

Club Resources
INTERNATIONAL

Labor Cost Controls

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Table of Contents

Purpose of this Manual	1
Labor Costs in Hospitality Industry	
Labor Intensive	1
Labor Cost Percentage	1
Industry Average Labor Cost Percentage	2
Business Cycles	2
Fixed Labor Cost	2
Variable Labor Cost	2
Profitability = Responsive Staff Scheduling	2
Supervisor’s Responsibility to Control Costs	2
Elements of Labor Costs	
Compensation Costs	3
Hours Worked	3
Overtime	3
Productivity	4
Payroll Taxes and Benefits	4
Challenges in a Start-Up Enterprise	
Controlling Staff Turnover	4
Staffing Lean	5
Departmental Staffing Guides	
Baseline Staffing	5
Additional Staffing	5
Thresholds for Additional Staffing	5
Club’s Needs	
Stable Core Staff	6
Pool of Qualified Temporaries	6
Quick Response to Business Levels	7
Flexibility	7
Avoiding Excessive Fluctuations in Labor Force	7
Employee Needs	
Breadwinner	8
Second Income Worker	8
Single Parent	8
Students	8
Retirees	8
Labor Cost Control Strategies	
Matching our Needs to Employee’s	8
Baseline with Core Staff	9
Forecast Scheduling	9

Seasonal Hires	9
Quick Response Training	9
Budget Time Off	9
Cross Training & Departmental Shares	10
Project Work	10
Sending Home Early	10
Layoffs	11
Voluntary Leaves of Absence	11
Scheduling Vacations	11
Misuse of Sick Pay	11
Unemployment Compensation	12
Summary	12

Purpose of this Manual

Meeting our responsibilities to our owners requires that we be aggressive in achieving the targets of our annual operating budget. The single largest expense in that budget is labor cost. To the extent that we can intelligently and efficiently manage labor cost, we will be successful in meeting our budget.

Managing labor cost with intelligence and efficiency is a delicate skill that requires intimacy with our numbers, sensitivity to the needs and morale of staff, mental toughness to make the hard decisions, and a dogged determination to monitor and react to changing levels of business. If we as supervisors had no other responsibilities, managing our labor cost would be simple, but maintaining sufficient staffing levels to properly serve our members is also a major requirement of our jobs. That these two responsibilities are often contradictory and competing makes for an interesting and challenging profession.

This document attempts to define the problems of labor cost control and offers various strategies to make it easier for supervisors to control their labor costs. As with most other aspects of leadership, there is no pat answer or set solution to the problem of maintaining high levels of service while aggressively controlling labor costs. Staffing needs vary from department to department and change with the demands of our business. The best we can do is to anticipate our changing needs and move quickly to implement more cost effective schedules when necessary.

Labor Costs in the Hospitality Industry

The hospitality industry is somewhat unique in its labor needs. Clubs operate from early morning to late at night. For the convenience, safety, and security of members, clubs have staffing needs day and night throughout the week. Success in the hospitality business has always been dependent upon attention to details – the thousands of details that contribute to high levels of service, well-maintained facilities, appetizing food and beverage, and high levels of cleanliness, comfort, and convenience. To do these things well takes an intelligent, dedicated, and highly trained staff.

Labor Intensive

Most of the tasks involved in providing remarkable service are labor intensive. While the banking industry has had great success in the development and public acceptance of automatic teller machines (ATMs), our industry is not able to mechanize the manifold and complex tasks of cleaning or maintaining a clubhouse. Further, hospitality and service expectations are deeply ingrained in our members. Production and service of food and beverage, because of its complexity and infinite variables, is not likely to be taken over by machines any time soon, no matter how sophisticated robotics becomes.

Because of the service expectations of our members and the complexity of tasks we undertake, a club is labor intensive in a labor-intensive industry. It takes a lot of people to do what we do.

