

Case Study: Utilities



Wales & West Utilities

Executive summary

Wales & West Utilities needed to update its working time patterns for its 300 emergency engineers to meet new industry regulatory requirements. The organisation also wanted to streamline its internal practices for this group to ensure it was meeting demand in a more cost effective way while reducing the requirement for hours worked outside of formal shift patterns. Current workforce agreements for all employees of the organisation also needed modernising to ensure the business was fit for the future.

Working Time Solutions (WTS) was called in to support the management team and provide expertise and insight right from the start. WTS guided Wales & West Utilities through the process with cost savings and better practises as a result.

Key Challenges

- Outdated working patterns for all employees
- Significant regulatory changes afoot
- Mismatched scheduling patterns; over-staffing and under-staffing for its emergency engineers when compared to in-day and seasonal demand
- Over reliance on overtime

Key Outcomes

- Standardised and mandatory working patterns for all employees
- More efficient shift patterns that reflect customer and regulatory demand
- Reduction in overtime required
- Improved planning processes
- Employees have better visibility of their working patterns
- Better work/life balance for emergency engineers

Key Learnings

- Set clear objectives at the beginning and keep referring back to them
- Software provides impartiality when analysing workload data
- Early engagement with Trade Unions and affected staff is critical
- Invest time in getting the data right and agreed up-front
- Set-up a dedicated working group to own and drive the project, with Executive level leadership
- Involve representatives from all areas of the business from the beginning
- Regular and positive engagement
- Communicate clearly, consistently and constantly
- Give people time to understand and, where necessary, challenge the changes suggested
- Utilise a third party such as Working Time Solutions for expertise, objectivity and best practice solutions

Background

Wales & West Utilities - formerly part of National Grid Transco - was launched in 2005 and is a regulated gas distribution business serving 7.4 million people in Wales and South West England.

At the time in question, the organisation employed 1,450 people, 600 contractors and exists to operate, maintain and develop a 35,000 km gas distribution network across its region. It provides a gas emergency service and deals with 100,000 calls a year servicing 2.5 million supply points in the area.

The Challenge

Outdated working arrangements across the board, regulatory changes and workload demands for its 300 emergency engineers meant that Wales & West Utilities needed to review, overhaul and update the way in which it operated. The organisation wanted to reduce its reliance on overtime and modernise its organisational structure and its flexibility for its emergency engineers, as well as employee terms & conditions for all staff to ensure it was fit to match future demands and requirements.

Facing these challenges, as well as a heavily unionised workforce, Wales & West Utilities enlisted the services of Working Time Solutions (WTS) for support and expertise.

The Approach

The team recognised right from the beginning that well established and constructive relationships with the trade union was key to success. The organisation took an engaging approach to the project by focussing on face-to-face meetings, briefings and roadshows to ensure that management and WTS were both visible throughout the process. This also gave the team a 'face' and somewhere for the engineers to direct questions and thoughts.

To ensure early buy-in and to reach agreement on the task at hand quickly, the project was kicked-off with a data workshop analysing shift pattern and demand profile information as available and making sure nothing was missed or misconstrued.

A number of other workshops were arranged throughout this period to share information, gain feedback and reach agreement. These sessions involved a cross section of affected staff and managers, and covered everything from reviewing data and resource matching, to the development of working patterns and recommendations for employees, which were agreed through a ballot vote.

There was also a series of fortnightly meetings arranged between Senior Managers and Trade Union colleagues to discuss the framework within which the new patterns would operate once in force and to agree the 'rules'

The Solution

Following this intensive six-month process, Wales & West Utilities successfully implemented new working patterns from January 2013. The new shifts are compulsory for all its emergency engineers and cover a seven-day week, 24 hours per day and offer more flexibility than previously, incorporating both "flex shifts" and banked hours.

The data analysis had pinpointed a scheduling mismatch with staffing shortfalls during certain periods and under-utilisation at others. The new shift patterns reallocated resources in a manner to more efficiently meet the peaks and troughs in demand and also led to a reduction in requirements for overtime.

The company also standardised its T&Cs for all its staff; this included holidays and start and finish times to make it easier to administer and run.

Benefits

As a result of introducing more flexible patterns, the organisation was able to downsize its manpower on a volunteer basis. The remainder of the emergency department is now operating in a more efficient way with early indications showing that work patterns are more effectively covering workload demands. There has also been a demonstrable reduction in overtime and hours worked on standby arrangements. The internal planning process is also much more streamlined and effective with a more transparent system in place allowing better foresight for both the organisation and the employees.

Peaks and troughs in demand are now managed better across the business with significantly improved flexibility.



From the engineers' point of view, they now have better visibility of their work pattern and rest days making it easier for them to plan their spare time promoting a good work/life balance.

The team set a tight six month deadline for the project, while adopting a flexible approach to cater for the needs of different groups to ensure they were engaged in the process and on-board.