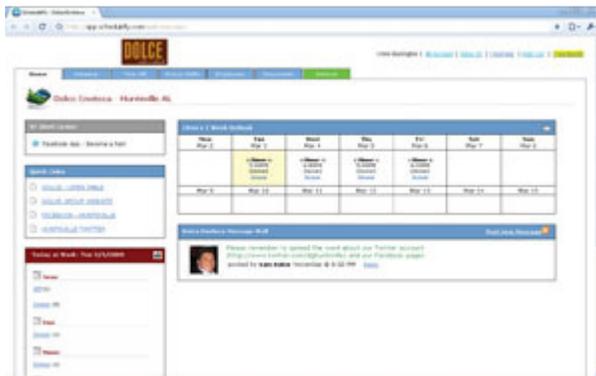


Technology: Shift Keys

Online scheduling software lets restaurant managers whip up a shift schedule in 15 minutes and that's just for starters. Here, the latest in what's available and what to look for.

By Christine LaFave, Associate Editor -- Restaurants and Institutions, 4/1/2009



With an interface such as a social-networking site, Dolce Group's online scheduling system is user-friendly for employees.

At Dolce Enoteca and Ketchup restaurants in Huntsville, Ala., five words used to derail a perfectly planned shift schedule—"I can't work that day." they no longer elevate general manager Sam Rubin's blood pressure though. Gone are the hassles of back-and-forth phone calls to find someone to cover the shift, and of having to recalculate employees' actual weekly work hours.

the schedule-creation process and does most of the work when it comes to shift changes. "It saves me hours upon hours every week," Rubin says.

The source of Rubin's peace of mind? An online scheduling system—in use at his two restaurants as well as at the 11 other units operated by Los Angeles-based Dolce Group—that automates

More than a time-saving tool, the newest scheduling software can help managers plan schedules based on employees' sales performance (through integration with point-of-sale systems) and provide invaluable labor documentation in the event of personnel disputes. And by reducing scheduling frustration for managers and hourly employees alike, they can even, say Rubin and other fans, help reduce turnover. "I think we're paying right around \$35 a month," for the software and technical support, Rubin says, "and if it was \$100 I would still pay for it."

The system Rubin's restaurants rely on works like a social-networking site, allowing employees to view the schedule and post requests to drop or add shifts at any time from most Web-enabled devices.

"Let's say [an employee] was scheduled to work tonight and she wants to drop the shift," explains Rubin. "Instead of letting me know, she posts online that the shift is up for grabs." The scheduling program then will send every other employee in the same role—hostess, server and so on—who isn't scheduled to work a text message about the open shift.

Employees can offer to pick up the shift by going online or sending a simple text reply. When a possible substitute is identified, Rubin will receive a text from the system noting the requested change, and he can approve or deny it via text. (The scheduling system also notes whether an

employee would be pushed into overtime by accepting the shift—crucial information to have when Rubin is fielding shift-change requests from his smartphone.) Rubin’s decisions are texted back to the employees. Any worker without access to text messaging or home Internet service can log in to the system at the restaurant.

Setting up a schedule is even easier. With around 30 employees at each restaurant, Rubin previously spent four

hours a week creating a schedule; now, the process takes less than 15 minutes.

Online scheduling systems can be a time-saver that boosts managers’ productivity: Less time spent on scheduling means more time to help employees in-store, says Kevin Moll, CEO of Denver-based National Restaurant Consultants. “It’s all about labor control, convenience, removal of redundant paperwork, ease of use and quick payback,” he says. “Ultimately, [online scheduling] helps to drive profit.”

At Irvine, Calif.-based Claim Jumper, managers used to take a full day each week to create the shift schedule. “We were very paper-based, [and] we had a lot of trouble managing labor dollars,” says Vice President of Human Resources Tina Burke.

Claim Jumper had been hesitant to invest in scheduling software, Burke says, but in early 2007, the casual-dining chain did a trial of an online system in five stores. Positive word of mouth spread quickly. “I had stores calling asking us to be next,” she says.

The system, which costs Claim Jumper \$165 a month, has been an unqualified hit with managers and hourly workers, says Burke. “If [employees] are out with family or friends and they want to release their shift, they can do it while they’re out [via text] rather than going home and going to a computer.”

And if employee conflicts about time-off requests arise, managers can turn to the program to find out who requested off specific shifts and when they did so. “Our retention rate is phenomenal; we attribute a lot of it to the program,” Burke says. In 2005, Claim Jumper’s hourly turnover was 100%; currently it’s 60%. Between the time savings provided and the labor savings realized by not scheduling staff for overtime unknowingly, the system saves the company an estimated \$500,000 across 46 stores, says Burke. She adds: “Like a lot of other places, our sales are struggling right now, and it’s a program we considered dropping, but we decided it really was something we wanted to keep.”



Scheduling software allows restaurant managers and employees to track shifts online.

KEY TIPS FOR BUYERS

Time is Money: How to Choose Scheduling Software

Several companies sell shift-scheduling software; a handful specialize in restaurant scheduling. The monthly cost of Web-based scheduling modules varies widely based on an operation's number of employees. Basic software for an operation with fewer than 20 employees can cost as little as \$30 a month. In contrast, modules designed to integrate with a point-of-sale system—allowing managers to view sales reports for the restaurant and individual employees when creating a schedule—can cost hundreds of dollars a month.

How to decide on a module? “I believe strongly that support is No. 1; brand name and reliability are No. 2; and cost is No. 3,” says National Restaurant Consultants CEO Kevin Moll. “Because the payback is so fast, cost should not be the No. 1 concern.” Rather, he says, look for a provider that can customize scheduling features according to an operation's needs. Is a 1-800 number available so that employees can quickly access their restaurant's latest schedule over the phone? If there is, is the recording available in Spanish? Can the module be integrated with the operation's existing point-of-sale system? Can managers approve changes using a smartphone?