, outsiders), how often managers use different forms of interaction (e.g., telephone, scheduled meetings, unscheduled meetings, written messages), where the interactions occur, how long they last, and who initiated them. Reviews of this research find some consistent activity patterns for most types of managerial positions (Hales, 1986; McCall, Morrison, & Hannan, 1978; Mintzberg, 1973). Here are some major findings about the nature of managerial/supervisory work.

- **Pace of Work Is Hectic and Unrelenting**
The typical manager works long hours, and many managers take work home. In part, this workload can be traced to the preferences of people in managerial positions. Having trained their minds to search for and analyze new information continually, most managers do this automatically and find it difficult to forget about their jobs when at home or on vacation. During the typical manager’s day, there is seldom a break in the workload. Managers receive almost continuous requests for information, assistance, direction, and authorization from a large number of people, such as subordinates, peers, superiors, and people outside the organization. The research on managerial activities contradicts the popular conception of managers as people who carefully plan and orchestrate events and then sit in their office waiting for the occasional exception to normal operations that may require their attention.

- **Content of Work Is Varied and Fragmented**
Managers typically engage in a variety of activities each day, and many of them are very brief in duration. Mintzberg’s (1973, p. 33) observations of executives found that “half of the activities were completed in less than nine minutes, and only one-tenth took more
than an hour.” The activities of managers tend to be fragmented as well as varied. Interruptions occur frequently, conversations are disjointed, and important activities are interspersed with trivial ones, requiring rapid shifts of mood. A manager may go from a budget meeting involving decisions about spending millions of dollars to a discussion about how to fix a broken water fountain (Sayles, 1979).

- **Many Activities Are Reactive**

  The fragmented nature of managerial activity reflects the fact that many interactions are initiated by others, and much of a manager’s behavior is reactive rather than proactive in nature. A common stereotype of managers is that they spend a considerable part of their time in careful analysis of business problems and development of elaborate plans to deal with them. However, the descriptive studies find that most managers devote little time to reflective planning. The fragmented activities and continual heavy demands characteristic of managerial work make it difficult for managers to find the long periods of uninterrupted time necessary for this type of activity. Reflective planning and other activities that require large blocks of time, such as building a team and training complex skills to subordinates, are usually preempted by “fire fighting” activities involving immediate operational problems. What little time managers spend alone in the office is typically used to read correspondence, check e-mail messages, handle administrative paperwork, write reports or memos, send e-mail messages, and scan journals or technical publications. Most managers gravitate toward the active aspects of their jobs, and they tend to focus on specific, immediate problems rather than general issues or long-term strategies.

  Problems occur in a mostly random order, and managers choose to react to some problems as they become aware of them, while others are ignored or postponed. There are always more problems than a manager can handle at any given time, and some types of problems are more likely to get immediate attention than others. The importance of a problem is a major determinant of whether it will be recognized and handled, but it is often unclear how important a problem really is.
A manager is more likely to respond to a problem if there is pressure for immediate action due to a crisis, deadline, or expectations of progress by someone important, such as the manager’s boss or an external client (McCall & Kaplan, 1985). In the absence of such pressure, a problem is more likely to get action when it is perceived to be similar to other problems that a manager has solved successfully in the past, when the problem is perceived to be clearly within the manager’s domain of responsibility, and when the manager perceives that the actions and resources necessary to solve the problem are available. Managers tend to ignore or postpone dealing with problems for which there is no external pressure for action, problems that are fuzzy and difficult to diagnose, problems for which other managers or subunits are responsible, and problems that cannot be solved without additional resources and support that would be difficult or impossible to obtain.

- **Interactions Often Involve Peers and Outsiders**

Although much of the leadership literature focuses on the relationship between leader and subordinates, the descriptive research has found that managers typically spend considerable time with persons other than direct subordinates or the manager’s boss. These contacts may involve subordinates of subordinates, superiors of the boss, lateral peers, subordinates of lateral peers, and superiors of lateral peers. In addition, many managers spend considerable time with people outside the organization, such as customers, clients, suppliers, subcontractors, people in government agencies, important people in the community, and managers from other organizations. Kotter (1982) found that the network of relationships for general managers often consisted of hundreds of people inside and outside of their organization (see Figure 2-1).

