

Ascent Technology Optimizes Workforce Scheduling at Mohegan Sun

“It’s like magic. You get the system. You work with the business units to set up the rules. And once the knowledge engineering is done, the system just works like magic. If you tell the system that something has changed, it figures out exactly what to do and all 8,000 people get scheduled.”

Carol Pride
Senior Vice President
Chief Information Officer
Mohegan Sun



An 8,000 strong hourly workforce, almost weekly business disruptions, and a myriad of work rules made efficient scheduling difficult for this billion-dollar casino. Not anymore.

Think your scheduling issues are challenging? Then consider what managers at one of the mega resort casinos face whenever they schedule workers. At any given moment, they must decide which of the thousands of employees on the payroll must show up in a business that operates non-stop 24/7, 365 days a year. Too few employees means money left on the table, a poor customer experience, and potential business lost to competitors. Too many employees needlessly increases labor costs, potentially wasting several million dollars a year in a large casino.

Managers must select from a multitude of skill sets so that just the right numbers fill the right positions while also complying with a multitude of work rules. Those cover everything from how many days people can work (or take off) in a row — to how many days they can work in high tipping locations (like gourmet dining) — to which departments they can work in. Work assignments come in an even greater variety covering hotel, retail, golf, theater, food and beverage, arena, spa, and numerous other venues. That’s in addition, of course, to countless table games, which themselves call for a variety of different skills as well as gaming commission certifications.

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Mohegan Sun, in Uncasville, CT, is one of the five largest Indian casinos in the United States, with approximately 10,000 employees and annual revenues in excess of \$1 billion. It features three casinos; a 34-story 1,000-room hotel; a 20,000 square-foot spa; 130,000 square feet of retail space; more than 40 restaurant, food, and beverage venues; the 10,000-seat Arena, the 350-seat Cabaret Theatre, and the 300-seat Wolf Den entertainment venues; more than 100,000 square feet of meeting and function space; and a golf course.

Meanwhile, the situations for which managers must schedule are constantly in motion. Some employees want to swap shifts with other employees. Others request time off. And still others call in sick or can't get to work because of weather or other reasons. Other disruptions occur on an almost weekly basis, such as sold-out concerts by music superstars. These can dramatically increase the number of patrons throughout the entire facility over and above a typical day.

Needed: Robust Scheduling Power

Such were the challenges facing Mohegan Sun, a \$1 billion enterprise owned by the Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut. To make matters worse, the casino's existing scheduling software lacked so much functionality that some departments didn't even use it, including table games and food and beverage, which have more complex scheduling needs. As a result, those departments, along with many that did use the software, relied on spreadsheets to schedule the casino's 8,000 workers.

"It was an incredibly labor-intensive ordeal that required hundreds of hours of manual schedule management every week," says Carol Pride, Mohegan Sun's Senior Vice President and Chief Information Officer. "The process was full of errors, with spreadsheets often reaching their maximum capacity. Yes, we actually reached the limit of Excel."

One particular software issue that really affected employee morale, Carol says, was helping employees swap shifts or request time off. "There just wasn't enough flexibility. Employees had to make their requests far in advance. Often they were denied simply because the people doing the scheduling couldn't deal with it." The result, she says, was more frustrated employees and greater absenteeism, which in turn meant managers often overstaffed just in case workers failed to appear.

Solutions that only work department-by-department also have another downside, she says. "If you can't view the enterprise as a whole, then you can't optimize the enterprise as a whole — meaning that some departments might run less efficiently than they could, given the availability of resources elsewhere."

Ascent Technology Responds

By late 2009, Mohegan Sun had had enough. After an extensive review of scheduling solutions, conducted over several months, the casino selected the Ascent WorkZone® workforce management system to create and manage the schedules for all departments over all shifts. "Ascent offered the most potential to address our scheduling challenges," states Ken Diaz, Mohegan Sun's Process Manager for Labor & Productivity. "For example, where shift trades were previously performed manually and required employees to submit paperwork in person, Ascent provided a means for employees to request shift trades both on site and off via the web."

What Ascent Technology Did

Provided an intelligent rule-based automated system to schedule 8,000 hourly employees for all shifts and all departments that:

- Achieves much more efficient staffing with far lower absenteeism
 - Dramatically reduces costs and labor involved in scheduling
 - Gives managers much greater flexibility to assign employees
 - Gives employees much greater flexibility to trade and give away shifts
 - Integrates with HR, payroll, and time and attendance systems
 - Takes into account factors like worker qualifications, seniority, number of days worked in a particular role or location, and number of consecutive days off
 - Easily handles schedule disruptions such as from snowstorms, holiday celebrations, and sold-out superstar concerts
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Workers are happier, he says, because they have more control of their schedules and having happier employees leads to higher productivity and happier, more loyal, customers.

The Ascent WorkZone® workforce management system plans schedules in advance as well as manages and administers schedules in the near term and on the day of operations. It automates workers' work, work-trade, and leave requests; ensures best use of full-time, part-time, shared, and on-call labor; and adjusts work schedules to handle changes in demand due to unforeseen events. The system ensures the entire facility is staffed at optimal levels.

"The system is easy to connect to third-party systems," Ken notes. "Ascent's integration competence is impressive. They had no trouble interfacing the Ascent system to our time and attendance software."

Carol cites other benefits from the new software: "First, there has been substantial cost savings as a result of the marked reduction in manual labor required for scheduling. Second, there's been a reduction in paper costs as time-off requests and approvals are now handled in a paperless manner. And third, and probably most important of all, there has been an improved patron experience resulting from optimized scheduling casino-wide with improved employee coverage."

As for unscheduled downtime of the Ascent software itself, Carol says there hasn't been any. "Reliability has been outstanding, with no unplanned outages since the system went live more than a year ago. This is what we expected given Ascent's 25 years of experience delivering mission-critical systems."

Carol also praises Ascent's performance as a company: "Ascent has provided exceptional support and resolved most issues, where they have occurred, within 24 hours. They have done an excellent job at anticipating our business needs and providing system enhancements to address those needs. As one of Mohegan Sun's 'premier application' providers, Ascent has proven to be one of our top vendors and we look forward to a continued business relationship."

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