



Avoiding the Pitfalls of Noncompliance

Scheduling automation is key to effectively
managing the public safety workforce



Introduction

For public safety agencies, scheduling is a never-ending challenge. Staffing needs are difficult to project accurately, as human nature and Mother Nature often work to complicate things. Peaceful protests can develop into civil unrest. Fires and floods occur with little to no warning. And, of course, there's always the minefield of compliance issues to navigate.

Public safety agencies that fail to comply with the growing labyrinth of rules and regulations face serious consequences. Noncompliance greatly increases an agency's risk of facing lawsuits, employee grievances, and union rules violations. Budget and staff cutbacks also complicate matters.

An automated staffing solution is a great tool for public safety agencies struggling with noncompliance issues. Surprisingly, though, a significant proportion of agencies still haven't upgraded to automation. Paper schedules and time-off slips haven't gone out of style. And slightly more modern alternatives, such as whiteboards and Excel spreadsheets, are just as inadequate for busy supervisors trying to balance staffing duties with other responsibilities.

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The misfortunes of manual

Manual staffing makes it difficult to manage overtime distribution in a fair and equitable manner. It can lead to the “buddy system,” in which a scheduling manager rewards friends with overtime work, often resulting in grievance filings by those who were deprived.

A manual system also lacks powerful reporting tools that enable a manager or department to justify when, where, and why a particular employee was offered overtime. By comparison, an automated system leaves a digital audit trail that helps resolve — or avoid — worker grievances and related issues.

Manual reporting also makes it harder for managers to identify and resolve sick leave abuse. Unnecessary sick leave is costly for police departments.

This matters because good record keeping is critically important. It’s the employer’s responsibility to log the time employees spend performing compensable activities. When an employer fails to do so, the employee is entitled to compensation based on good faith and reasonable estimates.¹

Overall, manual staffing solutions are slow and unreliable, and they make public safety agencies vulnerable to compliance issues. When supervisors spend valuable hours processing schedules, they’re using their work time inefficiently. Automation frees managers to focus on larger issues, not who worked when and where.

Dealing with emergencies

Civil unrest can erupt at any time. A flashpoint can turn a seemingly peaceful political demonstration into a full-blown riot, as police departments across the country have experienced.

Most public safety agencies aren’t adequately prepared to manage these crises. A Police1 survey found that only 54% of U.S. police departments have a written plan for dealing with civil unrest. Even more surprising: 31% have no plan at all.²

In a rapidly evolving emergency, a manual recall system can be slow, inefficient, and even chaotic. As a crisis breaks, the officer in charge doesn’t have time to thumb through a phone book or Rolodex, pick up the phone, and call officers one by one to check their availability.

In fact, it may take a minute or longer to recall each officer — perhaps up to 20 minutes to reach 10 people — during which time a violent demonstration could escalate significantly. A manual system also makes it difficult to identify responders with specialized training who are best equipped to deal with civil unrest. Finally, during a crisis, public safety personnel may not have time to ensure they are complying with overtime laws and other mandates.

Case Study: Fairfax County Fire & Rescue

With more than 1.1 million residents, Virginia's Fairfax County is the most populous jurisdiction in the Washington-Arlington-Alexandria metro area. It takes a dedicated and well-managed team of firefighters to protect lives and property in this rapidly growing region.

Back in the early 2000s, staffing coordinators at Fairfax County Fire & Rescue used pen, paper, and fax machines to manage scheduling — a cumbersome and inefficient process. The department has since migrated to automated staffing, an ongoing transition that has vastly simplified the critical task of documenting who works when, where, and why.

Under the old manual system, firefighters weren't able to "see exactly what was going on," says Fairfax County Fire & Rescue Battalion Chief Tom Arnold. "They knew what the rules were, but they really couldn't tell whether they were being applied fairly or not."

Automation has changed things for the better. "You didn't have the degree of transparency that you have now," says Arnold, who's in charge of one of Fairfax County Fire & Rescue's seven battalions. One of his ancillary duties is managing the agency's automated system, which staffing coordinators use to assign a minimum of 350 positions a day at 38 stations.

This software-based solution allows Fairfax County Fire & Rescue to provide "the fairest means possible to manage leave and overtime, which obviously are two of the most important components to the end-user — firefighters," notes Arnold.

Automation has made it easier to spot potential sick leave abuse too.

"You can go into someone's personal history and see a year, two years — however long you want — and find patterns," says Arnold.

This capability makes it easier to spot workers who "have a history of calling in sick on weekends or holidays, or on the first or last day of a tour," he adds. "I'm sure we've reduced the amount of sick leave used compared to years past."

In brief, manual staffing doesn't cut it in today's compliance-laden environment.

"I don't think there's a single function related to staffing that couldn't be made more efficient [via automation]," says Arnold.



