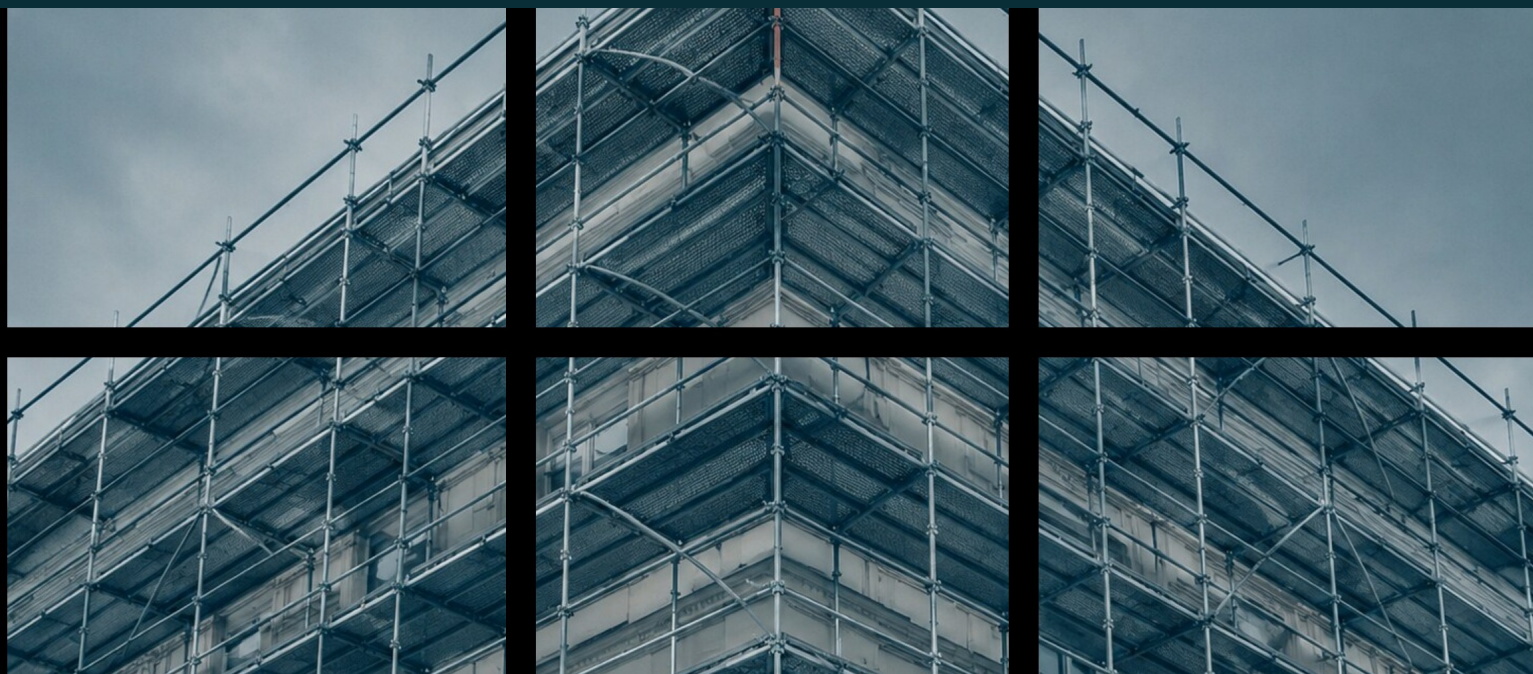


BEYOND THE UTILISATION COLUMN

# The Fiction in the Resource Plan: Why Capacity Planning Promises a Certainty It Can Never Keep

How the machinery of programme governance manufactures a capacity that exists only on the page — and what the fiction quietly protects



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*“The spreadsheet is where the organisation stores the arguments it has chosen not to have.”*

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## 1. Executive Summary

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Every organisation running a portfolio of change keeps, somewhere, a master resource plan: a workbook in which people are allocated to programmes in tidy fractional units, summed to a clean total, and reconciled each period against a column marked demand. It is among the most trusted artefacts the change function produces, and among the least true. The plan promises a precision the organisation cannot deliver. It counts allocation and calls it capacity; it treats a named individual as a fungible unit of effort; and it reconciles to a hundred per cent because the alternative — writing down that the portfolio is attempting more than its people can do — is politically unspeakable.