The high incidence of lateral and external interactions can be explained in terms of a manager’s need for information about complex and uncertain events that influence the operations of his or her organizational subunit, and the manager’s dependence on the cooperation and assistance of numerous people outside the immediate chain of command (Kotter, 1982). A large network of
contacts provides information about current events within or outside of the organization that may affect the manager’s job performance and career. In addition, networks can be used to obtain assistance for solving problems or making changes. The ability to assemble a coalition of internal and external supporters is especially important to make innovative changes and ensure that they will be implemented successfully (Kanter, 1983). Managers use different parts of their network for different purposes and extend the network as needed to accomplish a particular objective (Kaplan, 1986).

Networks are developed in a variety of ways, such as (1) talking with people before, during, and after meetings, ceremonies, and social events in the organization; (2) serving on special committees, interest groups, and task forces; (3) joining civic groups, advisory boards, and social clubs; and (4) attending workshops, trade shows, and meetings of professional associations. Cooperative relationships are established and maintained by showing respect and positive regard, offering unconditional favors (e.g., passing on useful information, offering to help with a problem), keeping in touch, and showing appreciation for favors received, especially those requiring a significant effort on the part of the person doing it. The process of networking is a perpetual
activity for managers. Old relationships need to be maintained and new ones established as people in key positions change, the organization changes, and the external environment changes.

- **Many Interactions Involve Oral Communication**

Managers have six principal ways to obtain information: written messages (e.g., memos, letters, reports, work orders, contracts), telephone messages, electronic messages (e-mail), scheduled meetings, unscheduled meetings, and observational tours. Managers show a strong preference for the use of oral communication media such as the telephone and informal meetings. The research on managerial activities found that lower and middle managers spent from 27 to 82 percent of their time engaged in oral communication, and the figure was 65-75 percent for higher-level managers. Now that e-mail is available, this media is becoming more popular, but like written messages, it has limitations.

The research shows that much of the oral communication by managers involves exchange of information and attempts to influence people. Managers tend to prefer current information to old information, and current information is usually obtained from face-to-face contacts with people who have access to it, including many people outside the manager’s organizational subunit. Informal gossip and rumors contain detailed information about recent events and new developments, whereas written reports usually summarize old information. Neustadt (1960, pp. 153-54) found a preference for recent, detailed information even among U.S. presidents:

> It is not information of a general sort that helps a President see personal stakes; not summaries, not surveys, not the bland amalgams. Rather . . . it is the odds and ends of tangible detail that pieced together in his mind illuminate the underside of issues put before him. To help himself, he must reach out as widely as he can for every scrap of fact, opinion, gossip, bearing on his interests and relationships as President.
Oral communication allows the effect of words to be magnified by the effect of intonation, gestures, and other nonverbal communication. Face-to-face interaction facilitates influence attempts and provides an opportunity to obtain immediate feedback about their effectiveness. This feedback can be used to modify and improve the manager’s influence strategy and negotiating effectiveness. The descriptive research found that a manager’s oral interactions tend to include a surprising amount of kidding, joking, and discussing of subjects unrelated to the work (e.g., sports, hobbies) or of trivial importance to it. This socializing activity and small talk probably helps managers to build and maintain effective relationships with the large network of people whose cooperation and support are needed.

- **Decision Processes Are Disorderly and Political**

Much of the management literature has described decisions as discrete events made by a single manager or group in an orderly, rational manner. This picture is sharply contradicted by the descriptive research on managerial work and related research on managerial decision making (Cohen & March, 1974; McCall & Kaplan, 1985; Schweiger, Anderson, & Locke, 1985; Simon, 1987). Managers are seldom observed to make major decisions at a single point in time, and they are unable to recall when a decision was finally reached. Some major decisions are the result of many small actions or incremental choices taken without regard to larger strategic issues.

Decision processes are likely to be characterized more by confusion, disorder, and emotionality than by rationality. Instead of careful analysis of likely outcomes in relation to predetermined objectives, information is often distorted or suppressed to serve preconceptions about the best course of action or a self-serving interest in a particular choice. The emotional shock of discovering a serious problem and anxiety about choosing among unattractive alternatives may result in denial of negative evidence, wishful thinking, procrastination, vacillation between choices, and panic reactions by individual managers or by decision groups (Janis & Mann, 1977).
Important decisions in organizations typically require the support and authorization of many different people at different levels of management and in different subunits of the organization. It is common practice for a manager to consult with subordinates, peers, or superiors about important decisions. The person who initiates the decision process may not be the person who makes the final choice among action alternatives. For example, a section supervisor with a problem may point out the need for a decision to his or her boss, the department manager. The department manager may consult with the plant manager or with managers in other departments who would be affected by the decision. Even when not consulted in advance, the plant manager may review the department manager’s decision and decide to approve, reject, or modify it.