Labor Cost Percentage

The standard industry measure of labor cost is expressed as one's labor cost percentage. It can be computed for each profit center individually or for the club as a whole. Simply expressed:

$$\text{Labor Cost Percentage} = \text{Labor Cost (\$)} \text{ divided by } \text{Sales (\$)}$$

Industry-Average Labor Cost Percentage

Industry-average labor cost percentages vary by type of club. High-end clubs such as those that we operate tend to run higher percentages, while mid-scale and semi-private properties tend to have lower percentages. The overall industry average labor cost percentage, including all segments, is in the range of 40 to 48%. Start-ups may have much higher labor cost percentages, in some cases exceeding 100%.

Business Cycles

Clubs, unlike some types of businesses, are subject to wide fluctuations in their levels of business on a daily, weekly, and seasonal basis. On a daily basis we can be very slow in the morning, busy at lunch, and slow again at dinner. Weekends tend to be busier than weekdays, and weather can have a big impact on golf play and club use. Seasonally, clubs in the mid-Atlantic and Southeast, for instance, usually show a peak period from March through May and again from September through Thanksgiving. Other areas of the country experience their own seasonal cycles.

It's plain to see, our staffing needs vary greatly and require a great deal of flexibility and responsiveness in scheduling.

Fixed Labor Cost

Fixed labor cost is that portion of labor cost that does not fluctuate with business. A good example of such fixed cost would be the payroll costs of staffing a reception desk with a concierge. Whether one member or fifty use the clubhouse, if we are open for business, we need to staff the reception desk. Likewise, the minimum staff in all operating departments can be considered fixed, as is some level of supervisory and management staffing.

Because of the service levels they attempt to achieve, high-end clubs usually have a high fixed labor cost.

Variable Labor Cost

Variable labor cost, on the other hand, is that staffing which changes with levels of business. While one cook and one server may be our minimum staffing for the kitchen and restaurant, when our business reaches a certain threshold – say forty meals per hour – we will need to add some staffing to adequately handle the business. This additional staffing, which is dependent upon additional business, is considered variable and contributes a variable labor cost to our operation.

Profitability = Responsive Staff Scheduling

Successful clubs are those that are able to efficiently manage their labor costs. Most, if not all, clubs experience volatile business cycles. This coupled with the labor intensity of our business, means that success in the club business depends upon highly flexible and responsive staff scheduling.

Supervisors' Responsibility to Control Costs

Departmental Supervisors have an absolute responsibility to control costs. Of all the costs a particular department will incur, labor is by far the largest. Putting effort where it gives the greatest return, supervisors should focus their efforts on controlling their labor costs efficiently.

Elements of Labor Costs

Departmental labor costs are made up of several major elements:

Compensation Costs

Compensation costs include salaries, wages, employment taxes, and staff benefits. In any department there are typically one or two supervisors who are salaried and exempt from overtime while the rest of the staff are hourly employees who are subject to payment of overtime.

Supervisors have some control over rates of pay for hourly employees, though there are a number of constraints as well.

- Federal Wage and Hour Laws require that staff be paid at least the Federal Minimum Wage.
- Prevailing industry or local pay scales will also dictate what a supervisor must offer an individual to do a particular job. In a strong economy with low unemployment, clubs and other hospitality businesses find themselves paying \$10 and more per hour for entry-level unskilled or semi-skilled employees.
- In the free market system, a supervisor may have to pay a higher rate of pay to employ someone with certain skills or experience. Ultimately, the offer and acceptance to work hinge on a meeting of the minds between an employer who needs certain skills and experience and an applicant who has certain compensation requirements.
- A supervisor must also keep in mind what he is paying current employees when making an offer to an applicant who will be doing essentially the same work. In other words, a supervisor must consider issues of pay parity when setting rates of pay for new hires.
- Finally, a supervisor will be constrained by the requirements of his operating budget when making offers to applicants and offering raises to existing staff.

Within these parameters, a supervisor has some leeway in making a wage offer and exercises control over his labor cost by prudent hiring and departmental wage level decisions.

Hours Worked

Another major factor in labor cost is the number of hours scheduled and worked by departmental staff. Scheduled hours are dependent upon the amount of time required to properly complete the work or the hours of coverage in an operation. For instance, housekeeping needs to schedule housekeeper hours to complete the cleaning of all club facilities, while the reception desk may need to be covered for twelve hours a day on certain days of the week.

