

AN EFFECTIVE STAFF SCHEDULE: A JIGSAW PUZZLE THAT IS FUN TO BUILD

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Why Care About Scheduling?

One of the most critical and most challenging functions of a practice manager is to design a proper staff schedule. So why should we be willing to invest so much in the scheduling process? A properly designed staffing schedule can maximize practice productivity by making sure the right number of the right people are in the right place at any given time. Similarly, a properly designed schedule can make it possible for the practice to deliver a consistently high level of customer service and patient care. This has become even more critical over the last decade as many practices have begun to feel the impact of increased levels of competition.

If more team members create a better practice, why not just load the schedule up with the maximum number of people that can fit in the building? The first reason is purely financial, as managing total labor costs is one of the most critical management functions at any veterinary practice. Practices with thin profit margins can go out of business when labor costs run too high. The second reason is most practices are challenged to find enough team members within their catchment area to meet all their needs. This is especially true for mission critical team members such as technicians and credentialed technicians. Therefore, it is a prudent strategy to balance the needs of the practice with the needs of each team member. It may sound like this would leave the practice vulnerable, but in reality it bonds team members to the practice and drives employee satisfaction, productivity and retention.

A critical need for most team members is at least some degree of schedule flexibility. Offering schedule flexibility may seem counter intuitive, but it is one of the most highly-desired benefits by Generation X and Generation Y staff members. Typically, when you review the most challenging shifts to fill in a practice schedule, you will often notice that these shifts are frequently filled with members of both of those generations. Following the lead of their younger peers, over the last five years more baby boomers have expressed a desire to work a more flexible schedule as well. Therefore, some degree of flexibility is an essential requirement in any contemporary scheduling scheme. With flexibility comes a requirement for **fairness**. Fairness is a critical component in the staff scheduling process and in many practices is among the leading causes of poor morale, staff conflict and staff turnover. We revisit the concept of fairness again later in these proceedings.

Before we can continue to discuss a schedule's impact on the team and on practice operations, we have to understand some scheduling concepts and terminology as well as the types of scheduling options that exist.

Scheduling Concepts and Terminology

Individual states may define a work day differently. It is important to understand how your state defines yours. It is also important to be aware of rules associated with work days and scheduling in general. For example, some states define a work day as twelve midnight to 11:59 p.m. Other states may refer to it as a 24-hour period starting at the point the employee needs to report for work. If your employee is scheduled for work at 6:00 p.m. their work day could last until 5:59 p.m. the next calendar day. Some states have specific meal period or other break requirements. For example, Connecticut law requires a 30-minute unpaid meal break away from work responsibilities for all non-professional employees who are scheduled for a seven and one-half hour shift or longer. The break must be more than 2 hours into the shift and no less than 2 hours before the end of their shift. Virtually all states control the work hours allowed within a work day for employees under the age of 18.

Controversy surrounding the minimum time allowed between shifts has become an urban legend in staff scheduling circles. No federal law mandates a required rest period between shifts. I have heard rumor of many states having requirements, but research has always shown it to be a company policy rather than a state law. For example, many big box retailers require 8 hours between consecutive shifts. Not only does a minimum period of rest help create a more productive employee, they have the added benefit of improved safety performance and avoidance of bad publicity for unfair working conditions. It also may relieve them of the potential liability related to an exhausted employee driving home and creating an auto accident. Therefore, while not an actual law, it is a wise scheduling practice that ultimately has many benefits.

Work week is most often defined as the range of time used to define pay periods. Sunday through Saturday or Monday through Sunday are the most common work weeks in veterinary practices as they follow a typical calendar week. However, by carefully designing a work week you can make it easier to monitor and manage a non-exempt employee's overtime. My preference is a Saturday through Friday work week as most overtime is created over the weekend. Thus, employees whose shifts that ran long on Saturdays and Sundays can have their midweek schedules adjusted to reduce overtime exposure.

A fixed schedule means that the staff members, their duties, their work day and work week are fixed week after week and do not change. The advantage of a fixed schedule is it is easy for staff to remember and it will therefore become habit reducing tardiness and call outs. It is also easy for the staff to extrapolate their schedule into the future to predict time off for scheduling life's events. Fixed schedules also make it easier for team members to coordinate child care and elder care. Fixed schedules are also the easiest for management to maintain.

