

On-the-Go Foodservice

Simplifying foodservice for cross-channel retail executives.

Better Labor, Better Service

By Mina Williams

Managers spend between one and eight hours every week building their schedule, as they are required to balance availability sheets with staffing needs, all the while keeping in mind overtime regulations and labor laws, according to industry experts. They estimate the cost of these activities at approximately \$1,000 per month per manager, based on an average annual salary of \$62,500.

While labor-management systems are charged with ferreting out inefficiencies in staff scheduling and freeing hours from managers' schedules, executives are spotting that these tech tools can significantly boost customer service, the priceless intangible in any foodservice operation.

"The leading decision gate when looking at labor-management technology is to look at your customer service and how your customers say that service is," said Steve Winegardner, project manager Sheetz Inc., the Altoona, Pa.-based operators of 330 convenience stores with gas.

"The best salespeople are managers; they give a face of the company to the customer," Winegardner said. But manual scheduling in each of Sheetz's stores takes three hours per week on average, and that's time that the manager is not spending with customers. Using an automated system, Sheetz shaved that activity to between 45 minutes and one hour. "The goal is to get it under 30 minutes," he said, adding that Sheetz also is considering centralizing scheduling to enable managers to spend even more time on the sales floor.

What Sheetz has gained is accurate scheduling, which is improving customer service. Certified workers are on every shift to perform various functions, including the sale of alcohol. The ability to follow time-card trails and audit time and attendance records can virtually eliminate pirated punchers and "buddy punching." Additionally, automated scheduling reduces the chances of human partiality, such as managers playing favorites by scheduling employees based on personal relationships and preferences instead of business needs, or assigning overtime unevenly.

"From a scheduling perspective, labor-management systems can help boost customer service," said Jennifer Simich, vice president of **InfoTronics**, a time and attendance solutions provider based in Farmington Hills, Mich. "Once you have the historical data, you can look for trends and patterns."

The historical data enables managers and headquarter personnel to schedule a certain number of employees based upon retail numbers for particular days. With the ability to observe historical revenue forecasts on an hourly basis, executives can make key labor decisions from real-time data.

"There is much to gain in using technology," said Jack Cushman, executive vice president of food services, for Nice N Easy Grocery Shoppes, based in Canastota, N.Y. "You can gain 1 to 3 percent [in gross profits] by managing food costs alone. Discovering what caused the problem can get into millions of dollars when that little percent is scaled across a chain. With labor it is different. Operators have to decide whether to waste labor or give customers enough service, and poor service can crush a foodservice operation.

"Managers are blowing labor," Cushman added. "If a store sold \$300 between 6 p.m. and 7 p.m. on a Tuesday night with a 21 percent labor cost I would know without even being at the store that it should be pristine, and all catch-up projects done."