

From Grids to Grins: Labor Scheduling for Small Business

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I've been involved in labor scheduling since high school. From a family owned gas station to a 120-room hotel, my scheduling began with a modest beginning. Scheduling 5-10 employees seemed like an easy task at first, but when I really got into the nuances of it, I determined that there really are human factors that need to be looked at.

As my career progressed, I found in every role that I was named to step in and provide the schedule for my department. I took each experience as an opportunity to leave behind some foundation that could be applied to future scheduling managers.

Rather than focus on the barebones of doing a schedule, what I intend to discuss with you is the strategies to ensure that you are doing a schedule that not only satisfies the needs of the business, but one that enables you to motivate and retain your best employees.

In this age of competition, where it is very easy for people in small business (retail especially) to jump ship for balance issues or to find better leaders, doing the little things to keep your staff happy is easy.

Regardless of the system you use, these basic principles behind a work schedule can be followed.

Here are the steps I suggest when completing a work schedule for small business:

1. Ensure that all your staff complete a preference sheet that contains the following
 - A. Hours worked at other jobs they may have
 - B. Outside commitments such as school/activities
 - C. Preferred schedule
 - D. Length of their commute

These basics will allow you to determine your staffing needs, and also balance the needs of each staff member. Often, we get irritated that someone is late all the time, or not focused on his/her work. Apathy is not the cause; it is a lack of balance in their life caused by working an ineffective schedule.

2. If someone is working for you as a second job, make sure there is at least one day a week that they are off from both jobs. Everyone needs balance.
3. Make a nice balance of experienced and new staff members on each shift. When you have a crew that is all new on your night shift especially, it can lead to poor service and decreased productivity.
4. Schedule people with overlaps of a minimum of 15 minutes. This allows for better communication between your staff members, and also an overlap in the case of lateness.
5. Don't recreate the wheel every week. Set up consistent schedules for each employee that are pre-entered into the schedule where feasible. For example, if you have someone who is available M-Friday from 530-1030, and wants to work three nights a week, schedule them M+W every week, and rotate Thursday and Friday on opposite weeks to allow for balance.
6. Have weekly scheduling one on ones with various employees to find out suggestions on coverage. This will allow you to have hands on experience that will enable you to have better coverage.
7. Post your schedule a minimum of 1 week ahead of time. I suggest doing a schedule up to two weeks out where possible. When you have people who can plan their life better, they are happier and more productive when they are with you.
8. Hire people who have commitment to you, even if they are only available three days a week. If you have people who can work only specific times, but are committed to your product/service, schedule them for those times, and count on them to be reliable.
9. When school is closed, that means more business for you. Keep up to date on your local school schedules to make sure you are covered.

If you follow these basics of scheduling, you will find that you will have to spend less time out of the operation, and more time being out there to see how your schedule is working!

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