FIXING WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT DURING EXTRAORDINARY (AND ORDINARY) TIMES

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- September 20 edition of The Seattle Times

Inefficient shift management practices can cause hurried managers to make mistakes and potentially overlook available workers for shifts. **Missing these opportunities can rack up losses due to lower production on a line, or even intermittent production shutdowns if minimum staffing levels aren't maintained.**

According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data released in October 2020, warehousing, logistics and trucking companies added nearly 50,000 jobs in September. Many of the positions are shiftwork. In spite of the ongoing hiring in these sectors, the September 20 edition of The Seattle Times noted businesses "needing in-person workers, including ... warehouse companies and some light manufacturing firms, are struggling to hire fast enough." In a recent survey by ARCOS, managers within critical infrastructure industries like logistics noted the most challenging part of daily shift management work was "handling unplanned absences."

The Covid-19 pandemic isn't the first extraordinary event to impact jobs or the way work gets done. Think of the 2008 financial crisis or the ongoing U.S.-China trade war. While filling open shifts for many employers has been a daily struggle due to Covid-19, the pandemic is only the latest crisis to expose the flaws in a manual system of filling shifts and keeping up with workload management via bulletin boards, pens and paper.

In healthcare, for instance, floaters – who are substitutes for an employee who calls in sick – may themselves pose an infection risk to staff if supervisors can't quickly pull a record and view their past shifts – including where they worked and with whom. In manufacturing, leaving shifts less than optimally covered, can cause safety issues. And shift supervisors in any industry who spend time on the phone (or texting) to fill unplanned absences are stealing time from inspecting work in the field.

THE DANGERS OF PLUGGING THE GAPS MANUALLY

A stopgap measure many manufacturers have turned to is calling on support staff like administrative clerks or accountants to fill shifts. In some instances, an employer might deliver just-in-time training to a crew of temporary workers to fill gaps if shift supervisors can find available temps. In extreme situations, an employer might divert production to another facility. But this creates logistical and supply-chain challenges and shift-management issues. Regardless of the approach, employers are managing work by hand – one call, email and text at a time. Inefficient shift management practices can cause hurried managers to make mistakes and potentially overlook available workers for shifts. Missing these opportunities can rack up losses due to lower production on a line, or even intermittent production shutdowns if minimum staffing levels aren't maintained. Relying on stand-in support or temp workers can result in injuries because substitutes aren't always familiar with the work or job tools.

LOGISTICS COMPANY AUTOMATES SHIFT-MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

By automating workload management, managers can save time, mitigate risk and reduce operational costs. When a manager or shift supervisor has to spend time on the phone coordinating a shift change or callout, an employer is wasting money. Recently, a logistics company selected ARCOS to automate its callout process to fill shift opportunities for union foremen, control operators and mechanics. Before ARCOS, supervisors and clerks handled the callout process by hand, which could take up to six hours to complete.

The company carries freight from an inland location to a shipyard as part of a manufacturing process. As the company unloads raw materials at the docks, employees run machinery to move the product to ships carrying the cargo to ports.

For each of the three shifts at the docks, clerks,

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when necessary, would manually call out workers like control operators who are critical to running equipment that loads docked ships. Shouldering callout work left clerks little time to do much else. Clerks could dial as many as 75 employees trying to find an available worker for an open shift. If a clerk failed to find, say, a control operator for an open shift, the vacancy could stop the movement of material and cost tens of thousands of dollars per hour. Beyond callout, a clerk's duties include accounting for inventory, managing the inventory profiles for ships and making sure the correct paperwork gets to a ship captain to prevent delays if stopped by the Coast Guard.

According to one of the company's managers, the clerks had to follow a 12-step callout process managing up to 200 callout lists with many fill-shift requirements. If clerks misdialed someone, the mistake would cause a time claim that could equate to thousands of dollars of supervisor time to explore. The manager and others would investigate the time claims, which involved the labor relations group and a port manager.

