

FORECAST FOCUS



Exploring Alternative Schedules

By Tiffany LaReau Human Numbers

A look at the Super-7 rotation and other schedule options for 24/7 contact centers.

When a call center is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, that means someone has to work nights, and someone has to work weekends. But the majority of schedule preference forms that cross my desk always ask for the same thing: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. This leaves a big gap between the schedules that people want to work and the schedules needed to provide adequate coverage, especially on the weekends.

Contact center agents generally prefer a fixed schedule. Higher seniority employees expect to get first choice for the day shift, and they expect to keep it until the end of time. New-hires understand that they may eventually get their preferred shift, and most people want the stability of knowing that their shift will not change, because this provides a nice work/life balance.

Coming up with schedules for a 24/7 center can feel like moving in the exact opposite direction of satisfying your employees' preferences. This is when alternative schedules can be helpful. The following are three common challenges and scheduling solutions.

► **PROBLEM:** Insufficient weekend coverage

► **SOLUTION:** Super-7 Rotation

In a larger center that suffers from weekend coverage, the Super-7 Rotation is a great solution. This rotation is simple: it spans 49 days, for seven agents, and each schedule includes six days worked with two days off. Total days worked = 35, and total days off = 14, then the whole thing starts over (see Figure 1).

The beauty of this rotation is that you get stable doses of weekend coverage while your employees get two three-day weekends, every seven weeks.

There are some ground rules to the Super-7 Rotation:

1. The center must be open seven days a week.
2. There must be seven agents willing to participate.
3. The rotation must last through seven weeks for everyone to benefit.

This rotation can be in place for the seven agents who are participating in the rotation, while the remainder of your staff can stay on fixed shifts. The employee benefit of the Super-7 Rotation is the extra three-day weekends without having to take vacation or personal time—which explains why it's so popular, and why there is usually a waiting list to participate.

► **PROBLEM:** Your intraday M-curve does not play well with your nine-hour schedule span

► **SOLUTION:** Extended Lunch Privileges

The M-curve is the term used in contact centers to describe a typical arrival of volume throughout the day. It starts off low, then builds in mid-morning, dropping right before lunch, then building up again in the afternoon, and dropping off at night. When charted out, it creates the shape of a lopsided M (see Figure 2). The reason calls drop off right before lunch is usually because your callers are also having lunch during that time.

If this sounds familiar, you are a good candidate for Extended Lunch Privileges. This is another schedule alternative that is simple to make: Just extend the lunch time by an extra hour, and extend the stop time by the same amount. This flexibility can bring much

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happiness to the lucky recipient because there are a million things that they can take care of in a two-hour lunch that could never happen with just a single hour (e.g., workout at the gym, have lunch with the kids at school, go to the salon, etc.). Another variation is to extend the lunch to 90 minutes instead of the full two hours (and compensate with an extra 30 minutes at the end of the shift).

This may not be desirable every single day, so you can rotate Extended Lunch Privileges from one agent to the next each day. The benefit to you is that you have less schedule inflexibility while gaining an extra hour of later-afternoon coverage without sacrificing employee schedule preference. It's the perfect building block to fit in the saggy part of your M-curve.

► **PROBLEM:** Monday and Tuesday volumes are a lot higher than Thursday and Friday.

► **SOLUTION:** The Short Week

If you track your day-of-week patterns, you may see a trend showing that your live contacts tend to arrive heavier on certain days. The example in Figure 3 suggests an early week trend, with volumes on Thursday and Friday coming in less than half as much as those on Monday and Tuesday. If this is a repeating trend every week, there is only so much training that can be shifted to account for the amount of overstaffing that you might end up with toward the end of the week. And you still may be left with understaffed days on Monday and Tuesday.