The useful question is not why the numbers are wrong. Everyone close to the work already knows they are wrong. The question is why the fiction is so stable, so comforting, and so fiercely defended — why intelligent people who would never sign off a financial forecast built on the same assumptions will sign a resource plan built on exactly those assumptions, every quarter, without flinching. This essay argues that the spreadsheet is not a failed attempt at accuracy but a successful piece of organisational theatre: it exists to manufacture the certainty the governance machine demands, to paper over an authority the matrix never resolved, and to keep an uncomfortable truth off the page. Naming the fiction, rather than perfecting it, is where the honest practice of resource management begins.

## 2. The Green Plan and the Stalled Programme

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Picture the monthly portfolio review. The resource lead brings the master workbook to the screen. Down the left, forty or fifty names; across the top, the live programmes; in the cells, the allocations — 0.4 here, 0.6 there, a scattering of 1.0s for the people lucky or unlucky enough to be dedicated. The far-right column totals each person to something at or near their available capacity, and a conditional format turns the over-allocated cells a discreet amber. There are not many amber cells this month. The plan, in the language everyone in the room has learned to speak, is green.

And yet three of the programmes are quietly late. The people in those tidy cells are, by their own account, drowning. The 0.4 allocations are being honoured in name — the person does attend the workstream calls — but the actual displacement of their attention runs nearer to a full day of thinking a week when the design questions are hard, and to almost nothing in the weeks when their other 0.6 catches fire. Nobody in the room believes the plan describes what is happening. Everybody in the room treats it as though it does. That gap — between a document that reads green and a reality that is visibly

straining — is not a defect in this particular workbook. It is the native condition of resource management as most organisations practise it, and it is worth understanding rather than merely deploring.

### 3. What the Fiction Actually Claims

Strip the plan back and it rests on three claims, each reasonable in isolation and false in combination.

The first is that a person is divisible. A 0.4 allocation asserts that four-tenths of someone's productive attention can be cleanly severed from the rest and applied to a programme, as though effort were a liquid to be decanted. Anyone who has tried to do two demanding things in the same week knows the severance is not clean. The switching cost between contexts — the reloading of where a problem had got to, the re-establishing of who owed what to whom — is real, and it does not appear anywhere in the arithmetic. Three 0.3 allocations do not sum to 0.9 of a productive person; they sum to a person who is slightly behind on three fronts and fully present on none.

The second claim is that allocation equals availability. The workbook records the intention to have someone spend time on a programme. It has nothing to say about whether that time survives contact with the working week — the line-management demands, the incident that pulls the best engineer back to keep the lights on, the annual leave that was booked before the plan existed, the interview panels and appraisals and the two hours a day that competent people spend simply keeping their colleagues unblocked. A plan that books people to a hundred per cent of their nominal hours has, in effect, planned for a person who never takes a holiday, never sits in a line meeting, and never once helps anyone else.

The third and deepest claim is that people are interchangeable. Resource management, in its spreadsheet form, is an accounting of head, not of capability. It knows that a workstream needs 2.0 of a business analyst; it does not know that the workstream needs this analyst, the one who understands the legacy settlement logic that no one has documented since the last reorganisation. Swap the unit and the total is unchanged; swap the person and the programme changes character entirely. The plan is blind to precisely the thing that determines whether the work will actually move.

*The plan counts allocation and calls it capacity; it counts head and calls it capability. Both substitutions are invisible in the arithmetic and decisive in the delivery.*

None of this is a secret. Ask any experienced programme manager whether the resource plan is accurate and you will get a rueful smile. Which makes the persistence of the fiction the genuinely interesting problem. If everyone knows, why does it survive — and not merely survive, but sit at the centre of the governance apparatus, consuming days of skilled effort every month to keep it tidy?

### 4. The Forces That Keep the Fiction Standing

The plan endures because it is doing work — just not the work its column headings advertise. Four forces hold it up.