A supervisor exercises control over hours worked by setting the schedule in accordance with the demands of the business and monitoring the productivity of his staff. Keeping in mind that work will expand to fill the time allotted to complete it, supervisors must be ever vigilant to ensure that employees are productively occupied all the time they are on the clock.

Overtime

Overtime is paid at time and one half for all time worked over forty hours in one workweek. Supervisors must be careful when scheduling and directing staff to avoid overtime when possible.

Productivity

High levels of productivity ensure that all employees are gainfully employed while on the clock. Staffing should be kept purposefully lean, consistent with good judgment and expected levels of business, to avoid work expanding to fill the time allotted.

Time standards can be developed for repetitive work such as cleaning club facilities. As an example, hotels establish a cleaning time standard for guestrooms, usually between 30 and 45 minutes, depending upon the size of the room, the specified cleaning standards, and the complexity of cleaning tasks. Once an appropriate room cleaning time standard is determined, it becomes fairly easy to project staffing needs for expected levels of room occupancy.

Payroll Taxes and Benefits

Payroll taxes include FICA (Social Security Tax), FUTA (Federal Unemployment and Medicare Taxes), and SUTA (State Unemployment Tax) and are set by law. Workmen's Compensation Insurance is also set by law. In addition, the club offers a benefit package for staff. All together these taxes and benefits add approximately 12-20% in cost to salaries and wages. In other words, if we have salaries and wages of \$100,000 for a particular period, we will have another \$12,000 to \$20,000 on top of that in taxes and benefits.

While a supervisor has no control over the levels of taxation and the cost of benefits, most of these costs are directly dependent on the amount of wages paid. Since total wages paid is dependent upon number of hours worked, supervisors can help control employment and benefit costs by keeping hours worked to a minimum consistent with quality expectations and standards.

Challenges in Start-up Enterprise

Operating costs and payroll are more easily controlled in a static business environment where business levels do not vary or do so only slowly. This is seldom the case in the club business, and even less so in a start up enterprise. Not only will we have to use our heads to staff appropriately for each day's activities, but we will also have to constantly analyze and project our business levels to decide when it is appropriate to hire more staff.

These challenges all point to the need to develop an efficient organizational structure and a properly motivated staff that is well-trained to meet all the contingencies of an extremely volatile business. To do what we have to do and to do it well, requires a maximum day in and day out effort from everyone on the team.

Controlling Staff Turnover

High levels of turnover are common in the hospitality profession. Turnover is a function of relatively low skill and low pay positions coupled with the seasonal and transient nature of service positions and staff. The more an organization invests in training, the more damaging staff turnover is – both in terms of hiring and training costs for new staff and its impact on organizational continuity and levels of service.

While we may limit turnover by good hiring decisions, thorough training, and maintaining high staff morale, the danger in a start-up enterprise is that the very staff we hire and train so thoroughly to open the facility, may leave in the ensuing weeks if business levels and income opportunities do not meet expectations.

Staffing Lean

Hospitality is a labor-intensive enterprise. Most of the things we must do require people – and well-trained people at that! There is an insistent tendency to overstaff when trying to provide high levels of service. But all of us who have worked in the business know that our peaks of business come in waves and staffing for the peaks is not the answer. When employees are not pressed, they slow down and let their work expand to fill the time. When they get slammed, good service employees have a remarkable overdrive that they shift into. By staffing lean, hiring service staff with that inherent “overdrive,” and expecting supervisors to pitch in to get the job done, we can keep our payroll costs down.

Departmental Staffing Guides

Staffing guides are defined levels of staffing for various levels of expected business.

Baseline Staffing

Baseline staffing is the minimum level of staffing necessary to keep the club open and operating, regardless of levels of business. Each department must examine its work requirements and determine its baseline staffing. For the reception desk, for instance, opening the doors for business would require a minimum of one concierge for two shifts per day to staff the desk.

Establishing baseline staffing is not an exact science; instead it requires the subjective experience of supervisors who are familiar with the workloads of their departments and the capabilities of their staffs.