By automating the callout for shift vacancies, the company says it has reduced callouts to 25 minutes on average. The company's grievances have been largely eliminated, and clerks now focus their attention on inventory. In making its business case for an automated, SaaS callout and scheduling system, the company predicts approximately $160,000 saved annually, which entails savings linked to investigating and paying grievances, saving clerks' time making callouts and building and maintaining shift lists. Because the ARCOS platform is a SaaS system, the logistics firm didn't have to deploy its IT department for the implementation. And reports created by the ARCOS platform now show clerks save up to $6,200 by using automated callout versus the prior manual approach.

GIVE SUPERVISORS A WAY TO FOCUS ON CRITICAL TASKS

The shift bidding process for most employers begins with emails or phone calls and postings on bulletin boards, followed by more phone calls, texts and emails. When bids go wrong, or managers overlook steps, employees can file grievances. To automate bidding, while mirroring work agreements, managers can use ARCOS's Resource Management solutions. With platforms like ARCOS, employers can analyze employee schedules at the moment they change and also see potential shortfalls or overages in staffing minutes, days or months in advance.

Here's how it works: With the ARCOS platform, a shift supervisor or scheduler goes into the software and creates a new bid package. They, then, name the package along with a date range for the bid. Using the workload management tools in ARCOS, a scheduler can input a seniority rule, the shift cycle and the bid window. Next, the scheduler can import a bid package from his company's HR system or an Excel spreadsheet and build out the bid lines in a few minutes, instead of documenting it with paper and pencil. Supervisors can, in turn, edit details and see who's bidding on a package. Employees can log in from work or home, across any device, and see the package as well as notifications about their bid.

Unplanned absences, especially when a facility is understaffed, force supervisors to scramble to

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find workers. In a manual process, a supervisor would rifle through a paper list or computer spreadsheet of who's available with the right skill set and seniority. With ARCOS, managers can fill an open slot in minutes and, if needed, send out a mass notification for help to pre-organized groups.

To fill an unplanned absence with the ARCOS platform, the software would first notify an employer that an employee says she cannot fill her shift, including the reason. The supervisor would select the employee's calendar and shift, mark her absent (triggering a message to her) and launch a request to cover her shift. Next, the supervisor would post the shift opening to the software's trade board to solicit volunteers to fill the shift. If nobody volunteers, the supervisor could launch a callout; a callout list would appear ranking the available employees by accrued overtime and seniority. The supervisor would click on the name of the employee atop the list, initiating a call. Within minutes, the supervisor would get a phone message from a worker who accepted the callout. The manager would then assign the shift, while getting an electronic copy of the reply with a time stamp and record of approval.

If an organization allows shift swapping, managers know that this process can rapidly unleash a torrent of emails, sticky notes, and phone calls. With an automated, self-service model, employers can lift work off the shoulders of schedulers and supervisors. For example, using the ARCOS platform, representatives from Piedmont Airlines say over the course of 30 days they can automatically handle 2,500 shift swaps and save approximately 1,600 administrative hours.

To handle shift swaps with ARCOS, an employee signs into the system and asks to swap a shift. They click on the shift calendar and post a request to the virtual trade board. Or an employee can send a message through the system tapping a coworker from a drop-down menu and clicking the desired shift date and times. The ARCOS system stores an employer's work agreements, so a shift swap can be automatically denied if, for instance, the swap exceeds an employee's allotted hours or overlaps with another shift already committed to. Along with shift swaps, the ARCOS platform automatically tracks employees' banked holiday hours; PTO requests show up as an alert on a supervisor's screen in ARCOS, and a supervisor can approve the request with a click and create a covering shift inside the application.

A FINAL NOTE

For most organizations, workload and workforce management is an inefficient, burdensome process that front-line supervisors and mid-level managers often make work at great cost to themselves and the organization's bottom line. Companies like Canadian National Rail and Piedmont Airlines see automating workload management as the way to reduce service interruptions, slash hours wasted on recordkeeping, redeploy support staff to critical work and keep shift supervisors focused on ensuring efficiency and safety. With automated resource management, an employer can also reconcile shift management with HR, payroll and learning-management system, LMS, software, while digitally and efficiently tracking all facets of shift work from one platform.