- The governance machine runs on numbers, and abhors a blank. A steering committee cannot easily interrogate "it depends" or "the team is stretched but coping." It can interrogate a figure. The resource plan exists in large part to convert an irreducibly uncertain human situation into a form the governance layer can consume — a total, a variance, a colour. In the current climate, with the control expectations that have followed the wave of financial-reporting reform, the pressure to demonstrate that resources are managed, visibly and auditably, has only intensified. A precise-looking plan is evidence of control. Its precision is the point; its accuracy is, quietly, optional.
- The matrix never settled who owns whom. The dominant operating model of the change function is the matrix: people belong to a functional line — engineering, analysis, design — and are lent to programmes. The unresolved question of the matrix, the one the org chart draws a clean box around and real life does not, is who decides where a given person's week actually goes when the programme and the line both want it. The resource plan pretends this is settled. Each fractional allocation implies a negotiation was held and a verdict reached. Often no such verdict exists; the number is a truce written down to avoid holding the fight. The spreadsheet is where the organisation stores the arguments it has chosen not to have.
- The annual cycle demands a whole-number answer to a fractional question. Budgets are struck once a year, in headcount and cost. To defend a headcount you must show it is fully deployed; an honest plan showing people at seventy per cent effective capacity is not a candid disclosure, it is an invitation to have the other thirty per cent cut. So the plan is written to a hundred per cent not because anyone believes it but because the budget conversation punishes anyone who does not. The fiction is, in part, a rational response to the way the money is governed.
- Utilisation culture treats idle time as waste. Much of the change workforce is drawn from, or benchmarked against, the professional-services world, where utilisation is the master metric and an unbilled hour is a failure. That instinct migrates inward. A plan with slack in it looks like inefficiency; a plan with everyone fully booked looks like good stewardship. But slack is not waste — it is the capacity to absorb the variation that every real programme generates. A system run at a hundred per cent utilisation has, by construction, no ability to respond to anything unexpected, and unexpected things are the one certainty in transformation. We have confused the appearance of efficiency with the substance of it.

Seen together, these forces explain the paradox. The plan is not a bad answer to the question "how much capacity do we have?" It is a good answer to a different set of questions — "can we show the board we are in control?", "can we avoid the fight between the line and the programme?", "can we defend the headcount?", "do we look efficient?" — and it is because it answers those questions so well that no one has any incentive to fix the ones it gets wrong.

## 5. The Case for the Defence

It would be too easy, and not quite honest, to stop there — to treat everyone who maintains a resource plan as a willing participant in a delusion. The strongest version of the opposing view deserves a hearing, because it is largely right.

The plan, its defenders would say, is better than the void it replaces. Before there was a master workbook, allocation happened in corridors and inboxes, invisible and unaccountable, and the loudest programme manager won. The spreadsheet, for all its fictions, at least makes the contention visible. When two programmes both claim the same

scarce analyst, the double-booking shows up as an amber cell, and a conversation that would otherwise have happened by ambush now happens in the open, in front of people who can adjudicate it. The plan is not valuable because its numbers are true; it is valuable because it is a shared surface on which the real negotiation can take place. It is a map that everyone has agreed to argue over, and a shared wrong map is often more useful than several private right ones.

This is a serious argument and it is correct as far as it goes. A resource plan that surfaces contention, forces the quarterly conversation, and gives the portfolio a single place to see its own commitments is doing something genuinely useful, and an organisation with no such artefact is usually worse off, not better. The error is not in keeping the plan. The error is in believing it — in mistaking the map for the territory, in letting a document whose real job is to stage a negotiation be read instead as a measurement. The moment the amber cell stops prompting a conversation and starts being smoothed away so the plan can go green for the board, the artefact has been inverted. It has stopped being a tool for surfacing the truth and become a tool for hiding it. The plan is defensible precisely to the degree that it is treated as a fiction we reason with, and indefensible to the degree that it is treated as a fact we report.

## 6. What the Numbers Look Like When You Stop Pretending

Consider a single workstream, drawn as a composite from the recognisable pattern rather than from any one organisation. On the plan it carries 4.0 FTE: four names, each allocated 1.0, feeding a delivery forecast built on the assumption of four productive people. The programme is amber on capacity but, the plan says, only just.