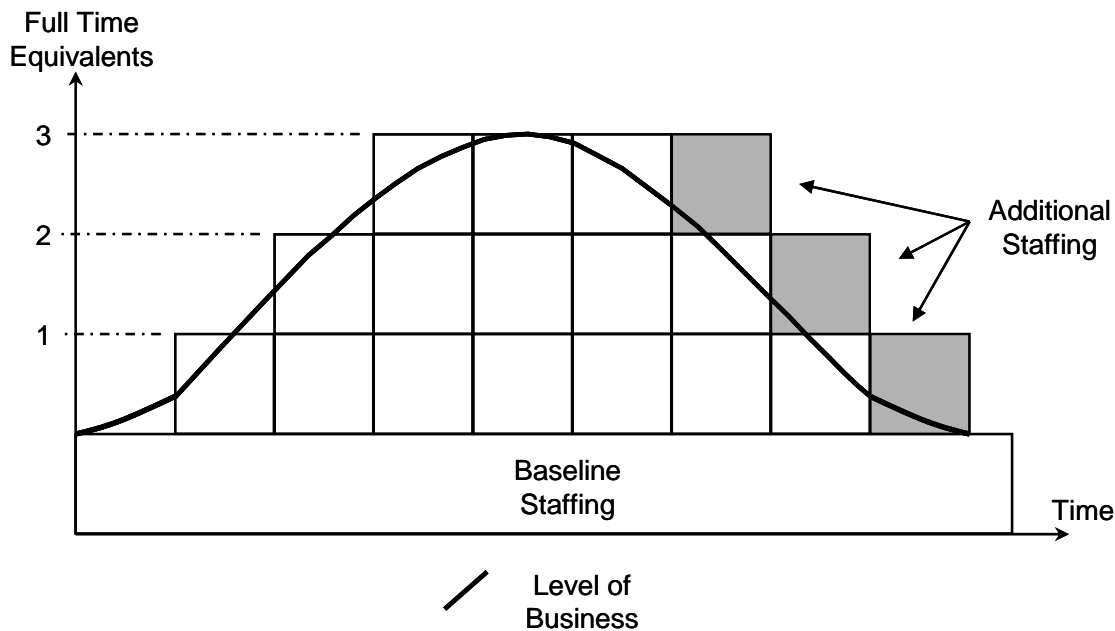
Additional Staffing

Additional staffing are those employees who must be added to the schedule to handle increasing levels of business. Supervisors must determine and define the additional staffing needed as business volume increases. The best way to do this is to benchmark their business levels by day of week, month by month, and by meal period. This history of what has happened in the past is a strong indicator of what will happen in the future.

Thresholds for Additional Staffing

Departmental staffing guides must specify the thresholds of business volume that cause supervisors to add additional staff.

The chart on the next page depicts a variable business pattern and how the baseline and additional staffing meets the needs of that business.



Note that business volume changes in small increments and is plotted as a continuous curving line, while adding or reducing staff happens in large discrete increments that are plotted as blocks. Note also that reducing staff tends to lag behind declining business levels (shaded blocks). This results from the natural reluctance of supervisors to reduce staff until the decline in business is clearly evident.

Club's Needs

When it comes to staffing, the club has various needs:

Stable Core Staff

In order to serve its members well, the club needs a stable core staff of competent, qualified, and dedicated people. These are the people that give our club the continuity of knowledge and experience that is the foundation upon which our success and other staffing needs are built.

The core staff consists of supervisors and line employees who are full and part time employees. Maintaining stability in the core staff is of some importance to the club. Each time a core staff member departs, a hole is created that is not easily filled. As business levels rise, the core staff's experience and knowledge of the club assists in the process of training seasonal staff.

Pool of Qualified Temporaries

When a club has a variable business pattern, a pool of qualified seasonal staff, who are available to round out the staff during the busier periods, must be developed in the local labor market. Establishing and maintaining such a pool is not easy, since many potential employees have need for full time or more steady employment. While the task of creating a pool of qualified seasonal staff is difficult, it is not impossible. The first step is to

have an in-depth understanding of the club's normal business patterns. Once understood, a supervisor can tailor his recruitment efforts to potential employees who have the same or similar employment needs.

