

Workforce scheduling and what you need to know

Author: Benjamin Sombi . March 2021

One of the main reasons for loss of profits can be linked to ineffective workforce scheduling. On any given day, managers are faced with a host of scheduling problems. These include overstaffing, understaffing, and the inability to meet a high workload on time. They are also expected to look under every rock to reduce overheads carefully.

All the executives need to ensure that product or service demand is properly met with their well-skilled hourly employees scheduled optimally to work at different shifts of the day. Workforce scheduling is the process of constructing work schedules or rosters for its workforce so that an organization can satisfy the demand for its products or services.

Inefficient scheduling and understaffing results in the assignment of the wrong number of workers who don't possess the right skills for the job, employees' burnout, and reduced efficiency. All the above scenarios harm an organization. Sadly, business owners overlook the importance of efficient workforce scheduling. This results in huge losses, increased absenteeism, a lack of collaboration, and poor retention of employees.

Optimum Workforce scheduling also involves the distribution of employees with the right behaviours and capacities throughout the organisation. Effective workforce scheduling is the key determinant affecting the performance of many organisations in Zimbabwe especially those in mining, health care, retail, manufacturing, financial services, etc. It's very essential to allocate the right job to the right person at the correct time.

In dynamic industries, workload changes frequently. Managers are faced with a variety of problems such as:

- Overstaffing employees when work demand is low.
- Understaffing of employees when work demand is high.
- Employees feeling overburdened when the organization is understaffed, and they must complete the overwhelmingly high burden.
- Employees calling in sick or not reporting for duty on time due to unforeseen emergencies.
- Management requiring to hire last-minute that ends up costly.

Scheduling helps in all the above scenarios by taking two main factors into account:

- Predicted workloads
- Number of resources that are required to complete the job

Many organisations around the globe are taking advantage of optimum workforce scheduling solutions to increase employee retention, revenue generation and reduce costs. Maximum benefit usually is obtained after workforce scheduling is well integrated with other components such as headcount analysis (the process of determining the optimum number of people need in an organisation or department), workload analysis, time utilisation within the organisation, payroll, etc.

Some of the industries where workforce scheduling is more useful are;

- Retail
- Healthcare
- Hospitality
- Contact centres
- Manufacturing
- Construction
- Transportation and Logistics

Employee productivity can easily be measured if an organisation is using optimum workforce scheduling systems. The executives or managers will be able to know how many hours have been spent performing certain tasks. With a workforce scheduling system, managers will be able to know which and when are certain employees late or absent from work. Measures to fix these issues will be done effectively.

What a great workforce schedule should look like?

An effective and efficient workforce schedule includes the following key features:

1. The schedule must ensure that every shift is properly and appropriately staffed for each position. For example, a bar might require only one bartender on a weeknight but three bartenders on weekends. Ensure you get the numbers right. For that, you must be aware of the hours when there will be unusual spikes or dips in business/customers. Keep an eye out for local and national events that will affect your business.
2. Ensure the schedule is completely error-free. Although this might sound like stating the obvious, managers must realize that creating a workforce schedule solution is not simple. It is always easier to make mistakes than to get a workforce schedule solution free of errors. Some common errors to look out for and avoid are:
 - Double-scheduling, an employee. This happens a lot when employees work two different types of jobs within the same company. In our example of a bar, an employee could work as a barman on some days and a waiter on other days. Ensure that an employee is not scheduled twice during the same time slot.
 - Scheduling staff for the wrong position. Another common mistake that is often made is scheduling an employee for a job that he does not have the skills to complete. This could lead to a slowdown in the production line or a complete failure.
 - Under/over-scheduling employees. Ensure that you do not give a single employee too many shifts. This is especially true of part-time employees who might have other commitments besides the job they do for you. Full-time staff might require additional or enough shifts to fulfil financial obligations.

What are the benefits of using workforce scheduling?

All organizations have one goal, and that is to succeed. This success can only be achieved when projects are completed on time, with as little expenditure as possible.

