

Making the Transition to a Shorter Workweek

Of all the lessons we have learned over the last two and a half years, one of the biggest is the importance that employees place on quality of life. Staffing has been a consistent challenge for many restaurant operators, not just in terms of quantity but also in the quality of that staff. And we have learned that if we want to hire and retain quality employees, we need to offer a better work-life balance for our team members.

How do we do that in an industry notorious for long hours and burnout? One approach that has worked for me is shortening the workweek and providing more consistent time off.

In January, my team and I decided to close my Atlanta restaurant, Old Vinings Inn, on Mondays and Tuesdays. That decision was driven by a desire to create a better quality of life for staffers that I did not want to lose. And it has resulted in a happier, more relaxed staff.

We were previously open every day, two shifts a day, 14 shifts a week. We are down to eight shifts a week now. We close on Sunday night and do not open again until dinner on Wednesday. This allows us to give our employees two full consecutive days off every week.

Closing Sunday nights was big for us. That has traditionally been one of our busiest shifts. But what it did was create breathing room for our employees. After a busy Sunday brunch shift, they can go out for Sunday dinner, spend time with families, have some personal time, whatever the case may be, and ease into their time off.

And that Wednesday morning makes that time off sacred. They can really enjoy their Monday and Tuesday without worrying about getting everything ready on Wednesday. Sometimes people will go to work on their day off to make sure they are set for the next day. Now they have time to prepare for that Wednesday dinner shift. It is a great time for everyone to get organized and communicate their desires and challenges for the night and the week ahead.

From an operator's standpoint,



The Vinings Inn (Photo by Brandon Amato)

it allows us to work with one roster of employees that can handle all the shifts, so we can basically schedule full-time.

Of course, there is a lot that goes into deciding what days or shifts to close your restaurant. It is important to figure out the shifts you can close that will impact your bottom line the least. For us, Monday and Tuesday made sense. Those days were slower for us. But for some operators, those days could turn out to be Monday and Thursday.

You have to look at the data. I would advise operators to pull sales data from the last year, or maybe the last couple of years, and look for patterns. Slow days might not always be the same days of the week. Or maybe the slow day is Tuesday—except for once a month when you see a significant uptick due to a civic group or some other event that takes place every third Tuesday of the month and spills into your restaurant for drinks and apps afterward.

You also might decide to adjust hours of operation to stay open another hour or two on the days you are open. We concluded that we did not have to go that route, but your situation may be different.

When deciding what's best, make sure to adjust your budget. Fewer shifts mean a change in how much food you are ordering. At the same time, there are fixed costs that don't go away—utilities, rent and normal overhead

costs. Wear and tear on equipment may decrease a little bit, but you are still going to need maintenance.

Once you have settled on the days to close, make sure guests know what to expect. Changing the hours on your website and posting a sign on the door isn't enough. Make sure you and your staff are communicating the new schedule to guests consistently. Give them some lead-time if possible—"Hey, if you haven't heard, starting next month, we're changing our schedule." Get your customer base used to these changes, ideally before they take place, to minimize any frustration.

"Lee," I can hear you thinking, "this is all well and good, but how do I make up that revenue?" There's no doubt about it—shortening the schedule sacrifices some business. Hopefully, you have come up with a schedule that mitigates that as much as possible. But to make it work, your staff needs to buy in, too. After all, some of them will be losing shifts.

It is imperative to communicate the challenges and the opportunities to your management team and staff: "This is an experiment. I believe this can work, but I need your help, because we're going to have to recover this business elsewhere."

So how do you do that? A good operator, and a good manager, will encourage his team to find ways to step up their game.

One of my full-time staffers

now works all eight shifts, and he really focuses on his salesmanship. He has learned the menu inside and out so he can maximize the tables he has. Even if it is not a busy night, he is trying to do the best he can from both a service and a sales standpoint to capture every opportunity to upsell, make the guest feel happy and relaxed and increase his income. As a result, he is becoming a better worker, is making better tips, is more confident and enjoys his work more.

That is not to say that you should not expect some turnover. That's a given in this business, but especially in times of change. The new schedule may not work for some staffers for whatever reason. It is always wise to anticipate that and have a plan in place to deal with it.

At Old Vinings Inn, the change has definitely been very good for us. We are seeing growth in the times that we are open. And generally speaking, those two set days off have created a better working environment. We are not as short-staffed, and people are not as stretched thin as they were before. The bottom line is: When people are rested and fresh, they are happier and are going to do a better job.

Panacea Management Group (PMG) Consulting is the newest venture from **Lee Schulman**, owner of Old Vinings Inn, in Georgia and a restaurant operations veteran with three decades of experience. Schulman also holds a degree in food systems, economics, and management from Michigan State University and attended the Pennsylvania Culinary Institute. PMG Consulting offers consultations for new and existing restaurants as well as businesses looking to expand into food and beverage service. For more information- 770-438-2282, email lee@pmgconsulting.us, or visit pmgconsulting.us.

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