Quick Response to Business Levels

As mentioned earlier, success in our club will depend on our ability to respond quickly to changing levels of business. If we are too slow in responding to upswings, we may be understaffed and upset members with poor service. If we add staff too early when an upswing is projected, we will incur higher labor costs needlessly. Conversely, if we reduce staff too early or late as business declines, we will again affect members or incur excessive labor costs.

Responding to changing levels of business with changing levels of staffing is both difficult and crucial. Because of the large costs involved and the detrimental effects on our business of giving poor service, it requires significant focus and careful planning. On the long list of things supervisors are responsible for, efficient staffing stands near the top in terms of priority and importance.

Flexibility

It's in the best interest of the club to have a certain amount of flexibility built into the schedule of each department. This allows coverage of critical shifts when people are sick, on vacation, or out for emergencies. It also allows some reduction of hours when we experience near-term declines in business.

Most people who work in the club business come to expect changes in schedules and accept it with some degree of equanimity. When hiring, supervisors should make sure that all prospective hires understand the nature of the business and the eventuality of changing schedules and hours.

Avoiding Excessive Fluctuations in Labor Force

At the same time that it is important to anticipate and respond quickly to changes in business levels, it is not in the best interest of the club or the morale of staff to respond to small changes in forecasted business. Small, near-term increases should be handled with increased productivity, supervisors pitching in to help, and overtime, if necessary. Small, near term decreases in business should be handled by assigning project work to keep employees busy. In a club operation there is always some project that needs doing and supervisors should develop lists of such work.

Fortunately, the club will have fairly well defined busy and slow seasons and these periods tend to be consistent year to year. By analyzing our business benchmarks and paying close attention to our forecasted business, we ought to be able to target the thresholds at particular times of the year and add or reduce additional staff in a planned, thoughtful, and intelligent way.

Employee Needs

Like employers, individuals have their own unique needs for seeking employment. Different people have different needs and one of the keys to building a stable core staff and adding to it when necessary, is to match the needs of prospective employees with those of the club. This is done in the hiring process and the key to successful hiring is having well defined needs and creating employment ads that clearly specify those needs.

Breadwinner

Many people seeking employment are breadwinners. These people are the primary support for themselves and their families. Most often they have the need to work full time and need an adequate benefit package. These people form the basis of our core staff. They, like the club, want stability, continuity, and longevity.

Second Income Earner

Second income earners may be breadwinners working a second job or spouses working to augment family income. Such individuals may need limited hours and specific shifts to fit the work schedule of their primary job or family child-care responsibilities. Benefits may be of secondary importance because the family is already covered under the breadwinner's benefit plan.

Single Parent

Single parents may have the needs of a breadwinner if they are the sole support of a family. In some cases, where income is not the crucial issue, schedules that permit maximum time with children or that match school schedules may be of primary importance. In most cases, benefits to cover the family are a major concern.

Students

Students, depending upon age and level of schooling, may be looking for limited evening and weekend hours and enough compensation for "spending money." Depending upon financial situation, some may need the compensation for primary living or educational expenses. The need for benefits will depend upon family situation. In most cases, full time students up to the age of twenty-two are covered under a parent's benefit package.

Retirees

Retirees may be working to augment Social Security or to keep busy. Often retirees need limited hours because of tax or Social Security considerations. Supervisors must also keep in mind the physical demands of a particular position when considering hiring someone of more advanced age. The need for benefits will vary from retiree to retiree depending upon their retirement situation.

Labor Cost Control Strategies

While there is no single answer to controlling labor costs, there are many different things that can be done to ease the task.

Matching our Needs to Employee's

There are many ways to staff a department properly. The best staffing plan meets the needs of the club and as many of the employees' individual needs as possible. This can become complicated since different people have different needs. Supervisors must ensure that the needs of the club come first, but by careful screening and hiring of staff, they may be able to build a staff whose work status and scheduling requirements make for the most cost effective and flexible departmental staffing.

