

Scheduling: How to Get Started

What does it mean to provide a stable schedule?

The idea of “stable scheduling” encompasses a variety of things, with the overall goal of allowing your employees to more easily balance their personal and professional lives. For your purposes, this means that employees can indicate scheduling preferences, receive advance notice of their schedules (ideally at least two weeks out), request days off and have the ability to trade shifts. Stable scheduling can enable your staff to attend school, take care of their children, and tend to personal needs when they have to. It also means that your employees can depend on working a consistent number of hours per week, thereby reducing worries around income fluctuations.

How can I implement stable scheduling at my business?

Regularly check in on employee availability

Understanding employees’ scheduling constraints doesn’t have to start during onboarding, but should be part of the hiring process itself. Making sure an employee’s schedule works for your business’s needs and vice versa can be discussed during the hiring process. Indeed, increased employee input and work flexibility are positively associated with a variety of health outcomes and life satisfaction.

For each employee, it’s helpful to determine their preferences regarding the number of weekly hours, start and end times, unavailability, and when they prefer not to work but can do so if necessary. For many retailers, weekends are peak times—requiring people to have availability on at least one weekend day, or two weekends a month, or whatever works for your business, may be key, for example. A great place to start is When I Work’s online resource, “[How to Use Employee Availability Forms Efficiently](#),” which includes a downloadable employee availability template.

Provide 14-day advance schedules

Setting schedules two weeks in advance helps your employees (and you) better manage personal and work commitments and reduce potential conflicts. A study of a national women’s

retail clothier showed (to the surprise of store managers) that 80 percent of staffing hours their store had been assigned were stable over the course of a year.

While rolling out a 14-day advance schedule may not be a smooth process immediately, in the long run, it enables your employees to balance their personal commitments more effectively and reduce potential conflicts, thereby driving down absenteeism and understaffing. This can help you as the business owner reduce the understaffing headaches caused by last-minute call-outs for scheduling conflicts.

Establish stable shift structures

Partially fixed schedules can provide a great deal of stability to your employees' lives. Based on store hours and the times you tend to be busiest, try to determine what percentage of staffing hours are around the same, and what percent vary week-to-week. Demand for your staff's store hours tends to fluctuate less than is commonly thought. According to Susan Lambert, co-Director of the [Employment Instability, Family Well-Being, and Social](#)

[Policy Scholars Network](#) (EINet) at the University of Chicago, "Although there is variation in expected demand at the margins, week to week and day to day, we find that managers might be able to take better advantage of the stability that's there. For example, if 80 percent of the hours are always the same, a manager might be able to give employees a stable schedule for 80 percent of their hours, and then tell them to expect that 20 percent may vary week to week. Such a practice would give employees 'predictable unpredictability.'"

To start shaping a stable schedule, ask yourself questions such as:

- On which days am I consistently over- or under-staffed?
- Are outside events (holidays, construction, etc.) impacting my revenue or foot traffic?
- Is there a relationship between hours worked or scheduled, and sales?
- Does my business tend to ebb and flow seasonally?

If you're not sure where to start, try out this [Hidden Scheduling Stability Worksheet](#) (Page 53).

- If you're unable to provide stable shifts to all your employees right now, consider adopting a version of [Walmart's new scheduling approach](#), which provides fixed schedules to employees with the longest tenure, and allocates additional shifts that become available on a first-come-first-served basis.

Reduce or eliminate on-call shifts

On-call shifts—in which employees are required to be available to work but are only called in to work based on variables such as customer traffic—can be very disruptive to employees' lives. By requiring employees to be available to work, on-call shifts prevent them from pursuing other activities such as taking a shift at another job or attending to personal commitments, especially for those who need to arrange childcare. Retailers across the country, [including the Gap](#), are starting to phase out these on-call shifts.

See if you can implement more regular schedules using the [Scheduling Stability Worksheet \(Page 53\)](#) and determine whether on-call shifts are a necessity at your business. If you still feel that on-call shifts play an important role at your business, consider compensating your employees for their time. For example, [Seattle's City Council Secure Scheduling legislation](#) (which applies to retail, food services, or drinking establishments with 500+ employees) requires employers to pay an employee for half of the hours not worked if an employer doesn't ask an on-call employee to report for duty. [Zazie Restaurant](#) in San Francisco uses an alternate approach, providing workers with core schedules that include no more than one on-call shift per week that's used solely to cover gaps in the schedule or because of illness. For more guidance, check out [Why You Should End On-Call Scheduling and What to Do Instead](#).

