EBOOK

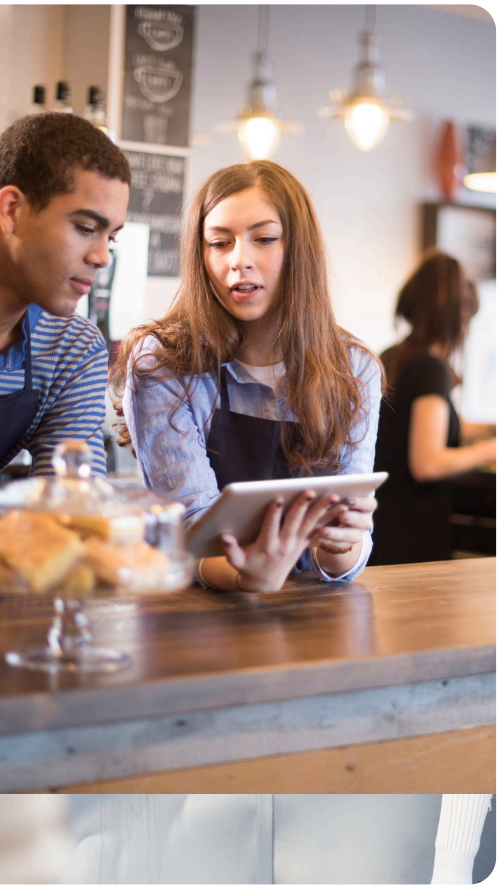
# The Ultimate Guide to Operational Efficiency for Shift-Based Businesses

## Why operational efficiency matters for shift-based businesses

# Introduction

Running a shift-based business means navigating a constant stream of challenges: last-minute callouts, complex shift swaps, and payroll errors. These small inefficiencies quickly stack up, draining margins and burning out your best people.

Operational efficiency is about using resources effectively to minimise waste and keep productivity high. In shift-based businesses, this means having the right number of people with the right skills in the right place at the right time while reducing unnecessary work. Getting this right matters more than ever, as labour costs keep climbing and worker shortages show no signs of easing.



**In 2025, Australia's unemployment rate hovered around 4.3 to 4.5%, with tight labour markets hitting accommodation, food services, and retail especially hard. At the same time, employee expectations around flexibility and communication have changed for good.**

Efficient operations deliver benefits beyond immediate cost savings. When teams can focus on the work that moves the day forward instead of patching gaps or chasing information, overall productivity lifts. Systems that run smoothly create better working environments and reduce the constant firefighting that burns managers out.

Manageable compliance replaces perpetual worry and teams that aren't stretched thin or dealing with roster chaos provide better customer experiences. On the flip side, inefficient businesses face higher costs, frustrated teams, compliance risks, and operational chaos that customers notice immediately.

This guide breaks down the core pillars of operational efficiency for shift-based businesses with examples in hospitality and retail, and provides practical strategies you can implement starting today.

# The hidden costs of operational inefficiency

Inefficiency costs compound in ways that aren't immediately obvious. Manual rostering creates downstream problems that multiply beyond the initial time investment. Without demand forecasts guiding your decisions, you end up overstaffed on quiet days and scrambling to find coverage on busy ones.

Add poor communication about changes to the mix, and staff miss shifts or show up when they're not needed. Fixing each mistake pulls managers away from actually running the business, and the time costs continue to add up. Hours are lost to admin work that could be automated, and the wrong people end up on the wrong tasks because the roster doesn’t reflect real needs.

## Time inefficiencies quickly become financial losses:

- **Overstaffing** during quiet periods drains your budget
- **Last-minute callouts** trigger penalty rates
- **Inaccurate time tracking** leads to overpayment or compliance risk
- **Excessive overtime** only shows up after payroll closes
- **Productivity drops** when staff are pulled into constant fixes rather than planned work
- **Admin tasks** that could be automated consume hours each week

Each of these issues eats into margins before you even see the warning signs, and the productivity losses behind them often stay hidden until they start affecting service quality.

The pressure from managing inefficient systems manually while trying to control costs creates another risk: compliance gaps. Australian workplace laws around breaks, overtime, penalty rates, and record-keeping are complex and vary by industry and award.

Relying on managers to remember every rule across every shift creates gaps, and staffing instability increases the risk of compliance errors with labour laws and award conditions. Errors like missed breaks or incorrect rates slow the day down and force managers to recheck work that should have been right the first time.

Those gaps can become expensive if Fair Work comes calling or an employee files a complaint, exposing businesses to legal and financial penalties. Public compliance breaches can also damage your brand, with Fair Work publicly listing underpayment cases.