Baseline with Core Staff

When examining business cycles, supervisors must determine the necessary baseline staffing to handle year round levels of business. In a start-up enterprise, we will have to make assumptions about projected levels of business and then monitor actual levels on a weekly basis, while being prepared to react quickly to change.

Forecast Scheduling

Using various tools at our disposal such as benchmarked levels of business, the schedule of club-sponsored events, and the catering forecast, supervisors should attempt to forecast their staffing needs at least one month out. The one-month horizon is important in that it allows time to contact, hire, and train seasonal help.

Seasonal Hires

When business conditions dictate (i.e., when the forecast shows business levels surpassing thresholds), Supervisors should begin bringing in seasonal hires. They can be people who you have already interviewed, hired, and trained such as former employees or employees hired specifically for seasonal work. In either case, these new hires should be given some indication of how many hours they can expect to work each week and how long they'll be kept on the payroll.

Rather than wait until a busy season is upon us, Supervisors with large seasonal needs should begin planning for the busy season in advance. Most positions can be properly trained in a couple of intensive weeks, but some, such as a concierge, may take months to properly train.

Knowing your staffing needs in advance and making plans for those needs is the mark of a good supervisor. Each supervisor should invest some time and effort in thinking through the process of gearing up for a busy season. Once done, this plan can be fine-tuned with experience and used year after year.

Conversely, supervisors should also plan for the sudden deceleration as the busy season comes to an end. Intelligently managing both the expansion and reduction of staff results in satisfied members and significant payroll cost savings.

Quick Response Training

The critical issue in adding seasonal staff is training. In a relatively short time, a new hire has to be trained in all the essentials of a new position and brought up to a standard of service and training that reflects well on the club.

The need for quality training is all the more acute when you consider that the new hire will, in short order, be dealing with the crush of a busy season. As much as possible their training must prepare them for a strenuous pace of several months' duration. To not train them well is a disservice to both employees and members.

Quick Response Training is nothing more than having a well conceived, formal (i.e., with written lesson plans and training materials) training program on the shelf, ready to go at a moment's notice. This permits a supervisor to train quickly once new hires are brought onboard.

Budget Time Off

As mentioned earlier, clubs have fluctuations in busy on a daily and weekly basis as well as seasonally. These fluctuations can result in legitimate overtime.

Having also said that we want to avoid overtime costs as much as possible, the same fluctuations in business that cause these costs can also help us balance them out. Using the concept of Budget Time Off, a Supervisor can send an employee home early on a slow day. Budget Time Off is used frequently in housekeeping and the food and beverage area. When the work is done or it's slow, employees are sent home.

Budget Time Off should also be applied in areas where staff work established shifts, such as the reception desk, maintenance, or in administration. The concept works like this – if, because of circumstances, an employee works more than eight hours in one day, the Supervisor should send him home early on another day in the same workweek to avoid surpassing 40 hours worked in a given week.

This is easy enough to do if the supervisor is paying attention to employee hours on a daily basis. If not, the supervisor may not notice the impending overtime and miss the opportunity to send an employee home early during that workweek. Many club have established a workweek from Friday through Thursday for just this purpose, based on the fact that they tend to busier on the weekend which is the early part of the weekly schedule.

Cross Training and Departmental Shares

In a small organization like the club, it does not serve us well to have a large staff of specialists. Rather, we should have a smaller staff of people who are cross-trained to work other positions. Often while one area of the club is slow, another is busy. Most cross training takes place within departments and allows a supervisor to deal with sickness and emergencies.

Another form of cross training is inter-departmental and results in departmental shares – employees who can work in two or more areas as the level of business requires. Departmental sharing requires close cooperation and communication between department heads to ensure that the needs of both staffs are met. Supervisors who are interested in exploring the possibility of departmental shares should pick other departments whose workload is dissimilar to their own.

The major concern when using departmental shares is avoiding overtime in aggregate hours. Both department heads must closely follow the overall time requirements for the employee. If overtime is necessary, there must also be agreement as to which department will absorb the OT cost.

