

Modern attendance management: A world of choices

From simple handwritten time sheets to sophisticated biometric time clocks, employers rely on attendance management systems to keep track of employee hours. Information collected proves vital to calculating each worker's paycheck, and HR departments must maintain records of when each employee is "on the clock" in order to run payroll correctly. Keeping this data in a convenient place and format ensures easy retrieval should questions arise from a worker or manager about hours worked. The collection also serves as evidence of compliance with legal requirements, such as proof of giving time off for lunch.

Determining the best way to collect and track hours is up to the individual company based on factors such as the size of its workforce and the budget allotted for attendance management. While some organizations remain basic in their methods, others have discovered that modern attendance management can be about much more than computing what is owed.

The evolution of attendance management

In the past, employers expected workers to fill in paper time sheets for each pay period. Every workday, the employee would write in the time he arrived and departed along with the time he stopped for lunch. He totaled the hours, signed the document, and submitted it to human resources.

Some organizations, especially small ones, still use this system. However, employees may not always be honest in their recording. They may write in a start time that is earlier than when they actually arrived or an end time later than when they headed out the door. While a few minutes shaved here or there does not seem like much, it adds up to lost productivity both on an individual and a whole-staff basis – all on the company's dime.

Also, many employees fail to input daily and instead fill in the whole sheet right before it is due. This rushed action can cause errors in reporting – such as forgetting to note a day when absent -- and end up causing headaches down the line for HR when situations need fixing.

Time clocks – devices that note the time of arrival and departure -- solve many such problems. Automatic recording of when someone puts his card through the machine eliminates fudging and inaccurate memory.

While workers standing in line to punch in and out of their shifts remains an iconic image of employment, much of today's attendance management thrives on advanced technology. Employees log in and out of computers to register their coming and going. Some systems contain alerts so that employees and managers can deal quickly with missing information, such as someone who rushed out the door at day's end and forgot to log out.

Other possible benefits of using attendance management software or cloud-based tools include:

- Storing information on vacations and absences to easily provide leave management data for both individuals and the company
- Breaking down hours spent on certain projects to provide efficient client billing

- Mobile sign-in for telecommuters or staff members traveling/on a job site
- Calendar integration to enable seeing who is available (logged in) at any given time
- Generating reports on specific topics, such as tardiness or amount of staff overtime
- Reducing human error introduced when inputting and calculating numbers

Biometrics

The buzzword of attendance management in the 2020s is biometrics. Feeling a bit like something out of a movie, biometric clocks use methods such as facial recognition, iris scans, or fingerprints to identify an employee and automatically record her punch time. Timekeeping software creates a virtual time card for the organization's payroll system.

The exactness of biometric time clocks prohibits "buddy punching" – the act of someone else logging/signing/punching in for a fellow employee who is tardy or even not showing up. Such time theft costs U.S. employers an estimated \$373 million annually.

Biometrics helps with security by identifying someone trying to get in who is not recognized by the system as an employee. Organizations also can "lock out" workers until set times to limit building access or to keep them from tacking unauthorized overtime onto their time card.

Companies with a large number of employees moving in and out for shifts often find biometric time clocks quick and effective. Some businesses, however, find the cost prohibitive or view such an attendance management method as overkill.

Employees sometimes balk at biometric measures. They see it as a sign of distrust or as an invasion of privacy. Taking the time to address concerns about how biometric data is recorded, stored, and used can assist in acceptance. Also, a company's legal team should be highly involved in the process to deal with issues such as employee consent.

Biometrics legal considerations: Case in point

Warning: Before you buy into any biometric timekeeping system, make sure you're compliant with your state's biometric privacy law—if your state has one. And if it doesn't, stay ahead of the curve by anticipating it soon will.



Take this recent real-life case ...

Illinois has a tough biometric privacy law and this isn't the first time an employer has been snagged for violations. Employees who worked at Little Caesars pizza restaurants are suing, alleging their employer didn't obtain their prior consent to its biometric thumb-print reader, as required under Illinois law.

Employees, however, gave their consent retroactively, and on that basis, Little Caesars wanted the case dismissed. Employer: Employees consented to the past, present and future collection, use and storage of their fingerprint data when they registered their finger scans in Caesar Vision. The employer then submitted evidence in the form of screen shots. That was its mistake.

A federal trial court did not grant the employer's motion to dismiss, but for a purely technical reason. Court: It's inappropriate to submit evidence at this point in the litigation. The court can only consider the allegations in the complaint and not extraneous evidence.

The employer can try again later, by making a motion for summary judgment.

The case is *Lenoir v. Little Caesar Enterprises, Inc.*

Choosing an attendance management system

No right or wrong answer exists as to which attendance management system is best for a given company. Periodically, though, management may want to evaluate the organization's current method to ensure it still meets needs. For instance, a start-up that has increased its staff substantially may discover it has outgrown manual paper recording of hours and opt for a tech-savvy system that streamlines data collection and payroll.

Similarly, the increase in remote work as both a career option and as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic has led many companies to explore attendance management options that span beyond the office door. Some organizations pair recording of hours worked with tactics designed to monitor productivity, such as measuring keystrokes or taking random screenshots. Other employers simply want a virtual time card submitted in order to run payroll -- not worrying about accounting for every minute as long as quality work gets done.

Future developments in attendance management remain to be seen. After all, employers wowed by the introduction of the punch clock would be astounded by today's biometric procedures. The bottom line is to look at your current situation and available options. Do this not in order to keep up with the Joneses at Company XYZ, but rather to make decisions true to your own business goals.