All of these problems accelerate staff turnover, which then makes every other issue worse. **Hospitality faces turnover rates around 15.5% annually, while retail sees approximately 9.3%,** according to industry analysis by Ai Group. Unpredictable rosters mean workers can't plan their lives. Communication gaps lead to missed shifts and confusion, while chronic understaffing grinds people down through overwork.

Every employee who leaves costs you money from the moment you start recruiting. Training the replacement consumes resources, and productivity drops while they get up to speed because experienced staff end up covering gaps instead of focusing on their main responsibilities.

High turnover creates a cycle: more overtime, more last-minute changes, more scheduling chaos, which drives even more people to quit. Turnover destroys institutional knowledge and weakens team cohesion, keeping your business stuck in perpetual training mode.

# The five pillars of operational efficiency

Operational efficiency means addressing multiple areas that work together, not finding one silver bullet. This operational efficiency framework for managers breaks it into five pillars. Each pillar tackles a pain point shift-based businesses face daily: wasted time on manual work, communication breakdowns, staff turnover, compliance risks, and decision-making without data. Address these five areas and efficiency compounds, with each improvement making the others easier to implement.

## Pillar 1: Smarter rostering and demand forecasting

The foundation of efficiency is matching staffing levels to real demand. Many managers still build rosters from habit or last month's patterns, but data reveals when the work actually peaks.

**Start by spotting trends:**

- ✔ Which days are busiest?
- ✔ When do you see peak demand within a shift?
- ✔ How do seasons or events change customer flow?

Use past sales or booking data to identify your busy and quiet periods, and build your roster around those patterns instead of relying on habit. Efficiency isn't about cutting hours but about matching coverage to real demand and giving your team stability when things slow down. It also reduces the time spent rebuilding rosters each week, since managers aren't reworking the same problems by hand.

F45 Training managers switched from guesswork to data-driven scheduling, building rosters around class bookings. They could instantly see who was available without making dozens of calls, which cut out repetitive admin work and freed up time for coaching, planning, and opening new studios.

> "The ease of finding available staff has changed everyone's life"
>
> F45 — Alex Loaney, Business Manager

**PRO TIP**

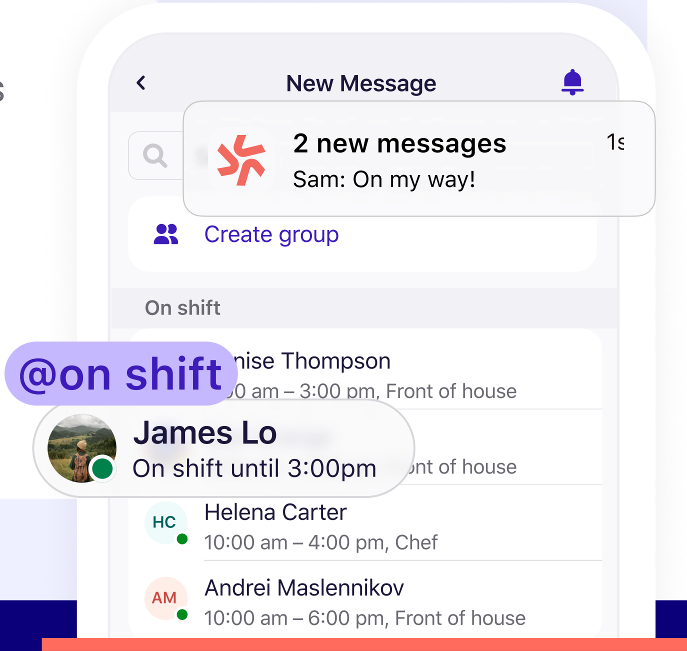
The best operators use technology tools for operational efficiency like workforce management platforms to forecast demand based on historical patterns, so rostering decisions come from data rather than habit. Automating these steps removes a lot of the manual back-and-forth and gives managers time to focus on running the business instead of rebuilding rosters by hand.

## Pillar 2: Clear communication and collaboration

Most communication inefficiencies start with missed messages. When shift swaps happen in texts or updates get buried in different chat apps, managers spend hours chasing details. Consolidating communication into one place, where rosters, swaps, and updates all live, keeps everyone aligned without the constant back-and-forth.

Juggling multiple apps and endless message threads was once standard practice at Barworks, a London-based hospitality group. Operations Manager Tanja Schoenberger says that moving to one platform has allowed her team to “focus more on nurturing our team and delivering exceptional customer experiences.” Consolidating everything in one place removed the daily friction. Confusion and errors dropped, and managers could finally spend their time leading their teams.