When it comes to timely project completion, the process of efficient workforce scheduling cannot be overstated. With efficient schedules in place, organizations can capably forecast labor costs and also plan their budgets efficiently.

As we have seen, ineffective workforce scheduling can have severe implications for a company. Here is a list of the key benefits of ensuring precise and effective workforce scheduling in an organization.

1. Balance workflow supply and demand

Assign the right number of employees that you will need for a particular job. Assign anticipated demand by planning for the right number of employees in advance. Historical data can give accurate insights into the number of employees required for specific days, specific situations, on holidays, or when a new product is rolled out.

2. Boost productivity at each shift

Proper workforce scheduling ensures you have an eye on when workers are available, the types of skills they possess, the level of the skills they possess, and how they are performing. With all this information available to an organization, managers can ensure that the necessary skills are available at each shift and boost productivity

3. Complements flexible work environments

An effective workforce schedule ensures that managers keep track of flexible work schedules seamlessly. Managing changing schedules and reducing workforce management hassles that are often associated with keeping track of flex time. This, in turn, ensures the advantages of flexible work hours are fully absorbed by the organization -

- Better retention
- Increased productivity
- Increased bottom line
- Credibility as a good place to work

4. Manage employee attendance issues and overtime

Stay compliant with the law about overtime and prevent issues related to overtime. Prevent violations of employees' overtime policy and protect the company from the violation of such laws.

5. Employee job satisfaction and retention

With efficient workforce scheduling in time, employees can work out their schedules around their tasks, know when they can ask for days off depending on the demand and ensures employees are not overburdened. Happy workers are willing to work for the organization, and this increases the retention

of good workers.

When team leaders are using automated workforce scheduling systems, they will be able to quickly react to sudden changes. Let's say, at the last minute they realise the employee is absent of certain machines are done, it will be hard to redo the schedule again. It is a few clicks to notify everyone and reschedule all operations if everything is automated.

One of the 5-star event services companies in Houston grows their revenue by 66% without adding a new employee by applying workforce scheduling in their operations. Their main challenge was to improve employee relations and internal efficiency by moving beyond manual staffing practices. They needed a better way to manage constantly changing staffing requirements and employee schedules. To solve the problem they used an online system. This system allowed them to centralise employee scheduling, employee timesheets & attendance register, and payroll in one place. This also allowed them to free up many office hours and quickly fill in slots in a case where an employee is not available for that event

With an automated system, managers will be able to track their employees' capabilities or competencies, and personality. Managers will be able to see who is fit for the task and who needs training. With some advanced systems that automatically search for employees with certain competencies, scheduling becomes easier to schedule an employee when the task requires certain competencies.

A police station in Zephyrhills, Florida, northeast of Tampa, used workforce scheduling to cut police shift scheduling time and overtime costs. The system they used reduced the Operation Division Command's 12 hours per week of shift work scheduling down to three hours. It also reduced police overtime costs by 35 percent to 50 percent.

Although there are many benefits explored by existing systems, many scheduling systems still do not take into consideration some of the factors that affect workers' productivity. These factors include human aspects such as skills, training, workers' personalities, workers' breaks, and workers' fatigue and recovery levels. They do not take into consideration the cost of hiring, firing, training, and overtime when scheduling employees. These are important factors that should be considered.

Companies that have employees that are on shifts need to invest in automated employee scheduling systems. As explained above, many benefits are enjoyed by using these systems. They bring high returns on investment.

Benjamin Sombi is a Data Scientist, Entrepreneur, & Business Analytics Manager at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt) Ltd a management and human resources consulting firm.

References;

1. <https://talentx.io/2020/02/28/workforce-scheduling-everything-you-need-to-know/>
2. <https://www.toolbox.com/hr/workforce-management/articles/what-is-workforce-scheduling/>
3. <https://thenextscoop.com/benefits-of-workforce-scheduling/>

<https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/workforce-scheduling-and-what-you-need-to-know>