The different people involved in making a decision often disagree about the true nature of a problem and the likely outcomes of various solutions, due to the different perspectives, assumptions, and values typical of managers from different functional specialties and backgrounds. A prolonged, highly political decision process is likely when decisions involve important and complex problems for which there are no readymade, good solutions; there are many affected parties with conflicting interests; and there is a diffusion of power among the parties. The decision process may drag on for months or years due to delays and interruptions as a proposal is sidetracked by opponents, preempted by immediate crises, or recycled back to its initiators for revisions necessary to make it suitable to managers whose support is needed (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret, 1976). For decisions involving major changes in organizational strategies or policies, the outcome will depend to a great extent on the influence skills and persistence of the individual managers who desire to initiate change and on the relative power of the various coalitions involved in making or authorizing these decisions (Kanter, 1983; Kotter, 1982, 1985).

Not all decisions involve major changes or prolonged political processes. Although managers are seldom observed to make major decisions at a given point in time, they do in fact make many less
momentous decisions in the process of solving operational problems, setting short-term goals, assigning work to subordinates, setting up work schedules, authorizing the expenditure of funds for supplies or equipment, and approving pay increases. These decisions often involve problems for which ready-made, low risk solutions are available; the manager has the authority to make a decision; few important people will be affected by the decision; there is little conflict about objectives or solutions; and there is pressure for a quick decision due to a deadline or a crisis. Managers usually make this type of decision either alone or after briefly consulting with a few people, and there is likely to be only a short period of problem analysis and search for solutions (McCall & Kaplan, 1985). Although these decisions are less important, they require appropriate technical knowledge by the manager and the capacity to find a good balance between lengthy, systematic analysis and quick, decisive action. A rash analysis may result in a poor decision that fails to solve the problem or makes it worse. On the other hand, if a manager keeps delaying action to get more information about the problem, it may get worse and become an embarrassment.

- **Most Planning Is Informal and Adaptive**

Planning is often described in the managerial literature as primarily a formal process of written objectives, strategies, policies, and budgets, cascading from top management down the hierarchy, with ever more detailed versions at each lower level of management. The descriptive studies find that some planning occurs, but it is usually informal and implicit. Kotter (1982) found that general managers develop agendas consisting of goals and plans related to their job responsibilities and involving a variety of short-term and long-term issues. The short-term (1 to 30 days) objectives and plans are usually quite specific and detailed, but the longer-term (5 to 20 years) agenda items are usually vague, incomplete, and only loosely connected. A new manager begins the process of developing this agenda immediately, but initially it is likely to be very rough and incomplete. Over time, as managers gather more information about their organization or subunit (e.g., operations, people, politics, markets, competitors, problems and concerns), the agendas are refined and expanded (Gabarro, 1985; Kotter, 1982).
Kotter found that the implementation of agenda items is also a gradual, continuous process. Managers use a variety of influence techniques during their daily interactions with other people to mobilize support and shape events. The agenda guides the manager in making efficient use of random encounters and brief interactions with relevant people in the manager’s network of contacts.

In his study of top executives, Quinn (1980) found that most of the important strategic decisions were made outside the formal planning process, and strategies were formulated in an incremental, flexible, and intuitive manner. In response to major unforeseen events, the executives developed tentative, broad strategies that allowed them to keep their options open until they had more opportunity to learn from experience about the nature of the environment and the feasibility of their initial actions. Strategies were refined and implemented simultaneously in a cautious, incremental manner that reflected the need to develop a political coalition in support of a strategy as well as to avoid the risks of an initial, irreversible commitment to a particular course of action. Instead of a top-down, formal process, overall objectives and strategies for the firms were more likely to be the result of a “bottom-up” political process in which the objectives and strategies of powerful individuals and organizational subunits are reconciled and integrated. The formal, annual plans were merely a confirmation of strategic decisions already reached through the informal political process.