

# Overtime Under Control

A test manager keeps the concerns of her team in mind when evaluating the need for overtime.

**Fiona Charles**

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## STORY LINES

- **As a test manager, you have responsibilities to both the project and your team.**
- **You and your team are in the best position to recommend whether overtime testing is a good choice.**
- **Remember that people working overtime have to neglect their personal responsibilities. They may have to make arrangements for their children and placate their spouses. Even if they get overtime pay, they may not feel compensated for the hits to their personal lives.**
- **Work through the deciding questions with team members to ensure that they can be fully productive if they work overtime.**
- **If you decide on overtime, arrange all the support your team needs, including management support if you can't be there.**
- **Sometimes no is the responsible answer.**

"The project steering committee is very concerned about how late we are," said Peter, the project manager. "They've decided the test team must work this weekend."

As an experienced test manager, Jane had been here before. When the going gets tough, especially on long and difficult projects, the question of testing overtime always arises.

At 2:30 p.m. on a Thursday, it was unwelcome news. Jane hesitated before answering. Peter obviously expected unquestioned compliance, but Jane wanted to consider the facts. Perhaps a few concentrated days of heads-down testing could regain lost time. Sometimes a short burst of crunch-mode work is exactly the right answer.

But Jane also knew that there are times when overtime can be detrimental to the project. If the team can't make genuine headway, then overtime will tire and frustrate them to no purpose.

Jane thanked Peter and said she would talk to her team and get back to him.

Jane sat down to think. She knew that making the right decision required detailed knowledge of the current testing situation and an understanding of the team's requirements for productive

work. A feeling for the team's energy level and morale was also important. Jane was close to the action but knew the rest of the project management team didn't share her perspective.

Jane had a dual responsibility to the project and to the test team, and she wanted to ensure the best for both. manager and consultant, she continually had to meet First, she thought about her two possible answers: "No, it's not the right decision at this time" or "Yes, if all the conditions can be met."

Next, Jane thought about the decision process. As a test deadlines for her own deliverables. When it was her own work and time, the choice was clear. Jane put in overtime on a deliverable if: the work was at a point where extra effort would finish it or move it forward; she could fit it in without totally disrupting her personal plans and responsibilities; and she had the energy to work the extra hours and still be fully productive the following week.

Otherwise, she would say, "No. I'm not available." Understanding these principles gave Jane a framework to use with her team.

Jane also needed to be sensitive to the employees' feelings about overtime demands. Even if it were her management right to order overtime, she would be better off asking as though they were making a sacrifice for the project.

Jane told the testers about the directive. Some resignedly said they'd cancel their plans, while others said it was a bad idea and what did the steering committee know anyhow? "That's why we're here," Jane said. "We have information that the steering committee and Peter don't have. We need to examine our knowledge and recommend the best option."

She explained that they first had to determine if overtime would move the work forward. Their ability to test depended primarily on a stable and fully available system and environment. If either were unstable, then the testers would be staggering--not testing. Coming in would be pointless and frustrating.

If team members decided overtime made sense, they'd still need a critical mass of willing and available testers. Even if only one or two could do it, it might still be worth it. Jane knew that it is often easier to arrange for a couple of volunteers than a whole team.

Then, what technical support would the testers need? At a minimum, they'd need support for the system under test, the environment, and the infrastructure. For each, they would have to decide who they needed on site and who could be available by phone with the option to come in.

Within a half-hour, Jane's team had its response: "Yes, with conditions." Two components of the system were stable enough to test and ready for major testing work to find the bugs. Three of the six testers could come in both days. Since the environment had been unstable, they needed an on-site programmer throughout the weekend to ensure its availability. They also wanted a DBA on call, in case previously encountered database issues recurred.

Jane took this information to the rest of the project management team. She explained why it made sense for only half the team to come in. She also made sure the conditions were understood and agreed upon by all the resources her team was counting on, as well as their managers.

Under other circumstances the answer might have been no, and Jane would have had to explain why. Some managers might hear "Yes, with conditions" better when stated, "No, unless we have all the conditions we need to make our work productive." Jane would tailor her approach to the listeners.

That weekend, Jane came into work with her team, believing that a team working under difficult conditions needs an advocate--and sometimes a gofer. As manager, she'd run interference, deal with anxious people asking for status, make the difficult phone calls, and insist that infrastructure people or developers come on site if needed. She would escalate a critical problem to whomever it took. Most importantly, Jane would call a halt if the work proved futile and take responsibility at the inevitable inquest on Monday morning.

And, of course, Jane would find out what everyone wanted for lunch and put it on her expense account. Sometimes the team's answer will be overridden, and each tester must make an individual choice. Jane's own choice, though, is always influenced by her team members' choices. If most of them are coming in, she probably will too. She believes that a team working over-time must have active management support, and it's her job to provide it.

On the rare occasions Jane can't go in with her team, she provides a reachable phone number and calls a designate at agreed times. If she can't be available by phone, she makes sure the team has on-site managerial support--someone she meets with in advance to explain what's required.

If team members must work outside normal hours, we are responsible as test managers to ensure that they have everything they need to make that work productive. But if those conditions can-not be met, or the overtime won't be productive for other reasons, we do have a responsibility to say no—for the good of the team and the project. {end}

How do you handle demands for tester overtime? Have you ever said no to overtime when you felt it was the wrong decision for your team?

Join the conversation below or start a new one in the Reader Comments section.

### **About the Author**

Fiona Charles (is a test manager and consultant based in Toronto. With more than twenty-five years of experience in systems development and integration projects, she designs and implements practical software test processes and manages testing for clients in retail, banking, financial services, telecommunications, and health care. Fiona thanks Jerry Weinberg and Naomi Karten for their reviews of this article.