Guarantee minimum hours

The number of current part-time workers who would prefer full-time employment has almost doubled since 2007 and currently stands at about 7.5 million people. The desire for full-time employment is [especially acute among retail and restaurant workers](#).

Guaranteeing a set number of weekly hours for employees can go a long way in helping to reduce employee turnover. For example, all part-time Costco employees receive their schedules at least two weeks in advance and are guaranteed a minimum of 24 "core hours" every week—a [policy that dates back to 1985](#) (page 7). Costco has been rewarded for its "core hours" policy with 11 percent annual turnover— one of the lowest rates in the retail industry.

While there is a risk in overstaffing shifts due to sometimes unpredictable fluctuations in customer demand, staff members enjoy the economic security that results from knowing that they have guaranteed, consistent hours to work every week. Employees who work more hours are also more likely to know your product, processes, and customers well and be therefore more productive and likelier to stay with your business.

Provide “show up pay”

Sending an employee home early due to customer fluctuations is common practice in the retail industry, but has negative consequences on employees’ financial stability and engagement. Employees often spend time commuting to/from work, arranging child care, and rearranging work conflicts. Getting sent home early can increase your workers’ work-life stress, which influences productivity, turnover, and absenteeism.

Consider establishing a policy wherein employees won’t be sent home when customer traffic is low on a given shift. Instead of sending an employee home, [they can address other tasks](#) that tend to get overlooked during high-traffic times, such as cleaning, stocking shelves, or completing online trainings. This policy not only provides more certainty and stability for employees, but also helps support a well-maintained business environment. Other options include providing a guaranteed minimum number of hours of pay for employees who are scheduled, even if the employee is sent home (e.g. an employee is guaranteed pay for 50 percent of the hours of their scheduled shift regardless of whether they work the full shift). For example, [at national retailer Costco](#), when customer traffic is lower than anticipated, store managers give employees the option to end their shift early, but employees are not required to take that option.

Empower employees to swap shifts

Employees know their own schedules best, so enabling them to exchange shifts or workdays voluntarily to manage personal commitments can go a long way in reducing turnover and improving absenteeism. [To provide structure to employee shift swaps](#), managers should be clear about which staff members are eligible to switch with one another based on certain characteristics, such as seniority, shift-specific skills, expertise, and other factors. If employees are comfortable with sharing phone numbers, you can publicly post a roster of staff availability and phone numbers to create a sense of employee empowerment and shared responsibility in ensuring shifts are covered.

Allowing employees to use a scheduling application [enables staff to select and update their schedules instantaneously](#), and provides greater visibility into which shifts are available. Certain scheduling applications, such as [When I Work](#), offer functionalities that allow employees to submit availability for approval. If you don’t currently use scheduling software, check out the article, [“20 Employee Scheduling Software Solutions for Small Businesses”](#) to compare your options and see which best fits your business.

Implement cross-training

Your small business can improve the likelihood of stable scheduling success by making their employees more nimble. Consider cross-training your employees on job tasks to maximize their adaptability. When an employee becomes an “expert” in a certain skill, consider asking that employee to train other employees in that skill (while temporarily reassigning their minor tasks to other staff). Ensuring that your staff are [trained in multiple roles and skillsets](#) allows employees to respond to schedule disruptions caused by workforce shortages and seasonal staff fluctuations. For example, at QuikTrip, a national convenience store chain, employees receive training that allows them to perform a variety of tasks. When in-store traffic is high, employees focus on engaging with customers. When traffic is low, they focus on other tasks, such as cleaning and restocking the store. For more detail on QuikTrip’s practices, check out [QuikTrip’s Investment in Retail Employees Pays Off](#).

COVID-19 Resources

Tailored resources to help you make decisions around flexible scheduling and remote work at your small business, help you reopen safely, and your employees build resilience in the midst of COVID-19.

[COVID-19 Resources](#)