> Deputy empowers us to be the best employers we can be. It aligns perfectly with our people-first approach, enabling us to invest more time in our team and build a stronger workforce.”
>
> Tanja Schoenberger, Operations Manager




**PRO TIP**

When teams centralise communication this way, the hours spent chasing information drop significantly, and tools like Deputy Messaging keep updates in one place so nothing gets lost in scattered chats. With everything accessible in the mobile app, staff can see what they need without being tied to a computer. Managers spend less time untangling messages and more time supporting the team where it counts.

## Pillar 3: Employee engagement and improving workforce productivity

Improving workforce productivity through operational efficiency starts with predictable schedules and open communication that drive loyalty. When staff know their shifts early and can manage changes easily, they stay longer and perform better. Fewer callouts mean less stress for managers and smoother customer service.

Engaged teams work more smoothly throughout a shift because they have the context and confidence to act without constant intervention. When staff feel supported, they spend less time coordinating with one another and more time serving customers. The longer they stay, the better they understand your systems and the quicker they are during busy periods. Experience creates a level of productivity that new hires simply can't match.

> Managing over 1,000 shifts weekly across Sydney and NSW, W Short Hotel Group's People & Culture Manager Shaun Chapman says moving to Deputy gave employees the clarity they needed: **"Fewer than five employees have called in three years to ask about their schedule."**
>
> That kind of clarity builds engagement that shows up in performance. When staff can see their schedules directly instead of hunting for printed rosters, they stay informed and managers stop fielding the same questions repeatedly.

## Pillar 4: Compliance and risk management

Manual compliance is risky and time-consuming. Managers can't be expected to remember every award condition or break rule across every shift, which is why automation matters:

- Missed or late rest breaks
- Incorrect overtime or penalty rate calculations
- Gaps in record-keeping and audit trails

Automated compliance systems shift this from constant oversight to a background process. The system tracks hours worked, flags required breaks, calculates penalty rates, and maintains the detailed records Australian law requires without manager intervention. Tools like Deputy handle these details in the background so compliance happens automatically rather than depending on someone remembering every rule across every shift.

### Pillar 5: Operational efficiency metrics for continuous improvement

You can't improve what you can't measure. Start by examining labour costs, attendance, and turnover to identify where time and money are being wasted. If one shift regularly runs over budget or a team struggles with no-shows, that's your signal to dig deeper. The most efficient operators review these numbers frequently, using simple dashboards or workforce tools to assess how each location is performing and identify areas for improvement.

**PRO TIP**

**Audit your labour costs by shift to see where your budget is going.** Pull payroll and sales data from the past month, then calculate labour cost as a percentage of revenue for each shift type. The patterns will stand out fast. Some shifts will run lean, while others will drain profit; focus on fixing the outliers first, then build from there.

## How to improve operational efficiency: Your action plan

Understanding these five pillars is the first step. Implementation is where theory meets reality, and most businesses struggle not with what to fix, but with how to begin.

Efficiency improves fastest when you focus on one problem at a time. Start with the area causing the most friction and build from there.

### Step 1: Pick your starting point and measure baseline metrics

Identify where you're currently losing the most time and money, then establish a baseline before implementing improvements.

- [ ] **Identify your biggest inefficiency:** Is manual rostering taking hours every week? Are communication gaps forcing constant intervention? Is compliance creating anxiety? Choose one area to address first.
- [ ] **Track your current state:** If you're tackling rostering, measure hours spent building rosters and changes made after publishing. If labour costs are the problem, calculate your current cost percentage and overtime spending.
- [ ] **Record these numbers:** These metrics let you measure whether your changes make a real difference rather than guessing at impact.

## Step 2: Implement practical improvements

Once you know what needs fixing and the current state of the issue, take targeted action. These approaches work across most efficiency challenges:

- [ ] **Consolidate scattered information:** Move rosters, communication, and time tracking into one reliable system, whether you're replacing manual workflows or switching from tools that no longer keep up.
- [ ] **Automate repetitive manual tasks:** Let systems handle compliance checks, break tracking, and roster updates instead of doing them by hand.
- [ ] **Increase visibility and transparency:** Publish rosters early, make availability and swap processes clear, and give staff access to their own information.
- [ ] **Use data to guide decisions:** Build rosters based on demand patterns instead of habit, and use real numbers to identify problem areas.
- [ ] **Get team input:** Ask your staff what slows them down before assuming you already know the solution.

