

# **Working 24/7**

## **What Employees Want from their Shift Schedules**

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If you ask a group of shiftworkers to describe their ideal shift schedule, you may hear statements like these:

- “Monday through Friday with 8-hour day shifts.”
- “Monday through Thursday with 10-hour day shifts.”
- “Thursdays only -- to pick up my check.”
- “I’ll stay home and you can mail me the check!”

These statements illustrate how much value shiftworkers place on their time-off. In fact, if compensation is unaffected, time-off is the shift worker’s primary consideration when comparing alternative shift schedules. Having adequate time-off allows them to have a life outside of work, i.e. the ability to balance their lives at work with their lives away from work.

There are four types of time-off that employees consider when evaluating a shift schedule: (1) weekends off, (2) total days off, (3) daily time off, and (4) consecutive days off. We will examine the schedule attributes that drive these four different types of time-off, supplementing this discussion with statistics from our database of over 20,000 shiftworker surveys.

### **Weekends Off**

Of the four types of time off, the number of weekends off is the usually the most important. The desire to increase the number of weekends off is a common reason for adopting longer shifts. The graph in Figure 1 shows the maximum number of full

weekends off (Saturday and Sunday together) per year with 8-hour and 12-hour shifts (13 versus 26 weekends off).

Of course, the **actual** number of full weekends off depends on more than just shift length. Other factors include the number of days worked in a row, the pattern of on-off work days, the amount of overtime, and the day the pay week begins. But, as a general rule, longer shifts will enable workers to get more full weekends off.

A key consideration with weekends off is predictability. Most shift workers (82% in the survey database) are willing to work their fair share of weekends. They simply want sufficient advance notice and no last-minute changes. This allows them to make plans for the weekend and not have to worry about getting an unexpected weekend assignment.

### **Total Days Off**

Many shift workers also favor schedules that offer more total days off overall. As shown in Figure 2, 12-hour shifts provide twice as many days off each year (compared to 8-hour shifts) for the same number of hours worked each week (182 days off versus 91 days off).

The substantial increase in days off is one of the reasons three-quarters of all shift workers prefer to work longer shifts (see Figure 3).

### **Daily Time-Off**

The third type of time-off is the number of hours off on the days of work. As seen in Figure 3, a quarter of the shift workers prefer shorter work days even though they would have to work more days a week. Shiftworkers who are older, have childcare concerns, are going to school, have second jobs, or participate in other non-work activities on workdays often prefer 8-hour or 8&12-hour shift schedules so they can have more “free” time each day.

### **Consecutive Days Off**

The fourth type of time-off is the number of consecutive days off in the schedule. In Figure 4, you can see that most shift workers prefer to work several days and then take a long break, i.e. get more consecutive days off.

In general, there are two ways to get more consecutive days off. One way is to work 12-hour shifts. The other is to work longer stretches of days in a row. With 8-hour shifts, a schedule that is based on working 7 shifts in-a-row can offer up to one 4-day break every month. With 12-hour shifts, a schedule that is based on working 3 and 4 shifts in-a-row can offer up to a 7 or 8-day break every month.

### **Discussion**

It is clear that shift workers place a high value on their time-off. This is what enables them to reach a balance between work and their personal lives. What is not clear, however, is which type of time-off the schedule should emphasize. Should the schedule have 12-hour shifts to provide more weekends off and more total days off? Should the schedule mix 8-hour and 12-hour shifts to satisfy both those who want more weekends off **and** those who want more time off each day of work? Should it have longer stretches of days worked in a row to provide more consecutive days off?

While recognizing that each work site will have its own unique set of preferences, our database of shiftworker surveys offers some additional insight into this dilemma. With each of our clients, we show the workers several different schedule options that satisfy the client's business coverage requirements. By educating employees about the various possibilities, we enable them to make more informed choices from the schedule alternatives.

The options we show employees typically include one or more 8-hour, 10-hour (infrequently because they are not a good match with most 24/7 operations), 8&12-hour, and 12-hour schedules. Although the schedules for each shift length may differ from site

to site, the results indicate a much stronger preference for schedules that incorporate 12-hour shifts (see Figure 5).

### **Summary**

When managers face the possibility of changing shift schedules, it is beneficial to be familiar with the schedule features that offer employees the best opportunities for work/life balance. This doesn't replace the need to survey the workforce to determine their unique schedule preferences, but it does provide insights that will be valuable during the change process.

Although 75% of the shift workers would rather work longer shifts in order to get more days off, this does not always mean that 12-hour shifts are best. Some workers place a greater value on the hours off each day instead of the number of days off each week. Other schedule features such as the number of consecutive days of work are equally important in helping some individuals realize the type of time-off they prefer. Despite these qualifications, 12-hour shifts are clearly a favorite, gaining the highest ratings at nearly every organization we've worked with.