The negatives associated with a fixed schedule include difficulties in trying to get coverage for open shifts. Team members that are locked into fixed schedules tend to

be less flexible assisting with coverage. Fixed schedules need to be equitable with weekend distributions or they create resentment. Doctors on production demand that fixed schedules are equitable in their ability to allow the doctors to maximize their income producing potential. For example, a Saturday or Sunday daytime shift will be far more advantageous than a Wednesday daytime shift.

A rotating schedule means that the staff, their shift or their responsibilities rotate. The rotation may be fixed (always the same) or random in nature. Rotating schedules are often designed to minimize exposure to undesirable schedule time. This may include weekends, overnights, etc. A hybrid schedule adopts characteristics of both a fixed and rotating schedule. A typical hybrid schedule may include a fixed weekday schedule with a rotating weekend rotation. Employees may also rotate responsibilities within the practice. For example, they could work outpatient shifts, inpatient shifts and in the laboratory. This type of rotation helps maintain skill sets and fosters teamwork and maintains a level of flexibility within the team.

Another scheduling methodology used for fine tuning a schedule is skill based scheduling. We probably all do it in an informal manner, but there is now some software programs out there that allow true skill based scheduling, so it is just starting to appear in veterinary medicine. It is a method of scheduling based on the known skill sets of individual employees and the needs of the practice. For example, you may determine that for a Saturday daytime shift you need 2 support staff with restraint skills, 2 with venipuncture skills and 2 that are good with client education. Skill based scheduling makes sure you have the right number of skills in place and not just the right number of bodies. The more skill sets an employee has developed, the more flexible their scheduling options.

Split scheduling is when an employee works for more than one business unit within a single work day or work week. For example, a receptionist on a split schedule works in the general practice from 4:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. and then moves to the emergency practice from 9:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. to finish her shift. An assistant may work inpatient in the afternoon and move to triage in the evening when the outpatient volume increases.

A template is one of the best drivers of schedule-making efficiency. A template is a standard layout of a schedule that can be used to create future schedules. Templates may be for a week, or month in duration depending on how your schedule is designed. Practices with a rotating weekend responsibility often have a Template Week 1 and Template Week 2 prepared in advance that they can copy and paste into their scheduling program. This dramatically reduces not only the labor involved in creating schedules but it also has the added benefit of reducing the number of errors in a potential schedule.

Specific employees may be exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act minimum wage and overtime requirements. We typically refer to these employees as "exempt." Doctors are classified as professionals and are therefore typically

considered exempt employees. Most hourly staff members are covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act minimum wage and overtime regulations and are typically considered “non-exempt” employees. I mention this in a scheduling discussion to help dispel the myth that has existed in our industry for a long time that a practice can evade paying overtime by placing them on salary, or by giving every staff member a manager title. The requirements to meet the manager exemption are very clear and there are new federal standards in place designed to tighten the standards even further to help eliminate abuses. In my opinion, paying overtime is far cheaper than having a team member report the practice to your state Department of Labor to investigate any potential wage and hour payroll violations.

Per Diem staff members are scheduled one day at a time as needed by the practice. For example, a former staff member hired on a per diem basis may be called in to cover operations during a staff meeting, or to cover for a team member that has just called out on short notice. A badge of honor for a scheduler in many larger practices is the size of the stable of per diem staff members they have amassed as they are often the most cost effective way to meet scheduling needs.

Seasonal team members can also be a huge help to keep schedules working in a cost effective manner. These staff members only work during a specific season of the year. The most common example is veterinary, or technician students who return to the practice during their holiday breaks and the summer months. It works well for practices that colleges let students break during most of the major holidays. This can be important relief for the staff at a small practice where each individual may be required to work several holidays each year.

Scheduling Tools

There are numerous tools available in the workplace today to assist with the development and maintenance of schedules. Handwritten schedules should be obsolete for any practice larger than 2 staff members. Schedules developed in a word processing program such as Microsoft Word[®] are easier to read than handwritten schedules, but offer little gains in efficiency and effectiveness. Tables can be created and names can be substituted more easily. Schedules can be saved and easily distributed via email, but this is still a cumbersome format. Calendar software such as Microsoft Outlook[®] creates easy to read schedules and allows for quick and easy revisions, but offer little more than a more comfortable and familiar viewing format.

Spreadsheet software such as Microsoft Excel[®] does offer all of the features listed above along with the added capability of calculating the number of hours (and/or dollars) for which a staff member has been scheduled. This feature is important for monitoring the hours of non-exempt employees and employees that have negotiated a minimum number of hours to work.

