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Dealing With Seasonal Changes in Workload

Your 10-Minute Guide to Planning for Busy and Quiet Periods



Some business cycles are as predictable as spring or fall.

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Find out how to prepare yourself, your team and your customers for the impact of changing demands on your time and resources.

No matter what industry you work in, chances are that you'll experience some seasonal changes in your organization's activity. For example, if you work in retail, you'll likely be busiest around the holidays.

Busy periods can be difficult to deal with, for managers and teams alike. People might struggle to cope, they can start making mistakes, and they get sick. That in turn creates more pressure for their co-workers.

Quieter periods can happen after major deadlines such as financial year-ends, when customers are on vacation, or after the holiday season.

This guide looks into how to manage periods of particularly high or low workload.

Please share it freely within your organization.



If you're a manager, you need to plan for the impact of these seasonal variations on your team. When you do this, you can ensure that you have the resources you need, that your people feel supported, and that you make the most of each person's skills.

Seasonal Workload Changes

Seasonal changes to workload can be extreme but predictable, especially in agriculture and retail.

For example, in the U.S., young people reported researching deals on social media ahead of the 2018 Black Friday/Cyber Monday weekend, so that they were [ready to "splurge."](#)

However, new trends in a market can disrupt such patterns.

For example, in 2012 and 2013, U.K. retail sales growth into December reached 16.6 percent and 17.6 percent respectively as shoppers prepared for Christmas. But each year from 2014 through 2017 saw this [spending gradually move earlier](#), from December into November, as the U.K. too adopted Black Friday.

Prepare for Increased Workloads

Use the strategies below to guide your team management approach for the year ahead.

Understand the Bigger Picture and Begin to Create a Plan

Your first step is to understand the highs and lows of your business. Look at the cash flow, orders, inventories, and staffing levels from previous years. What are your fixed expenses? How much extra will you need to bring in during your busy season to carry you through the quiet season?

Next, forecast who and what you'll need, to achieve that growth. Work out how you'll secure the raw materials and stock, and plan how you'll increase marketing. Think about how and when you'll recruit any temporary employees – remember to build in time for training.

Extend your planning to consider how you'll handle demand if it's unexpectedly high, or if it's disappointingly low. Then, use [risk analysis](#) to explore how other possible issues could affect your team, such as supply problems or key people taking time off sick.

Be sure to avoid simply "hoping for the best." Instead, have robust [contingency plans](#) in place.

Evolve and Communicate Your Plan

Your team members will have crucial insights based on their hands-on knowledge and experience, so share your thinking with them and ask for feedback.

As a result, your plan will be more effective, and you'll likely get more buy-in from the people it involves. For example, you might need co-workers to "pitch in" and go the extra mile to help one another. This could involve staying late, or working extra days.

Make sure that everyone has clear expectations: if you use a [team charter](#), you may want to include a note of your plans for busy periods. And get your new hires onboard from the beginning by including this information in their [job descriptions](#).

Note:

Check your local employment laws to ensure that you provide enough breaks and days off during busy periods.

Prepare Your Team

Focus on time management and [prioritization](#) **before** the busy season strikes. Share your own time management tips, and encourage team members to explore ways that they can use their time efficiently.

Let people know that they can ask for advice if they're struggling with their workload. You may want to block out regular "open door" times when your team can talk to you, or you may prefer to set up regular meetings.

[Management by Wandering Around](#) is invaluable during busy times, so that you can pick up early warning signs of any problems.

Depending on your business, you may also need to provide refresher training to help your people cope with other problems. For example, [dealing with unhappy customers](#) or [handling social media criticism](#).

Support Your Team

People can experience [hurry sickness](#) or even [burnout](#) if pressure is relentless, so keep a close eye on your team.

Make sure that your team members have a [healthy workplace](#). When people feel safe and comfortable, they'll be more productive, have higher morale, and be more engaged with their work.

People who work in [emotionally demanding roles](#), such as customer services, will need extra attention. Be sure to give them regular breaks so that they can rest and recharge: encourage them to take a quick walk outside, or to spend a few minutes alone, [meditating](#).

Also, take time to celebrate people's accomplishments. Keep morale high by recognizing individuals who meet or exceed targets, and show your appreciation by [saying "thank you"](#) to all hardworking team members.

Manage Customer Expectations

It might take you longer to respond to queries during busy periods. Be honest with customers so that they know what to expect. (This is common, for example, with accountancy firms in the run-up to a tax deadline.) This can help to reduce [unrealistic requests](#).

Where you can, make sure that an increase in business doesn't affect service **quality**. Use quality management strategies such as [kaizen](#) to keep standards high, even during busy times, and automate work where you can, so that you can scale up more easily.

Lead by Example

Remember to manage your own time carefully during busy periods. Stay focused and [regulate your emotions](#).

Keep a log of the problems you experience when you're busy, so that you can focus on them during quiet periods.

Strategies for the Quiet Season

When your organization slows down, it can be tempting to take a break and relax. However, it's important to make the most of this time, too.

Develop and Cross-Train

Slow periods can be the best time to develop your team.

First, create a [skills matrix](#) to identify knowledge and skills gaps, then work out the best ways to fill these gaps.

Offer a mix of formal training, [coaching](#) and social cross-training. Invite people to share their skills and knowledge with one another, so that you have a more engaged and flexible workforce. Then, people will be able to respond to any future staff shortages or changing business conditions.

Consider Annual Hours or a ROWE

Depending on local employment legislation, you may want to think about transitioning your team to annualized hours. This can improve productivity and reduce risk if your organization has strong seasonal upswings and downturns.

Annualized hours allow you to contract employees for a specific number of hours per year, rather than per week or month. You can then schedule employees to work longer when demand is high, without fear of violating their working contract, and give team members time off when business is slow.

Alternatively, you could take the radical step of adopting a "[Results-Only Work Environment](#)" or ROWE, in which people are paid for delivering an agreed outcome, not for the hours that they work. This is likely not appropriate in all workplaces!

Fix Problems and Processes

Starting with your log of problems from your last busy season, look for ways to [streamline processes](#), automate operations, improve equipment, and solve people problems for next season.

Use the [McKinsey 7S framework](#) to explore your issues, and list the problems, frustrations, complaints, or [bottlenecks](#) that you experienced.

Again, your team members will have valuable insights to offer, so use the [5 Whys](#) technique together, to help get to the root of any issues, and to agree solutions. Then apply some [appreciative inquiry](#) to build on the things that have gone well.

Reassess Goals and Objectives

Review the objectives you set for this season or year. How did your team perform? Did you meet your goals, or did you fall short?

Along with your team, reflect on what happened, and what you could do differently in future.

Be sure to [learn from your mistakes](#). And what more could you do to take full advantage of the high season?

Finally, think about how you could smooth the next year's workload so it's less disruptive. Could you increase your marketing efforts to boost sales during your quiet period, for example?

Key Points

Your organization likely experiences some seasonal fluctuations in its activity. As a manager, you need to plan for these changes, and support your people through them.

Focus on time management, resources and processes, and think about what you can do to help your team to meet organizational targets. Then, with your people's input, create a robust plan to help them through the busy season, and communicate it clearly, so that you manage expectations, internally and externally.

Actively support your team during this time, minimize unnecessary pressures, keep health and morale high, and lead by example.

Then, when the pressure eases, reflect on problems and successes, and invest in developing your team so that you're even better prepared for the next busy season.

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