Advantages of automation

An automated staffing system saves time and effort in many ways. By auto-generating calls to personnel, it eliminates the need for inefficient manual phoning. And by enabling staffing supervisors to filter the expertise, training, and special team assignments included in each employee's profile, agencies can quickly identify the right people for specific incidents.

Compliance issues matter too. Automation reduces errors and makes it easier to track hours and identify costs related to emergency response — a boon for supervisors preparing labor and management reports. For instance, if a department is entitled to federal reimbursements, an automated system simplifies the export of work codes, resources, and labor hours to appropriate FEMA reports.

However, despite the clear advantages of automation, the Police1 survey found that nearly 80% of departments still rely on manual solutions to staff and deploy officers in emergency situations. And less than 30% of respondents reported using automated staffing and recall, despite the tangible benefits of doing so.³ Therefore, it's clear that many public safety departments need to implement automated staffing to manage crisis events more effectively.

Case Study: Las Vegas Detention Center

Sgt. Rodolfo Padilla knows all about keeping the peace.

In his 25 years of employment at the Las Vegas Detention Center, including his current role as leader of an elite squad that handles the center's most uncooperative inmates, he's managed plenty of stressful situations.

"If we've got some kind of emergency — let's say an inmate won't come out of a room or is being aggressive and violent — we don't want to send regular officers to deal with this," says Padilla. "So we activate the Special Emergency Response Team, or SERT."

As SERT's operations sergeant, Padilla is in charge of scheduling a crew of 21, including 15 correctional officers, three deputy city marshals, and three corrections sergeants.

Automated staffing has proven to be a big plus for the detention center, an agency of the city of Las Vegas Department of Public Safety, which upgraded to a software-based system in June 2008.

"Before that, it was all manual," says Padilla. "There were a lot of problems when it came to who got overtime."

With old-school manual staffing, the risk of favoritism always loomed large. "You called the sergeant — or the sergeant knew you — and they would just put you in [for overtime]," Padilla says. But the automated system is "more fair and transparent, because everybody can see what's going on, and who's getting the overtime. Everybody can log in on any computer, at home or here, and see what's going on with the schedule."

Not only does automation help the detention center adhere to government and union rules and regulations, it's also a big help in emergencies. Under the old manual system, the operations sergeant had to track down the phone number for each SERT member and call everyone separately. "Now it's automatic," says Padilla. "I need the SERT team and — boom — the (automated system) will call everybody. It saves a lot of time."



Moving up from manual:

9 tips for switching to automated staffing

The benefits of automation are clear to public safety agencies that have upgraded from manual staffing. Transitions don't always go smoothly, however, so here are nine ways to ensure they do.



Preach the word

When selling people on automated staffing, stress a key benefit: fairness. An online scheduling solution can be set up to be transparent and available for all employees to access based on their role and authority, unlike a paper-based system, where insiders can take advantage of the system.



Beware the boo birds

Humans typically don't like change — particularly if the “new way of doing things” requires some effort on their part. They'll be more receptive, however, when they reap the benefits of a transparent, easy-to-use automated system.



Support multiple platforms

Your staffing system should allow easy access from a variety of internet-connected devices, including computers, smartphones, and tablets.



Make IT happy

Choose a solution that seamlessly exchanges scheduling, timekeeping, personnel, and time-off information with existing systems. The benefit: streamlined workflow, fewer errors, and less time spent waiting for important data.



Get granular scheduling

Need to assign seats on a fire truck? A good staffing solution has a host of flexible scheduling tools that go beyond basic timekeeping and vacation planning.



Consider the cloud

A cloud-hosted staffing system can free up valuable IT resources for other core initiatives.



Communicate through multiple channels

Choose a system capable of communicating through multiple channels, including by phone call, text, or email.



Pick a vendor that has your back

New staffing tool got you stumped? A reliable automated staffing vendor — that also has public safety staffing expertise — will provide phone and online support during regular business hours, plus optional 24/7 help.



If you've got it, use it

Take advantage of everything your automated solution has to offer. It's easy to ignore lesser-known features, such as mobile functionality support.

Conclusion

Penalties and payouts related to noncompliance cost public safety agencies millions of dollars each year, and manual staffing solutions are a large part of the problem. A manual system — whether it's pen and paper or an unwieldy Excel spreadsheet — is inefficient, wasteful, and potentially dangerous. It burdens supervisors with hours of tedious busywork — work that could be managed far more efficiently via an automated approach.

Automation also increases accountability in making sure everyone must abide by the same rules. It reduces the likelihood of sick leave abuse and enables busy supervisors to focus on more important tasks. For public safety agencies, automated staffing is an investment that will more than pay for itself in years to come.

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- ² UKG, *Civil Unrest: Police Preparedness, Trends, and Staffing Software Solutions* (accessed September 27, 2021), found at <https://www.ukg.com/resources/white-paper/civil-unrest-police-preparedness-trends-and-staffing-software-solutions>.
- ³ Ibid.

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