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WORKFORCE PLANNING MASTERCLASS

Planning for Peak

Black Friday, Christmas and the seasonal surge — back-planning the people, the hours and the plan B

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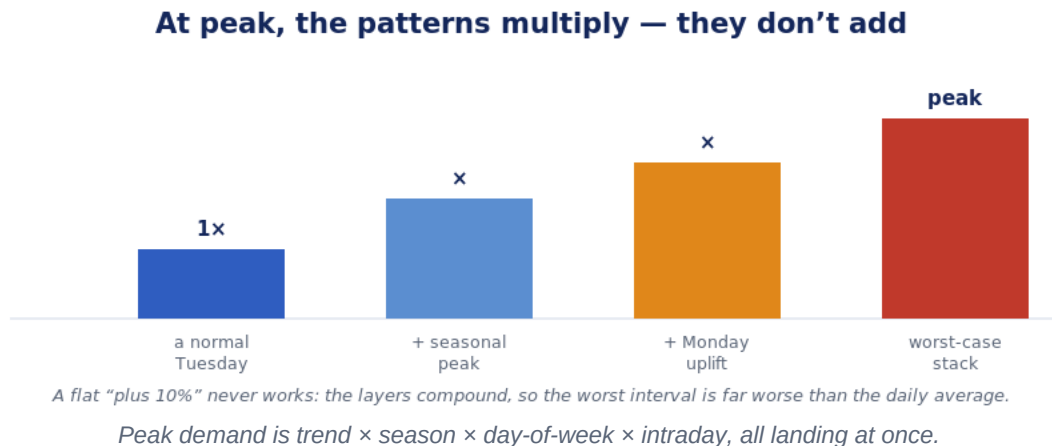
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1. Peak is not just “busier”

A daily total tells you almost nothing about peak. The danger of peak is that the patterns multiply, and the pipeline that staffs it has a deadline months earlier than the demand.



Your busiest interval of the year is the moment four patterns point the same way at once — an upward trend, the seasonal high, the busiest weekday and the daily spike, stacked. They compound, so a flat percentage uplift quietly under-staffs the moments that matter most. Plan the peak at the interval level, on the worst-case stack, not the comfortable average.

For Christmas, you hire in autumn. The deadline that matters is not when the peak arrives — it is when recruitment must start to land trained people in time.

2. Forecasting the peak

Last year is your best guide, but only adjusted — for the trend since, for the known step-changes (a new product, a price change, a marketing push, a self-service launch that will deflect some of it), and for the calendar (which weekday each peak date falls on this year changes the shape). Treat one-off events as events, not baseline, and forecast AHT for the peak separately: a peak often skews toward harder contacts, and a hiring wave drags AHT up just as volume climbs.

Forecast in ranges, not a single number. Peak is exactly where uncertainty is widest and where being short is most expensive, so run a low, expected and high case and decide deliberately how much risk to carry rather than betting on one figure.

3. Back-planning the people

Work backwards from the date you need heads productive: subtract the ramp, the training, the hiring lead time and the funnel yield, and that tells you when the requisition must open and how big it must be. If you need ten productive heads for December, allow for ramp and training and a

60% funnel yield, and the advert has to open in late summer — not November. Respect training throughput, too: a plan that needs forty starters is worthless if you can only train fifteen at a time.

And remember the new-starter wave is not full capacity on day one. Model effective FTE through the ramp, because a classroom full of graduates in week one is staffing on paper, not on the phones.

4. Flexing capacity and protecting people

Permanent hiring is not the only lever, and for a short, sharp peak it is often the wrong one. Match the lever to the variation: annualised hours bank summer quiet for winter peak; a part-time layer and overtime add precision over the busiest weeks; temps and outsourcing flex the baseline. Reach for overtime to cover a permanent seasonal peak and you pay premium rates forever for a problem a contract could solve.

Protect your people through it. Peak is when occupancy runs hottest and burnout risk is highest, so place planned shrinkage — training, projects, leave — away from the peak weeks, hold a sensible buffer for the sickness that peak itself drives, and don't bank a productivity gain you have not delivered. A peak that breaks the team is repaid in January attrition.

5. The plan B, and the review

Whatever the forecast, peak will throw something at you — a bigger-than-expected day, an outage, a viral moment. The plan that matters most is the surge-and-escalation playbook: pre-agreed triggers and responses, who gets pulled in and how fast, the holding messages, the path to comms. Decide it in the calm, not in the storm.

Then close the loop. The post-peak review — where the forecast missed, which intervals always ran hot, which levers worked — is the cheapest planning win there is, because next year's peak is mostly this year's peak with the lessons applied. Run it while the memory is fresh.

Forecast the compounding peak, hire in autumn, flex with the right lever, protect the team, and keep a playbook for the day the forecast breaks.

About the author

John Casey has spent more than 30 years in contact-centre workforce planning, including roles as a workforce-planning manager and operations director, and now writes and teaches at ccplanning.net. The views in this paper are his own. It represents general professional experience and is not affiliated with, nor does it represent, any current or former employer.

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