SHIFTS EXPLAINED: HOW DOES THE OFFICE MAKE DECISIONS AROUND SHIFTS?

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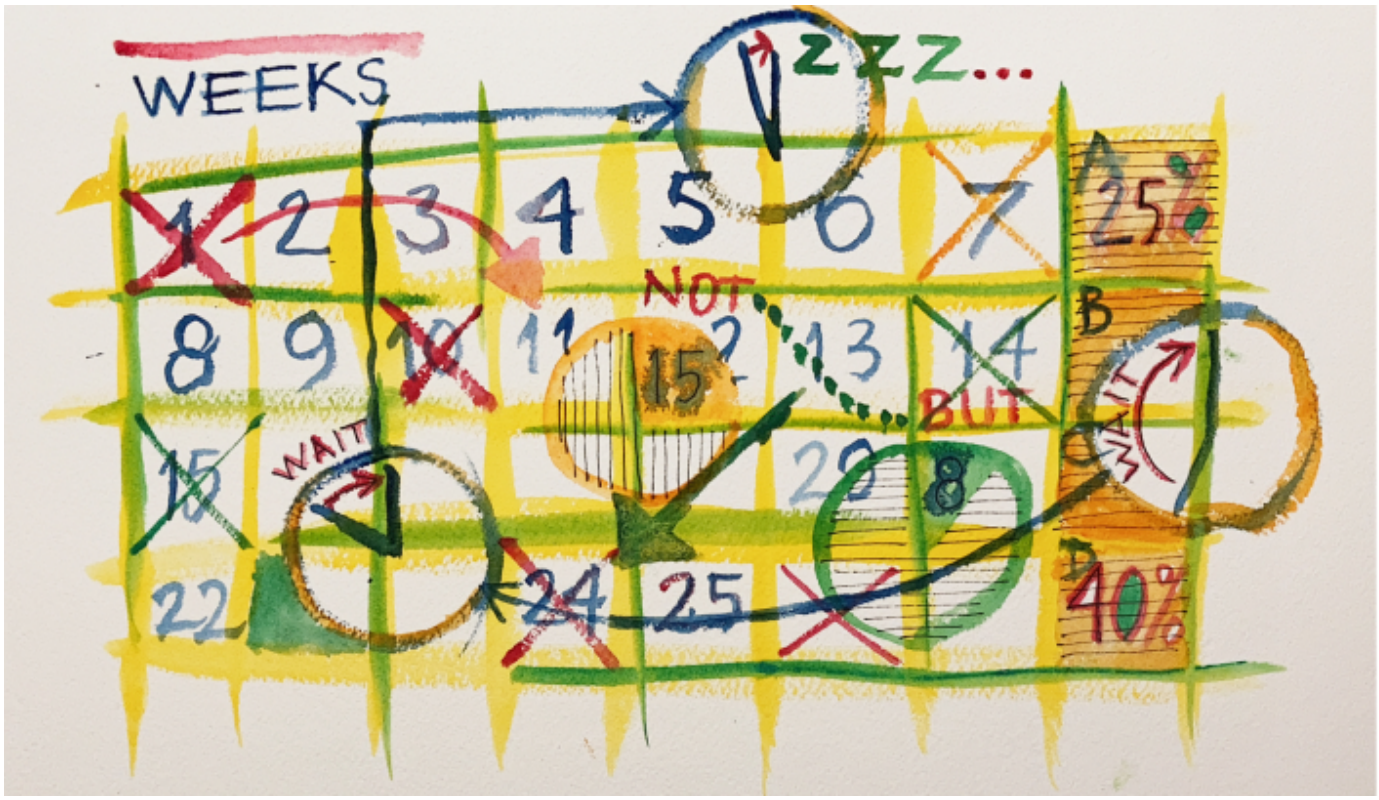


ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

By Meredith Kolodner

Have you ever wondered, as you're looking online at the list of open shifts, how the Coop knows that it needs only four food processors at 3:30 PM on a Saturday?

The Coop strives for efficiency—so how does the staff decide? In a word, it's data.

"We have years and years of experience," said Membership Coordinator Matt Hoagland, who's been working at the Coop for more than 17 years. "We're on the shopping floor, we're watching how things are working…how receiving is taking in deliveries, etc." Hoagland explains that they look at the data from the past and make continued refinements based on new anecdotal evidence to continue to refine their approach.

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Under the old system, where members were assigned to a "regular" squad, it was the squad leaders who sometimes reported back to Coop staff if they felt they needed more members to get the work done, or if they had more people than they knew what to do with. The staff would supervise the leaders and pay attention to the numbers. More often than not, they determined how many workers were needed based on the shopping volume or how many deliveries we got on a particular day. Or, for example, they knew fewer cashiers were needed because they could tell from their books that fewer members were using cash.

