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Vitality

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Managing Employee Motivation: Peak and Down Seasons

Whistler Blackcomb, located in British Columbia, Canada is one of the most popular resorts in the world. Whistler's peak season runs from the end of November to the end of April, after which focus shifts to summer sports and preparation for the next winter season. Seasonal workers tend to experience cycles of peak and down seasons because of the irregular employment and high cost of living there.

Workers often face temporary layoffs, and some acquire side jobs; others shift to part-time work or pivot in their responsibilities altogether. Businesses that fluctuate with the seasons can be thrilling and fulfilling places to work if business owners and managers can find the right ways to set their workers up for success. This article is about what employers can do to motivate and manage employee productivity through various business cycles.

Peak and down seasons and how they impact employees

The term seasonality is somewhat straightforward, but in terms of business, it can have a few nuanced meanings.

Most broadly, seasonality refers to regular and predictable fluctuations in sales volume that recur every calendar year.[1] Any pattern that recurs or repeats over a year for three years or more is said to be seasonal. You may hear the term cyclical effects used to describe the same thing, but they are two different notions. Seasonal cycles occur within one calendar year. In contrast, cyclical effects, such as boosted sales due to low unemployment rates, can span periods shorter or longer than one calendar year.

Peak seasons, also known as high seasons, are typically marked by increased cash flow, volume of business, demands on employees and work-related stress. For example, retailers of outdoor furniture have peak seasons that follow the calendar year. Traditionally, outdoor furniture retail in Canada and the United States is at its lowest during the first week of February and then begins to climb to a peak that occurs in the summer. That's because the increasingly good weather from late spring to mid-summer drives up the market for outdoor furniture, like patio tables and chairs.

After labour day[2], that market demand enters a refractory period marked by a decrease in cash flow and therefore becomes an excellent time to slow down, conserve resources, and strategize.

More than being about the four seasons of the year, seasonality in business refers to periodic fluctuations and cycles that occur regularly. A season may, alternatively, refer to a commercially-driven period, such as the holiday season or sales event. Large retailers, including e-retail organizations, may hire temporary workers to respond to higher consumer demand associated with the holiday season. In 2018, one large online retailer said it would employ approximately 100,000 employees to help offset the increased activity expected in stores.[3] Meanwhile, another said it would hire 120,000 for the same holiday period.

An essential feature of peak seasons all business owners and managers must remember is that they have high-visibility and interaction with the public, and failure to motivate employees properly could result in a considerably negative way. The mismanagement of one company's large annual sale, for example, resulted in staff protesting working conditions.[4] One article that reported the incident stated employees grew increasingly frustrated because of the relentless churn of action after action. The company apparently uses a severe efficiency metric to surveil employees' productivity, as they scan, pick, place, send, and repeat. According to the story, bathroom breaks and workstation problems resulting in stopped work count against an individual's rate of work. Overwhelmed by the pace and the methods by which their worth was measured, workers in one of the company's many fulfillment centres walked off the job.

Organizations and management must be aware of the effects that their particular business' seasonality may have on workers of all kinds. If the down season happens to be winter, this could intersect with other depressing factors like increased social seclusion, increased risk of disease[5] and seasonal affective disorder, stressful holidays, and tax season.

At Whistler-Blackcomb, a primary consideration is that many workers are non-residents who are away from their families and may rely on special visas that allow them to work.[6] Non-resident seasonal workers are subject to rules and regulations that may govern how many hours per week they may work and how long they can stay in the country. Seasonal work impacts non-resident employees differently,[7] and this is yet another consideration organizations, and managers in seasonal occupations must consider if they want to support employees. Employees that feel they are not taken care of may not feel incentivized or enthusiastic enough to return to the job next season.

Five ways to have a staff that feels supported and engaged in all seasons

Ideally, you want your staff to feel supported during peak seasons and properly motivated and engaged the rest of the time they are employed.

1. Get your team ready for the peak season. Using inadequate systems to design and manage responsive seasonal workflows creates huge administrative overheads because of the time it takes to execute tasks. Outdated systems also tend to increase the risk of errors, resulting in a proliferation of spreadsheets with timely and difficult manual processes and ultimately fails to deliver the benefits of workforce optimization.[8] Give your team the best tools you can afford to make peak seasons run smoother; this could mean automating systems or hiring part-time support staff to fill holes in your workforce.

2. Hire the right people. Seasonal hiring should be started months in advance of the peak season. One contact centre expert advises that no matter your industry, you should give yourself a minimum six-month lead time before peak season begins.[9] An employee referral program may help attract new, reliable workers from your network of trusted employees.

3. As the seasons and patronage shift, so too must your operations management. Job descriptions and responsibilities, if they shift, must be clearly communicated from the onset. Your staff should know their job requirements and key performance indicators before they start, and they should have a clear understanding about how their job contributes to the success of the business.

