

# Shift Worker Productivity Need Not Be an Oxymoron

by John Frehse

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Employees who work nontraditional schedules can create as much value as nine-to-fivers if executives can manage their expectations and special needs.

by John Frehse

**N**ot long ago, I got a call from a Canadian bank executive who was facing a revolt by his 1,000-plus contact center employees. The workers were grumbling that management was too strict and was cracking down on legitimate break time. Generally removed from these hourly employees, the executive had no idea how to handle their complaints. Afraid that they might stage a slowdown or take some other disagreeable action, he was on the verge of trying to placate them by implementing a more generous break policy that would cost the bank US\$1 million annually.

“What’s the turnover rate in your contact center?” I asked. “Three percent,” he said. “Who are the supervisors?” “All former contact agents,” he said. I started to understand what was going on. The low turnover rate suggested that workers were actually quite satisfied with their jobs. But a vocal majority was protesting, and their supervisors — onetime peers, if not friends — were doing nothing to counter their outcry. Some supervisors were even amplifying the complaints out of loyalty.

Specific circumstances may differ, but the basic story line is the same in almost all industries where shift workers — the factory hands and customer service reps who don’t work traditional 9-to-5 office

hours — play a large role, such as financial services, manufacturing, and energy. Management distrusts these workers, viewing them as keen to immediately bring grievances to their unions or to unionize if they have not already done so. As a result, companies shy away from responding to the workers’ concerns even when working conditions have not been altered in years, or, worse yet, they take ill-considered, rash actions that hurt the organization. Indeed, whereas most companies won’t hesitate to invest \$20 million in a new software system or \$40 million to build a new plant to improve shift worker productivity, executives often don’t even think about less expensive ways of achieving the same goal, such as asking these employees to work longer hours or simply different shifts. That’s particularly unfortunate, because the root of the problem between management and shift workers is a misunderstanding.

Here’s the reality: The vast majority of shift workers actually like their work and are satisfied with their pay and benefits. In the surveys Core Practice Partners has done, 74 percent of shift workers have described themselves as “very satisfied” or “moderately satisfied” with their jobs, versus just 9 percent who say they are dissatisfied. Even more important, shift workers are often willing to make changes, such as adjustments in

**John Frehse**

(jfhrehse@corepractice.com) is chief strategist at Core Practice Partners, an international consulting firm that specializes in workforce optimization. He has lectured around the world on labor management strategies.

their schedules, if they have clear information about the alternatives available to them.

The key is education — on both sides. Management needs to give up some classic misconceptions, among them that shift workers are malcontents who shouldn't be included in decisions and that overtime pay is a pox created by the devil. As for shift workers, they must learn the value of flexibility. For example, shift workers don't necessarily understand how extended-hour shifts can translate into more time off. Again and again, that math, when made transparent, helps sell sweeping schedule alterations.

A few years ago, for instance, we worked with a packaged-foods company that needed one of its distribution centers to move to seven-day-a-week production. There was no option — the only question was whether the workers would accomplish the new schedule by sticking with their 8-hour work days or move to 12-hour days.

In truth, the shift workers didn't like the choice they were being offered: working more or longer days. Mistrust between management and workers being what it is, the workers suspected that management wanted them to work the 12-hour days. In fact, management was indifferent to that detail as long as it got the coverage it needed. We created models (basic day off/day on patterns) to show the workers how the different schedules would affect them. At first, they were so upset they couldn't digest what we were saying. Once they did, however, they overwhelmingly chose the 12-hour shifts, which gave them 78 more days off a year and twice as many weekends free. In the end, by letting the workers participate in the decision and have buy-in, management achieved the production

increase it needed without the backlash it feared.

Of course, what's good for one group of shift workers may not be desirable for another, as was evident at an insurance call center we recently worked with. Call centers are notorious for their fluctuating pace. The phones ring off the hook at certain times of day and are much less active at other times. In this company's case, most of the customer service agents were single parents. They told us they'd be receptive to the idea of working split shifts. The unusual schedule served these workers' needs because it let them take several hours off in the middle of the day to pick their children up at school and drop them off at a care center. They then returned to work to complete their shift. It so happened that the hours when these workers were with their children coincided with a period of low call volume. At the same time that managers were accommodating the workers' scheduling preference, they were reducing idle time and making the operation more productive. The lesson: Although it is useful to know that shift workers are generally satisfied with their jobs, such knowledge tells management little about the needs of individual employees or departments. To get a sense of these needs, management must survey shift workers directly.

When it comes to scheduling, perhaps the biggest misunderstanding is that paying shift workers overtime is proof of poor management. I'd be rich if I had a dollar (or more appropriately, a \$1.50) for every time I've heard a manager express a desire to limit overtime pay to some predetermined percentage. The truth is that paying overtime can be sound economic practice; it depends on what alternatives are available. Overtime can be cheaper in cases where companies

routinely hire additional workers to cover break times or deal with issues like seasonal increases in demand or vacation relief. A worker logging overtime doesn't cost the company more in terms of benefits, because that burden is already covered. And by asking existing workers to do more, management avoids the risks of overstaffing and increasing the amount of idle time, which is the real source of wage inefficiency.

As with a lot of things in life, you just have to do the math. +

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## Resources

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Awake in Philly Community Education Group, "Shift Work Sleep Disorder Fact Sheet": Details the degree that sleep disorders can jeopardize the health and safety of shift workers and undermine employers' profitability. [www.awakeinphilly.org/ExcessiveSleepiness/SWSD\\_FactSheet.pdf](http://www.awakeinphilly.org/ExcessiveSleepiness/SWSD_FactSheet.pdf)

Mike Noon and Paul Blyton, *The Realities of Work* (3rd ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): How the rank and file view their jobs — and what gives rise to morale problems. [www.amazon.com/dp/1403994935](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1403994935)

Harriet B. Presser, "The Economy That Never Sleeps," *Contexts*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2004): The role of policy in a world where two in every five employees work late shifts and weekends. [www.contextsmagazine.org/content\\_sample\\_v3-2.php](http://www.contextsmagazine.org/content_sample_v3-2.php)

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