## Step 3: Track results and refine your approach

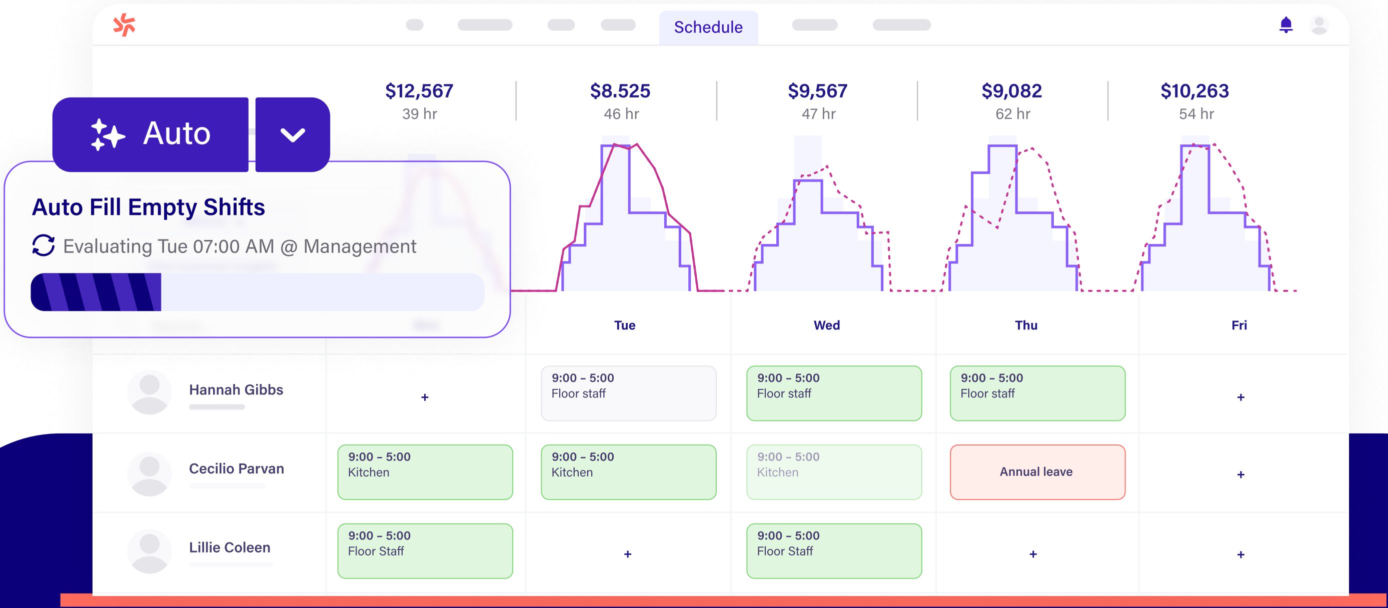
New systems only work when teams understand them and see their value. Support your people through each change and make sure the improvements stick.

- [ ] **Train your team properly:** Show why the change matters and how it makes their day easier, not just how to use a new tool.
- [ ] **Give managers extra support:** They're adapting to new workflows while keeping daily operations running, so build in time and space to get comfortable.
- [ ] **Set a review point:** Schedule a check-in 30 to 60 days after making changes to review your metrics and feedback.
- [ ] **Evaluate what worked:** Did labour costs improve? Are you spending less time on admin? What feedback have you heard from staff?
- [ ] **Adjust and move forward:** Some changes will work right away, while others uncover new challenges. Once you've made progress in your first area, take what you've learned and apply it to the next.

## EFFICIENCY TIP

### Start small, scale what works — once you've refined your process, it's time to test and scale.

The teams that succeed with efficiency improvements always start small. Test your new rostering approach in one location or department first to see how it performs. This approach helps you identify issues early, allowing you to refine the process and build confidence before expanding it more widely. It's also easier to train managers in stages than to change everything at once.




# Start improving operational efficiency today

Operational efficiency builds momentum. Each improvement makes the next easier and frees up capacity to take on new challenges. With the right systems in place, efficiency stops being an ongoing struggle and becomes how your business operates every day.

Deputy provides workforce management tools built specifically for shift-based businesses across hospitality, retail, healthcare, and other industries. The platform brings together rostering, time tracking, team communication, compliance, and analytics in one place. Businesses using Deputy report up to 50% reduction in time spent rostering, saving significant hours weekly on admin work.

**Ready to save hours each week and cut unnecessary labour costs without burning out your team? Book a free demo or start your free trial today to see how Deputy can help your business run more efficiently.**

Book a demo

Start free trial