Time clock software is available with a wide range of features and a wide price range as well. Many veterinary practice management software programs include some level of time clock software. Better software packages facilitate the development of the work schedule and are therefore able to identify tardy employees, potential overtime shifts and other scheduling trends. You need to be a good consumer, conduct your due diligence and make an educated purchasing decision. Many time clock programs available from management software or payroll companies offered scheduling capabilities as an afterthought and placed little development effort into them. I once visited a practice that took a manager 3 times longer to enter a schedule into the time clock than it did to create it in scheduling software. Your time is valuable. Sometimes cheap or free software costs you more in the end.

Previously, only the largest and most diverse (multiple business units) veterinary practices utilized scheduling software. Today, 1 or 2 doctor mom and pop practices can use cloud-based scheduling programs for a small monthly fee. These programs are very user-friendly and intuitive and many of the more common ones have instructional videos available on www.youtube.com making their implementation easier than ever. These simple to use yet powerful programs offer much more than automated scheduling templates, they interface with budget software, they track vacation requests, they offer coworkers shift trading options, etc. They also have tools that ensure complete and proper coverages are in place at all times. This feature alone is a critical tool in helping to ensure you have continuous 24/7 coverage throughout an entire month with no gaps.

Staff can access their schedules 24/7, often through a smart phone app making them very user-friendly for those Generation X and Y employees we mentioned earlier. Many programs also include communication features so you can send targeted or global announcements for everything ranging from a staff meeting, to a critical drug backorder. The software we use allows managers to send employees emergency text alerts. We cover virtually all of our reception and technician call outs this way and it takes only a minute to reach your entire team at once! Given both hard cost and soft cost savings, there is no reason why any type of veterinary practice of any size should not be using scheduling software.

Staffing Guidelines

To begin a schedule, it is best to first outline the specific needs of the practice. Simply put, you need to know how many people are needed at each position within the practice. While trusting your gut helps, objective data gathered over long periods of time can help you predict future caseload with great accuracy. In some emergency practices, the reception staff logs each case that comes in. This data allows them to forecast the number of expected outpatients for each shift. In general practice, an appointment book audit is utilized. In emergency medicine, we actually break the data down into 2-hour blocks so we know how best to structure individual shifts for each day of the week. This data helps with reception, outpatient and triage staffing. In our practices our technicians round twice each day. Their rounding

census helps us determine our inpatient case volume for determining inpatient technician and assistant staffing levels.

Once you have determined the specific needs of the practice, you should establish guidelines to accommodate those needs. For instance, the number of desired receptionists per shift may equal one receptionist for every 10 transactions during a shift. If you process 30 transactions during a shift, you need 3 receptionists to properly staff that shift. Sadly, there is no magic number that works as a universal constant in all practices. The ratios are different for each practice based on policies, protocols and infrastructure. However, history is the best indicator of future results and it does not take long to determine the most cost-effective staffing level at your practice.

Staffing guidelines are best developed during staff meetings and not in the middle of busy times. A guideline created during a crisis may be unique to that particular scenario and therefore not helpful to general operations. In addition to determining what staffing levels best support customer service and patient care, you may also wish to develop other guidelines such as the number of new employees in training that can be scheduled during each shift or in each department. In the reception department at our practices, that number is two.

Although most practices do not use true skill based scheduling, employee skill-sets are often figured into the scheduling mix by astute managers. For example, you might schedule one warm and fuzzy receptionist with a receptionist with strong computer and telephone skills. Review your assistant and technician schedule and determine if you have the proper mix of technical skills such as: restraint, venipuncture, anesthesia monitoring, laboratory skills, etc. The productivity and effectiveness of an entire shift can be crushed if one essential skill is missing from the mix.

Tips and Cautions

In human resources, we often talk about trust. It is important for the success of any business for the employees to trust the managers and leaders of the business. There is an old saying to “never mess with someone’s pay or schedule.” Those words still ring true today. Perhaps, even more than ever given the priorities and values of the younger generations now making up the majority of our workforce. One way to build trust is to consistently have the schedule prepared and available to all when you say it will be ready. We try to have the schedule available at least one month in advance. Practices that post Mondays schedule on the Saturday before, have a huge morale and trust problem, whether they perceive it or not.

Another way to build trust in a practice team is to schedule everyone fairly. This usually means an equitable distribution of undesirable shifts such as Friday and Saturday nights and holidays. Formal deadlines for posting the schedule and submission of the staff’s time off requests should be communicated to the entire staff. Moreover, the entire staff should agree with and comply with the established deadlines. For example, in order to have a month’s worth of schedule posted in

advance, the staff needs to know that all vacation and CE requests need to be in 6 weeks in advance. Sure there are emergencies, but birthdays, anniversaries, weddings and cruises are scheduled well in advance and the scheduler should be given as much notice as possible in order to locate alternate coverage.

