Smart rostering

How efficient is the system you’re using to manage your staff roster? Ken Burgin offers his tips for improving its efficiency and creating a smoother running, and happier, workplace.

UNEMPLOYMENT may be high, but the best staff are still in short supply. Offering an efficient, flexible rostering system can be a powerful way to attract and retain smart people, no matter what size your business. When preparing your next roster, use the following checklist to save time, money and frustration.

Think through the roster without individual names. Work out the allocation of shifts and responsibilities, then cost it according to hourly wage rates. When that’s done, add the names of suitable people for different shifts. This is ‘position rostering’ rather than the traditional method that builds a roster around the requests of individuals and their busy social lives. Position rostering puts the business first.

Rostering requires both sides of the brain. Left-brain people pay attention to order and accuracy, while right-brain people are more focused on creativity and feelings. Whoever does the roster should have a good eye for detail and an understanding of the personalities involved.

A good roster shares the best shifts. For waiters and bar staff some days offer better tips. For all staff, some shifts are easier, and late shifts or busy days can be sheer hard work. Staff will handle it if rewards and burdens are shared fairly.

Busy shifts need the best staff. Sometimes experienced staff or managers gravitate to easier, daytime schedules, maybe because they write the roster. It may also be because management rewards

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Chickadee Egg & Bacon Roundas.
are not connected to the performance of busy shifts eg when managers are cut out of tip sharing. All staff should know how the business works during days, nights and weekends.

Flexibility is part of modern work life. This is where online rostering has an advantage, because shift preferences and availability can be handled automatically. Business needs are a priority, but if you keep denying time off requests staff will start calling in 'sick' or move elsewhere.

Costing rosters should be part of writing rosters. Traditionally, the functions have been separate, and the bad news on wage costs is only revealed after the week is finished. Modern rostering shows wage costs as the roster is written.

Start the roster week on a busy day. Typically, rosters are written Monday to Sunday, from the quietest to the busiest days. But if the week is slow and by Wednesday you decide to start trimming hours, chances are they'll come from the weekend, where online rostering has an advantage, because insisting on constant long hours, they may have performance and burnout. If you have someone for more than five days per week leads to loss of time off, confident work is organised and predictable. Staff to plan their lives and achieve more of the 'work-life' balance we all aspire to. Many managers fear a roster done well in advance will need endless rewriting. But once you automate the rostering process, you'll find rostering doesn't need to be a drama. Staff can organise time off, confident work is organised and predictable. A new calm has descended.

Everyone needs two days off. There will be times when you need someone to do double shifts, extra days or back-to-back. But regular rostering for more than five days per week leads to loss of performance and burnout. If you have someone insisting on constant long hours, they may have financial problems: Avoid this shortcut.

Allow staff to check their roster without calling in. Modern online rostering services like those from JustRosters.com.au and Impact Data allow the roster to be prepared entirely online. Organise the schedule, notify shifts by SMS or email and allow staff to accept shifts or request changes automatically. Managers can do it anywhere—one of the few examples of 'working from home' that apply in hospitality. Imagine if rostering could be handled without endless phone calls, giving you more time for work like training and marketing.

Paul Smith, owner of Green Zebra in Albury, manages his roster using Apple's free iCal online service. He likes the flexibility, but cautions "just because your staff are young, and stereotypically sharp with modern tech, it isn't actually so. Don't equate texting with the ability to read, let alone write an email. Our staff news site is problematic in that regard—I have to force staff to read it. Rosters online, however, are always read because they affect the person directly."

Encourage staff to plan their lives. There are legal requirements for how far in advance rosters must be displayed but, just as importantly, a roster displayed at least four weeks in advance allows staff to plan their lives and achieve more of the 'work-life' balance we all aspire to. Many managers fear a roster done well in advance will need endless rewriting. But once you automate the request and shift-change system, you'll find rostering doesn't need to be a drama. Staff can organise time off, confident work is organised and predictable. A new calm has descended.

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that were excellent examples of the art. The prawn dumplings with fine, glutinous pastry and full of flavour were matched by the dense, meaty texture of the pork. I'm now primed for some of that duck.

We're introduced to our whole, individually numbered, Peking Duck ($88) by the carver (another specialist role) who deftly slices some of the rich, crisp belly skin off for starters while he sets to the remainder of the bird. I'm captivated by the skill and speed of the carving and presentation of the meat. It's restaurant as theatre at its finest.

Simply presented with steamer baskets of pancakes and sides of spring onion, cucumber and an excellent sauce, we were given a swift lesson in pancake folding and left to our own devices.

Peking Duck at Quanjude is a wonderful experience and encourages more conversation as we negotiate duck versus pancake versus who has eaten what and how skilled they are with chopsticks. Eventually the duck plate was exhausted, the slightly odd, but very traditional Duck Broth that is part of the Peking experience was cleared—and then the prawns arrived. My beloved wasn't convinced they were required. Surely the duck had satisfied all but no, the Stir-fried Prawns with Szechuan Chilli Sauce ($39.50) looked fantastically irresistible.

Our section head had suggested earlier that they be served after the duck so the chilli would not overpower our palate. That was just fine with me.

Placed delicately atop plain steamed rice these prawns were fat, crunchy, hot and sweet all at once. Marvellous; and with just enough chilli zing to send me away as happy as can be; full of tea, dumplings, duck and prawn—fat and happy.