

BEFORE YOU HIRE: IDEAS FOR MEETING SERVICE LEVELS WITH EXISTING STAFF

Address staffing needs
by **optimizing schedules,**
crosstraining and reducing
absenteeism.

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The latest scheduling woes faced by some 130,000 Starbucks baristas (“Starbucks to Revise Policies to End Irregular Schedules for Its 130,000 Baristas,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 14, 2014) have demonstrated a familiar painpoint common to retail and contact center environments: scheduling based on business needs that also ensures the humane treatment of employees.

In a recent petition, Starbucks employees demanded that managers provide their schedules one month in advance (Starbucks Fair Workweek Petition, www.coworker.org). In a contact center environment, actually going that extra mile to create schedules two months ahead allows planning for overtime or sending agents home early when needed. Moreover, it avoids constant last-minute changes allowing agents the flexibility to arrange their careers around family and personal obligations, such as daycare, education, grocery shopping and family events. Here at Aimia, we plan for many months before publishing schedules for call center agents, which they then receive two months in advance.

Interestingly, the labor force is one of the most controllable costs for operations managers, which makes hiring a sensitive issue at times. Hiring additional bodies, a favorite among schedulers, could be a quick fix for filling in peak hours in the week or to ensure coverage during peak months in order to maintain service levels.

However, operations managers and executive teams often resist hiring due to the high costs of recruiting, training and paying for additional employees; it’s understandable given that agent salaries make up 70% of call center costs. How, then, can operations manage its active headcount before falling back on the hiring option?

The truth is that contact center agents are very capable individuals who can learn multiple skill sets, service more than one program at a time, and provide actionable feedback on improvements to their schedules, if only engaged in the scheduling process by open-minded workforce management and operations teams.

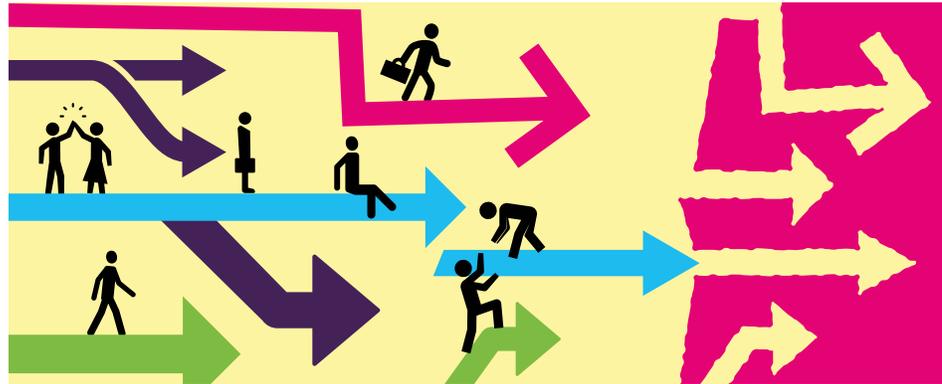
Optimizing Schedules

Starbucks has failed to curb the dreaded practice of “clopening,” where employees close a store late at night and must return just a few hours later to open again in the early morning. This is particularly hard for employees who live longer distances away from work and cannot rest adequately between shifts; leading to employee dissatisfaction, lateness, absenteeism and, eventually, higher turnover. Starbucks has vowed to end this practice, but doing so will depend on improving manager training and being open to employee feedback.

Just as with all strategic decisions, the greater the level of information and detail that goes into a schedule, the more the schedule will help both agents and businesses meet their key performance indicators (KPIs).

Schedules should include as many items as possible that take agents off the phones: vendor training and information sessions, one-on-one and team coaching, up-training, new system training, team lunches, religious holidays and new client launches. In addition, including out-of-work restrictions, such as family obligations and commuting constraints, could help curb employee lateness, absenteeism and turnover.

Managers could also embrace breaks and lunches as opportunities to optimize workflow. Scheduling breaks around peak hours often proves to be the key in meeting daily target service levels.



Once created, it is recommended that supervisors should have some flexibility to make alterations to published schedules. If call volume arrives below forecast, supervisors could reduce hours for agents based on seniority after confirming with real-time analysts (RTAs) that business needs (i.e., KPIs) will be met. If call volume is above forecast and agents are requesting overtime to complete their work, supervisors should be able to work with RTAs so as to roll out overtime in a timely and organized manner.