Project Work

When fluctuations in business leave us with short-term lulls, supervisors who are concerned about keeping staff productively employed, should assign project work. In a club operation, particularly one that has been busy, there are many things that get deferred in the crush of business. These deferred items, such as intensive cleaning, polishing the details, straightening out back- of-house areas, etc., make excellent project work.

Because we never know when business will suddenly be slow, Supervisors should have a ready list of necessary project work. With this list at hand, it's a simple thing to assign the work whenever staff have excess time on their hands in lieu of sending them home.

Sending Home Early

Sending home early is self explanatory and fairly easy to do. It requires the will to do it, vigilance on the part of the supervisor, and a feel for the business. While there is always some risk involved that we may suddenly get busy and need the full staff, supervisors should take the risk and depend on the dedication and

professionalism of remaining staff to rise to the occasion. Experienced supervisors know that we all have an overdrive that we can kick into for short periods of time to get the job done. For those of us who are “adrenaline junkies,” (and who in this business isn’t?), we actually get a rush from it.

Layoffs

As long-term busy periods wind down, supervisors are often faced with the difficult task of reducing staff. While no one enjoys laying off employees, it is much easier to do if the employee(s) involved were hired seasonally and already know that their hours will be reduced or they will be laid off when the busy season is over.

As business slows down, supervisors will naturally begin to reduce scheduled hours and to send employees home early. Supervisors must be careful to make the distinction between core staff and seasonal staff. If you cut hours for core staff, you may lose them. Seasonal staff, on the other hand, should have been forewarned of the eventuality of a business slowdown.

When business drops below staffing guide thresholds, supervisors must take decisive action to reduce staff. This is done through layoffs. In selecting who is to be laid off, supervisors must take into account the employees’ status. Seasonal employees should be the first to go. While there may be other factors involved, such as specific promises made when hired, normally the most recently hired are the first to go. When the decision involves a group of seasonals, supervisors have much more leeway in deciding who will be laid off. In some cases, a supervisor may want to retain the best employees for the longest time and let other, less productive, employees go.

Voluntary Leaves of Absence

Before a supervisor considers layoff staff, he should inquire if anyone on his staff – core or temporary – wants to voluntarily leave. There may be a temporary employee who for some reason wants to leave or a core staff member may want to take an unpaid leave of absence.

While no one may be interested, it’s always worth asking before another staff member is involuntarily laid off.

Scheduling Vacations

Full time employees earn vacation time. Some employees, by virtue of their longevity, have substantial amounts of vacation to use each year. Supervisors should schedule their employees’ vacations during slow times when you will not be forced to replace them on the schedule.

Misuse of Sick/Emergency Pay

Sick/Emergency pay is a benefit that allows eligible staff to receive pay when out sick. Some employees feel that sick pay allows them to take time off with pay when they are not sick. Supervisors will be vigilant for any signs of misuse of sick pay. Such signs are excessive sickness, patterns of sickness such as the day before or after regularly scheduled days off or on the days after payday.

Supervisors, who suspect any employee of misusing sick pay, must move vigorously to stop such misuse.

Unemployment Compensation

Employees who are laid off or who receive less than the number of hours they were hired for because of insufficient work may be eligible for unemployment compensation. Their eligibility and the amount of their compensation will depend upon a number of circumstances, such as how long they worked the club and their rate of pay.

Summary

In a broad and general way this document discusses the challenges of efficiently managing labor costs in this industry and discusses various strategies for doing this. As with any complicated matter, there is no simple or “master stroke” solution. Rather, it is through the constant application of a number of these principles and strategies that a supervisor will achieve success in managing labor costs.

Regardless what combination of strategies ultimately proves most helpful to a particular supervisor, continuing success depends upon vigilance and attention to business levels and scheduling on a daily basis. The easiest way to achieve this is to make this vigilance and attention part of your daily routine. Compare daily hours and schedules frequently to ensure compliance. Checking employee hours daily will help avoid overtime. Pay close attention to levels of business. Know who is on the clock, what their schedule and rate of pay is. Act decisively to control cost. Act as if your job depends upon it. Ultimately, it may.