But this came with some drawbacks. Members who were part of the Coop pre-pandemic might remember some days when the checkout line stretched into the produce aisle, and there weren't checkout workers at all of the stations. A squad leader might say they needed more members, but the underlying issue wasn't necessarily the number of people on the shift; it was the absentee rate. On average, before the change to the current flex schedule, between 25% and 40% of members didn't show up for their shifts. Creating the squad assignments was difficult, because staff had to account for people not showing up and then factor in how many people might arrive for an unscheduled make-up shift. Sometimes those numbers matched, and sometimes they were way off.

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However, under the current system, on an average day only 5% of workers don't

show up for their shifts, which makes it easier to figure out how many people are actually needed. Coop staff also have been running the shifts, so they can see how the system is working first-hand and make judgements about whether more or fewer people would be optimal. They watch the aisles, they can see how the stocking is going, how many carts are being used, whether there are enough receivers to unload the trucks, and they keep discussing and sharing experiences. During the pandemic, when there were no member-workers, the staff had the opportunity to make improvements with the goal of making Coop more efficient.

Having experienced staff watching the floor every day, instead of squad leaders who are only there every few weeks, has also made the Coop more efficient, Hoagland said. There are active conversations about bringing back some squad leaders, he noted, now that systems have become more streamlined. But before bringing back the squad leaders (who will now be known as team leaders), the Coop is designing a training that will help members who take those positions.

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The flexibility of the system also means that shifts can get added, or cut, based on a specific event. For example, there are fewer shoppers during the summer, while the days before a holiday can ramp up the crowds. The staff can adjust the number of slots available on particular days, which the former membership database didn’t allow. Those changes can be made weeks or a few days in advance, without causing havoc to the whole shift calendar.

Many members who are intent on getting a particular shift at a particular time have discovered that shifts get released 42 days ahead of time around midnight. The Coop

also releases some shifts closer to when they actually occur so that not all the shifts are booked up so far in advance. Hoagland added that one reason the office does not want all six weeks of shifts booked in advance is so that when new members join, or when old members rejoin, they will see some openings when they look at the shift calendar.

Some astute members have found another way to get the shifts they want: people can cancel their shifts up until 8:00 PM the day before they work, and often, according to these crafty members, people wait until very close to the deadline to cancel. As a result, you can sometimes find a popular shift for the next day if you check the site in the hours leading up to 8:00pm, when the deadline passes. You can also sign up for shifts the day of, up to 30 minutes before the start of a shift.

One of the most popular shifts—and among the more difficult shifts to keep track of—is the Cart Return, or the "walkers", as they're commonly known, as it's not easy to determine the number of walkers who should be assigned to them. There aren't staff members sitting outside timing how long people are waiting for walkers, or how many walkers are sitting without much to do for long periods of time. Many members would like there to be more walking shifts. They are always in high demand, especially since the pandemic, and members say they have to stay awake until midnight so they can sign up when a new shift gets released.

Member Andrea Lindstrom says she can't usually make it until midnight, so it's her husband's job to stay up and get the walking shifts. "It seems like it's been getting more difficult to get them recently," she said.

Along with checkout, weekend Cart Return is one of the most coveted shifts. Darryl Hill and his wife used to do their shifts together, but under the new system, they haven't been able to make it work. He stays up to grab a Sunday Cart Return shift, but it hasn't been possible for them to both get one at the same time because they go so quickly. He echoed several weekend shoppers and walkers who said there are always long waits and they wish there were more walking slots.

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“It’s always nonstop,” said Hill, who has been a member for almost 20 years.

Hoagland says it’s difficult to track the Cart Return shifts because the information is so anecdotal. The feedback comes in the form of how many times people say they’re waiting for a walker and how many times staff see the walkers sitting on the bench reading a book or checking their phones because they don’t have anything to do.

“It’s a really tricky one to get right,” said Hoagland. “We’ve discussed increasing the shifts on the weekend, but it’s also a question of, how much waiting is too much?”

As a weekend shopper who often finds herself waiting for a walker, I discovered that Hoagland had a good point. I set my timer that last time I was waiting, and while I was sure it had been more than 15 minutes, it was, in fact, only eight.

“We’re thinking about these things all the time,” Hoagland said. “There are improvements to be made that we’re not aware of, but with feedback we’ll continue to refine the system. We want to make members’ shopping and working experience the best it can be.”

Meredith Kolodner lives in Brooklyn.