In these situations, a Short Week schedule is a cozy fit, because offering a few 4x10 shifts can bring instant relief. The value of the 4x10 shift is that it brings additional hours to the heavier volume days without the need for overtime, and eliminates extra overstaffing on lighter volume days. Other Short Week variations include:

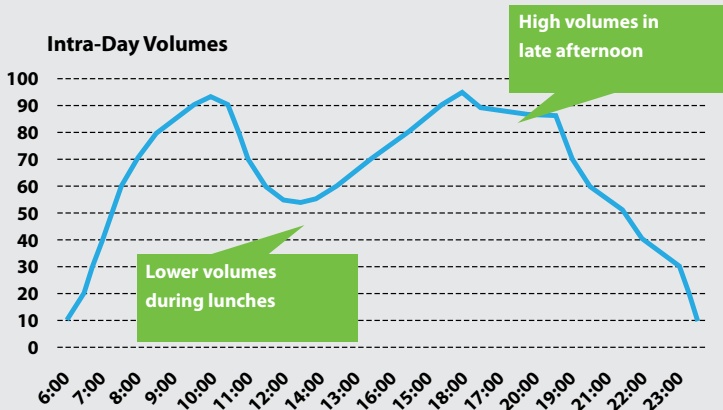
- 12.5 hours per day, three days per week

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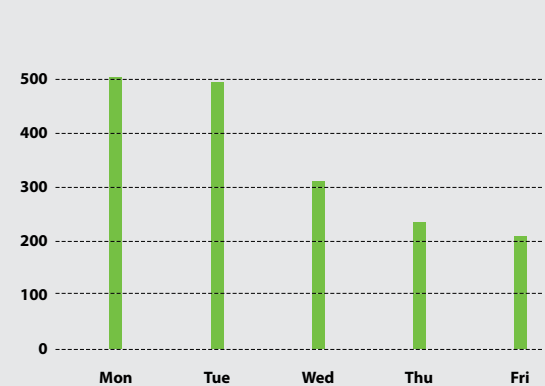
The Super-7 Rotation (Figure 1)

Super-7 Rotation	Week 1							Week 2							Week 3							Week 4							Week 5							Week 6							Week 7																																	
	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S																				
Employee #1						X	X	X							X	X	X										X	X										X	X														X	X															X	X						
Employee #2	X	X						X	X	X								X	X									X	X												X	X															X	X															X	X		
Employee #3	X	X									X	X							X	X									X	X														X	X														X	X															X	X
Employee #5		X	X								X	X							X	X									X	X														X	X														X	X															X	X
Employee #4			X	X							X	X							X	X									X	X														X	X														X	X															X	X
Employee #6				X	X						X	X							X	X									X	X														X	X														X	X															X	X
Employee #7					X	X					X	X							X	X									X	X														X	X														X	X															X	X

The M-curve (Figure 2)



Day-of-Week Patterns (Figure 3)



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- 4.5 hours per days, four days per week, plus a half-day
- 9x9: nine hours a day, Monday–Friday, with an extra day off every other week

Before implementing the Short Week, you should work through any new conflicts that may result, like payroll issues during a week with holidays, or a week where a single vacation day is taken. Any rules on time lapse between start/stop of shifts, break assignments or other compliance issues should also be worked through before introducing the Short Week. These barriers can typically be solved (e.g., give Short Week agents a traditional eight-hour span during a week with holidays), but it's better to have these solutions documented and in place before the exceptions happen instead of reacting to them later.

The biggest consideration for the popular Short Week schedules is actually the individual who is chosen to work the shift. This person must have the right motivational fit or burnout may be higher during the last hours of the shift and quality could suffer. But for the employee who possesses high concentration levels and values the extra time off, the Short Week is a beautiful fit. And another benefit to Short Weeks is that it is green—less days commuting = reduced traffic.

Sometimes a contact center thinks they are understaffed but they're really just improperly staffed. The monthly model that calculates workload, shrinkage and staffing requirements, migrates into a well-balanced intraday roster filled with people's names only after a great deal

Success Tips for Alternative Schedules

- Keep your employees involved. This contributes to a supportive workforce.
- Get management buy-in, especially when they have to administer the changes.
- Communicate well, and often.
- Use a pilot team to test changes in a real-world environment before making everything official.

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of shaping, trimming and simulation first. Each date on the calendar has to be created and managed individually, starting with required staff, then incorporate agent rank and preferences, and finally the daily exceptions and flexible schedule needs. After thoroughly going through this process, the understaffing should be balance with the overstaffing, and the net staff line should be tightly hugging the perfectly staffed goal. 📍

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Online Resource

This issue is available online at: [November 2010, Contact Center Pipeline](http://www.contactcenterpipeline.com/t-CCP201011.aspx)

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