4. Give employees a better sense of what seasonal fluctuations mean to their future with the company. Knowledge and preparedness is power. If you know that you will have to lay a worker off by a certain date to conserve cash in the down season, tell employees that upon hiring, and help them navigate their options (like unemployment insurance) before the job end date arrives.

5. Encourage and educate workers to conserve and invest their peak season earnings, and consider offering a financial advisor as a perk to help your seasonal support save for the down season.

Three tools to help motivate employees

The ways organizations and managers support and motivate will differ, as will the support and motivation needs of employees. In the travel and hospitality industry, a hotel manager's staffing strategy should tell them how and who to staff in every season. We have identified three tools that managers can use to keep workers motivated throughout the year, even in occupations with peak and down seasons.

1. Meaningful work, even in the off-season
   When peak season demand wanes, have meaningful work for your year-round employees to do during slower times. Look for or create tasks that increase a worker's overall worth, like marketing and branding, website development, inventory management, construction, building bookkeeping assets. Consider expanding their roles so they can help with more tasks or giving them interesting special projects.

2. Down season skills development
   Allow workers to develop new skills in the down season, with paid training when possible. Training an individual for new skills sets an expectation for excellence and shows that you're willing to invest in their value as a worker. You might provide in-person or virtual e-training courses that target different facets of your business from office management to design, to menu planning. If that's not feasible, you could consider giving employees paid time off to engage in approved training programs. When the high season comes around again, determine if the employee's new skills can be worked into their standard role and whether that demands a renegotiation of their current wages.

3. Consider moving to shorter work weeks.
   Seasonal workflow changes can have a direct impact on employee motivation and morale. One way to keep the momentum steady during work hours is to shorten the work week. In 2018, a major software corporation gave employees five consecutive long weekends in a row, at which time sales increased by 40 percent over the previous year.[10] Although that increase could be due to other factors, the philosophy that more work hours equals higher productivity is not true. One extra day off for employees without a significant drop in productivity is an effective perk that may not increase the overall operating budget.

Maintaining employee engagement, even in the down season

Seasonal employees expect a few things from their employer beyond safety, healthy working conditions and fair compensation.[11] They come to the job with the expectation that the employer has a thoughtful strategy for hiring the right staff and keeping that staff engaged, even when operations enter an expected slow season.

To understand the seasonal impact on your business, sales data must be tracked, examined, and utilized strategically. Tracking data year-round will allow you to monitor the effect seasonality has on your business and plan accordingly.[12] Tracking employee trends will also prove to be a valuable way to plan for future peak and down times. Work-supplied tracking tools, like GPS trackers, Slack or productivity trackers, are all possible sources of employee information. Parsing that data is the job of someone often labelled as "people analytics," which is part of an emerging branch of Human Resources.[13] Remember from the earlier example of employees walking off the job. Workers don't thrive when their movements and productivity are tracked to the point of exhaustion.

All of the decisions companies make about hiring large amounts of workers for the winter holiday season were made by examining traffic patterns from previous holiday seasons and using that information to predict what may be expected in the coming season.[14] The companies know far in advance that once the season is over, many temporary employees are no longer needed based on the postseason traffic expectations. Employees know what to expect when they are hired and these organizations have plenty of work to keep full-time workers busy when the holidays subside.

Track seasonal fluctuations in revenue and its impact on payroll and cash flow. Once you've tracked three years worth of data, patterns will start to emerge to help you manage high season momentum and better plan for periods of down time. For new businesses or emerging markets, it is important to remember that rapid growth can disguise a normal seasonal fluctuation. If your business hasn't been around for long enough to have three years of sales data, check your numbers with peers and industry sources.[15]

Take into account the size of the company when observing productivity fluctuations in peak and down seasons. It is generally acknowledged that productivity is naturally higher in large businesses. Productivity, in this respect, is total nominal output divided by the number of hours worked. One report that compares the labour productivity gap in Canada to that of the United States concluded that, "While small firms are often regarded as a dynamic and innovative segment of the population, in many cases, they are not able to exploit the scale economies associated with size and therefore possess a productivity disadvantage."[16] If a large company must lay off 75 percent of their support staff when peak season changes to down season, the drop in productivity may — by the numbers — seem disproportionately significant when in reality, it is the effect of the economy of scale.

Don't waste your offseason waiting for peak season to come back. Utilize the employees you have, even if their numbers diminish in down times, to prepare for the peak season. When your year-round employees aren't flush with tasks, you may use the opportunity for cross training or job shadowing to maintain motivation.

Low-volume seasons are the perfect time to utilize a workforce for administrative tasks, such as inventory control, e-commerce upgrades, and planning the next marketing campaign.[17] These skills and more make them an even more valuable asset, and you should consider this point when the worker is due for a pay raise or bonus. Allow year-round employees to help design their own solutions to workflow problems.

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