Unpredictable scheduling brings added stress to the holidays for hourly workers

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Work-Life Column

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Lexington, KY - It is that time again: the season of busy schedules. It is the season when nearly every day is assigned a holiday party, a dinner, a school play, a holiday shopping list, a cookie-baking list, or a dreaded pre-guest, whole-house cleaning list. Despite the stress, it’s an exciting, fun-filled and busy time of year..

For people working a traditional, 9-to-5 schedule, the flurry of chores and engagements is difficult to squeeze into the available nights and weekends. For those who work hourly or lower-wage jobs, it can be downright impossible.

We all know that the holidays are a crucial season for many industries, including service, retail, shipping and others, and some workers in these industries may celebrate the opportunity to work the extra shifts they’ve needed throughout the year. However, these shifts may be condensed into a month-long window, with little time for the parties or family gatherings that make the holidays special, not to mention the necessary chores that accompany them. Furthermore, many hourly workers have no ability to influence when or how much they are scheduled to work.

As businesses struggle to react to shifting market demands, this unpredictability can be passed onto workers. Unpredictable schedules are difficult for anyone to manage, but they are particularly difficult for those with limited resources outside of work. Many workers may not have the luxury of outsourcing non-work responsibilities such as childcare. And coordinating schedules among family and friends who help provide care becomes complicated when schedules aren’t predictable. Many daycares request or require predictability that working parents can’t provide due to their own shifting schedules.

At the Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin), our research has shown that scheduling issues can lead to work-family conflict, stress and ultimately negative health consequences for workers. Last year, iwin published a report titled Flexible Workplace Solutions for Low-Wage Hourly Workers that found that the most common scheduling conflicts arise from employees’ lack of input into their schedules, short notice regarding their schedules and a fluctuating number of hours. In essence, when workers can’t predict when they’ll work or how much they’ll make, they can’t effectively plan for other parts of their lives, either. No matter how organized someone is with their non-work obligations, if she can’t influence her work schedule, conflict and stress will most likely occur.

We also understand that managers may not realize the impact that scheduling practices may have on their staff and are often under extreme pressure to meet business needs while using minimal resources. So how can employers accommodate workers’ needs while meeting business objectives?
The authors of the above report, Jennifer Swanberg of iwin and Liz Watson, Legislative Council, Workplace Flexibility 2010, recommend three scheduling guidelines for managers that can help workers negotiate their work and non-work obligations: 1) solicit employee input into schedules before they are drafted, 2) try to maintain predictability in the days and number of hours when possible, and 3) guarantee a minimum or maximum number of hours for workers.

The benefits of this sort of scheduling go beyond employee satisfaction. For example, CitiSales, a national retail firm that participated in another research study led by Swanberg and Jacqueline James at Boston College in 2008, used the following scheduling practices to give employees more control: 1) it allowed employees to request regular schedules, 2) it created formal procedures for schedule requests, and 3) it developed a standard process for just-in-time schedule changes to accommodate unpredictable situations.

In a smart but often overlooked step, CitiSales also communicated the business case of its scheduling changes — including their impact on engagement, retention and the bottom line — to managers in charge of scheduling to make sure they were on board with the new policies. CitiSales’ managers ultimately reported that these scheduling practices reduced work-family conflict, employee stress, turnover and absenteeism and improved employee engagement and recruitment efforts. According to a CitiSales representative: “…the reward that we receive is greater than the cost associated with it. [The reward is] we have employees who feel better about their job. They understand that we’re going to work together to accomplish what we need to accomplish and that makes for a happier employee who’s going to do a better job for us and be more willing to focus on the things we’re asking them to focus on.”

Swanberg elaborates: “What we found through the CitiSales study surprised us. We had a hunch that employees would experience more satisfaction when they had more control over their schedules, but we also found that customer service went up. The managers’ participation was very important. Managers know what the needs of the store are, and employees know what their own needs are. When you create a scheduling system that enables both of those voices to be heard, both employees and organizations benefit.”

These three steps may sound simple or complex depending on the nature of the organization, but evidence suggests that when workers are able to work the schedules they desire, they are not only more satisfied and less stressed, but they are more productive and provide better customer service. Those are outcomes everyone can celebrate, this and any other time of year.

Jess Miller Clouser is a researcher at the Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin). The two reports referenced in this article, Flexible Workplace Solutions for Low-Wage Hourly Workers and the CitiSales study, can be accessed at iwin.uky.edu.

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