A workforce management system allows for greater efficiency in opening the necessary number of overtime slots and allowing agent bidding based on seniority. Through such a system, agents will have a specific number of overtime slots available so as not to offer too many or too few. If, however, agents are not taking enough offered overtime, incentives such as paid lunches or flexible days off might entice sign-ups.

In addition, operations could offer the opportunity for their contact center agents to diversify and grow their skill sets. Crosstraining could be another great option allowing agents to keep learning new skills and programs, while facilitating scheduling flexibility so as to place agents in various programs to service calls as needed.

Crosstrain

Contact centers could be diverse enough to service various businesses, each with its own KPIs and call volume trends, in which case it would be very beneficial to crosstrain agents on these varied programs. For instance, if peak season for program A is in Q1, but in Q2 for program B, agents trained in program A plus the crosstrained agents from program B would reduce the number of new-hires needed to meet service levels during Q1 peak months, and vice versa for Q2 peak months. Along the same lines, agents from program B plus the crosstrained agents from program A would reduce, or maybe even eliminate, the need for new-hires that arises in off-season months due to attrition rates.

On the other hand, a contact center could be servicing programs that are similar to each other in call volume trends. In this instance, once additional agents are hired to deal with peak months, operations could keep the top-performing agents to help with low-season calls. These top performers, once crosstrained, could be utilized to support all programs during low-season months, thereby reducing attrition replacement hires.

Moreover, having additionally crosstrained agents who could step in to support other programs even during the low season would allow greater flexibility in scheduling vacations, time off and religious holidays and would also help with tackling any possible absenteeism issues.

A final and important note here, before crosstraining can be implemented as a strategy to meet service levels, client contracts need to be reviewed to determine whether agents have the legal

option of being crosstrained or if they must stay dedicated to a certain program or client. Breaking contractual obligations could lead to monthly fines or, worse yet, the loss of a significant client and revenue source.

Reduce Absenteeism

Erratic schedules, coupled with management inflexibility, could lead to higher levels of absenteeism, which often become higher turnover rates, as Starbucks seems to be experiencing. Absenteeism costs most definitely add up: The practice costs agents in their healthcare spending and lost pay, your contact center in a reduced workforce, the agents in bigger strains on their shifts, and client penalties when service levels plummet due to a lack of bodies on the phones. It also costs in reduced flexibility to scheduling and fewer options available for real-time management when scrambling to meet service levels.

First and foremost, your employees need to understand your absenteeism policy. They must know what is expected of them, who and when they should call regarding absences, and when to obtain a doctor's note. People managers and supervisors must also demonstrate a high level of consistency when dealing with unacceptable absences.

Drawing from the countless resources available on ways to reduce absenteeism, the following list, by no means exhaustive, is meant as a starting point for tackling absenteeism issues:

- Tie incentive bonus programs or promotions to absenteeism.
- Ask agents for absenteeism feedback through surveys.
- Allow shift swaps or trades, clearly communicating how absenteeism affects the business and service levels.
- Implement suspension without pay prior to termination for chronic lateness.
- Share KPI statistics with agents so they could see how they compare against their peers.

Bringing a little creativity to bear on this issue will likely call to mind countless other potential solutions.

Including absenteeism as a KPI or recognizing perfect attendance on a quarterly or yearly basis could lead to stronger agent accountability for their days off. This is especially helpful on days when absenteeism drastically increases, as often happens on Mondays, Fridays, weekends and holidays. During these times, instead of hiring, a stronger attendance of just a few agents could be the lifeline needed to keep service levels afloat.

Consider the Options

Starbucks may have embraced scheduling volatility as “flexibility” for too long, leading to a backlash from their baristas (“How Starbucks’s ‘Flexible’ Scheduling Is Stretching Workers to the Breaking Point,” *The Nation*, Aug. 18, 2014). However, your call center can avoid reaching agents’ breaking point by addressing staffing needs and hiring after optimizing schedules to meet agent and business needs, embracing crosstraining across various programs, and identifying and addressing the root causes of absenteeism. Just realize that your contact center has many options when it comes to meeting service levels and optimizing operations; hiring may not always be the best choice. 🌐

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