Always post written or printed schedules. Avoid verbal schedules at all cost. Require employees to submit in writing all requests for schedule changes, shift trades and requests for time off. So as to avoid the perception of favoritism (i.e., questions regarding why some requests are approved and others rejected), implement a written protocol that explains how time off requests are processed and approved. Typical criteria would include the date the request was submitted, the operational needs of the practice, the staff member's length of service at the practice, their recent time off history and history of holidays worked. If not using scheduling software, keep these written requests in each employee's personnel folder for the same length of time you are required to keep their payroll records and time cards.

Flexibility

Offering increased schedule flexibility is a great benefit for staff that can increase productivity, quality of work and staff retention. However, it can dramatically increase the supervisor's workload. Always try to find a balance with which both parties are comfortable. Offering scheduling options to staff members is becoming an extremely popular practice and is generally well received by staff. Such options might include five 8-hour days, four 10-hour days or three 12-hour days with, or without a 4-hour morning or evening shift depending on whether or not your staff typically gets out on time (which they should be able to do most of the time). Please check with an attorney first to see if there are any state laws that regulate such schedules (e.g., California requires overtime for shifts longer than 8 hours in duration).

Plan for contingencies as best as possible. Per Diem staff members and employees on call can be two excellent tools to help maintain schedule integrity when staff calls out, or you experience unexpectedly heavy caseload.

Presenteeism is a relatively new concept in the business and no discussion of scheduling is complete without at least mentioning this syndrome that we are only just beginning to understand how to manage effectively. Presenteeism actually has two different and distinct meanings. The original definition of Presenteeism refers to those employees that wish to work a large number of hours each work week. They are always asking to cover extra shifts. They are the first to offer to work overtime for reasons other than financial need. These individuals are usually workaholics or individuals that are avoiding dealing with specific personal problems such as an uncomfortable personal relationship at home. These employees tend to be very non-productive given the amount of time they are present in the workplace. Despite the help they offer to fill shifts, these team members often have issues that should be addressed, but that is beyond the scope of this presentation.

Presenteeism also refers to those employees that refuse to take sick or personal time when they are ill. Instead, they show up at work and attempt to perform their duties. Research has shown that a staff is generally more productive if they are short one worker that is sick because everyone pitches in to complete the work at hand. If the sick person comes to work, they generally perform at a lower level of both work quality and work volume. They also spend time describing their maladies to coworkers and clients which further decreases productivity. Not to mention their obvious ability to make the rest of the team sick. It is best to send these individuals home and determine if you need to replace them, or if existing staff can effectively complete the workload present for their shift.

Remember that scheduling needs and scheduling templates should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of the practice as it changes and evolves. Because seasonality affects scheduling in most areas, remember to increase staff numbers during a busy season(s) and decrease as much as possible during slow times.

24-hour practices may have trouble filling specific shifts such as Friday or Saturday evenings. During these times, a financial incentive called a shift differential is often employed to entice staff members to volunteer to work these shifts. Currently, shift differentials average between 10-20% of the employee's regular hourly wage (typically \$2-5.00 per hour in most markets). However, you should think through the concept of a differential very carefully before you implement it and only implement it for those shifts where it is critical to keep them staffed. Once a differential has been paid, the staff will perceive it as an entitlement from that point forward and it will be difficult to decrease or remove without that "violation of trust" that we discussed earlier as you would be messing with both pay and schedule.

If a work group needs leadership during a time when their supervisor is not scheduled, many practices will designate an individual as a shift supervisor, or a team leader or other catchy title. This individual may receive a financial incentive called a supervisory differential which is similar to a shift differential. A supervisory differential for a team leader is an excellent way to evaluate someone's potential to assume a leadership role within the practice. If they do well on these shifts, you can move them into a more permanent role. If not, you can fill the role with others and avoid some of the difficulties associated with having to demote a new manager who has not worked out.

During our talk today, we mentioned that if your practice is trying to fill a position that requires weekend or evening hours, it is best to state this in the job posting (advertisement) to avoid wasting time with potential candidates that cannot meet practice needs. It is also a best practice to have potential candidates complete an Availability Form as part of your written Employment Application. This helps clarify schedule expectations from the very first interaction with the potential employee to help decrease conflict and controversy down the road.

Now that you have all the pieces ready, enjoy building your puzzle!