Now walk the four names through the working week as it is actually lived.

| Deduction from nominal capacity                                                                                                                 | Effect on the 4.0 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Nominal plan                                                                                                                                    | 4.00              |
| Less annual leave, public holidays, training (≈12%)                                                                                             | 3.52              |
| Less line management, appraisals, recruitment, corporate obligations (≈10%)                                                                     | 3.17              |
| Less the pull of "keep the lights on" on the two who also support live service (≈15% of their time)                                             | 2.87              |
| Less context-switching loss, as three of the four also carry allocations on other programmes (≈20% effective)                                   | 2.30              |
| Less the single genuinely scarce skill — one analyst whose knowledge nothing else can substitute — being the bottleneck the other three wait on | ~1.6 effective    |

The workstream is planned at 4.0 and is delivering, on a good week, something closer to 1.6 of genuinely applied, unblocked capacity — and the last and largest reduction is not a matter of hours at all but of dependency: three capable people moving at the speed of the one whose knowledge cannot be cloned. The plan's amber cell was warning of a ten per cent overcommitment. The reality is a workstream running at perhaps forty per cent of its nominal power, and the gap is invisible to the arithmetic because every one of those deductions lives in a place the spreadsheet does not look. This is what is meant by

spreadsheet fiction. It is not that the numbers are careless. It is that the numbers are precise about the wrong quantity.

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*“A plan booked to a hundred per cent has, by construction, no ability to absorb the one thing every programme guarantees: the unexpected.”*

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## 7. Managing the Territory Instead of the Map

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If the plan cannot be made true, what does honest practice look like? Not, I think, a better spreadsheet — the failure is not one of tooling, and the newer portfolio-management systems, for all their sophistication, reproduce the same three false claims in a prettier interface. The shift required is one of posture, and it can be described without a new methodology.

It begins by managing to ranges rather than points. A workstream does not need 4.0 people; it needs somewhere between three and five, depending on how the dependencies fall, and stating it as a range is not vagueness — it is a more accurate account of what is actually known. A plan that admits its own uncertainty invites the right conversation; a plan that hides its uncertainty behind a false decimal forecloses it.

It continues by planning explicitly for contention rather than pretending it away. The scarce analyst in the composite above is the real constraint on the workstream, and no amount of adding fractional head elsewhere will move it. Mature resource management identifies the genuine bottlenecks — the individuals, not the roles — and protects them: shields their time, sequences the work so they are not the dependency for three things at once, and resists the temptation to book them to a hundred per cent when their value lies precisely in having the slack to be pulled onto whatever is stuck this week.

And it depends, above all, on naming the fiction out loud. The most useful thing a change leader can do with a resource plan is to say, in the room, what everyone in the room already knows: that the total is a planning convenience and not a measurement, that green means “we have staged the negotiation” and not “we have the capacity,” and that the interesting information is not in the totals but in the arguments the totals are standing in for. That single act of candour changes what the artefact is used for. It stops being evidence to be presented upward and starts being a lens to be reasoned with — which is the only thing it was ever any good at.

*The task is not to make the plan true. It is to stop asking the plan to be something it cannot be, and to start using it for the one thing it does well: making the contention visible enough to argue about honestly.*

## 8. The Gap the Fiction Protects

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Return, finally, to the deeper current the topic points at: the distance between transformation intent and transformation reality. The resource plan is one of the places that gap is most visible and most carefully concealed, and the concealment is not accidental. To write an honest resource plan — one that showed the effective capacity, the dependency bottlenecks, the slack that real work requires — would be to write down that the portfolio has committed to more transformation than it has the human capacity to deliver. That is a sentence very few organisations are willing to see on a page, because it implicates not the resourcing process but the ambition itself. It is far more comfortable to keep a plan that reconciles to a hundred per cent and to let the shortfall express itself later, and more deniably, as slipped dates and tired people and programmes that were somehow always nearly done.

The fiction, in the end, is load-bearing. It protects the organisation from a confrontation it does not want to have — between what it has promised its stakeholders it will change and what its people can actually carry. We are, as a profession, fluent in the mechanics of allocation and strikingly reluctant to speak the truth those mechanics are designed to obscure. The spreadsheet is not the disease. It is the symptom, and the anaesthetic, of a portfolio that has not yet found the honesty to match its capacity to its intent. The organisations that close the gap between transformation intent and transformation reality will not be the ones with the most sophisticated resource tooling. They will be the ones willing to let the plan tell them something they would rather not hear, and to change the promise rather than the colour of the cell.