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After the Localism Bill, councils do not have to 'sack to save'

11 April 2011

A local authority with 1,000 staff can save over £1m a year just by managing their staff better. In particular they need to tackle absence, time theft and fraud, and effective staff deployment, writes Neville Henderson



Since the government published its local council funding cuts, not a day has passed without a newspaper story about the desperate measures councils are taking in response.

While drastic job losses and reduced services have a great symbolic value, councils do not have to 'sack to save'. Rather than even touching people's jobs and service provision, councils first – and finally – need to address some of the inefficiencies that have plagued them for years.

The saying that people are an organisation's biggest asset rings particularly true for councils whose workforces easily equal those of a large private sector companies. With thousands, if not tens of thousands, of employees, they can save hundreds of thousands of pounds just by managing their staff better.

There are three major issues to consider in this context: the huge problem of absence, time theft and fraud, and effective staff deployment.

Research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that in 2009 the public sector average for sickness-related absence was nearly 10 days, while in the private sector it was 6.4 days. The Yorkshire Post reported last year that Doncaster Council staff took an average of nearly 13 sick days per employee, costing the authority more than £10m.

Adding to this is the issue of time abuse, such as arriving late and leaving early, and 'rounding up' one's working time when reporting.

Councils are often helplessly exposed to such practices. In spite of being major employers in their regions, many do not have appropriate systems in place to monitor employees' time, attendance and activities, creating a critical blind spot.

If working time is even being tracked, the prevalent means of recording time is either on paper or in spreadsheets, relying on people's honesty when reporting. Often the depth of information that is recorded is superficial. According to an article in the Leicester Mercury, Leicestershire County Council found that sickness return forms were not filled in properly. As a result, the authority had little to go on when it wanted to analyse why employees took an average of nearly nine sick days a year each.

While the CIPD observed that organisations – public and private – are taking a more proactive stance to absence management, it also noted that the public sector in particular had to crack down on absences in the light of imminent budget cuts.

While absence is a serious issue that local government has to get under control in order to make personnel-related savings, the saving grace for many endangered

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council services will be the ability to deploy staff more effectively.

Community care services are a case in point. Councils often have little visibility of a community carer's activities, whether it is their own staff or a contractor. The lack of adequate time and activity tracking exposes councils to a high risk of costs spinning out of control due to inefficiencies and abuse.

Having in place stringent time and activity monitoring, ideally in real-time, will reduce this risk while also enabling the council to make better use of available staff resource. If community carers have completed their round early, they can be allocated additional jobs – rather than spending idle time in the office or finishing early.

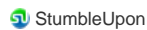
There is evidence from the private sector that by implementing a comprehensive workforce management system, an organisation employing 1,000 staff can save over one million pounds annually. Needless to say that for a large council with 10,000 or more staff, the savings can be even greater. Considering that an average 15 per cent savings can be made in staff-related costs alone, this would go a long way to achieving the 20-30 per cent target imposed on local government by the recent cuts.

These savings come from a range of improvements. With automated systems for time recording and monitoring, public sector organisations can crack down on absenteeism and combat time abuse at the root. With greater visibility of people's movements and workloads, it becomes easier to create effective schedules and rosters that maximise every employee's available time.

In addition to raising productivity, the workforce intelligence collected within the system can assist with better planning, plugging skills gaps and aligning the workforce with changing demand patterns. This means that councils can be more prepared for rapid increases in demand for their services, for example when extra manpower is needed at the drop of a hat to staff emergency hotlines, gritting vehicles or road repair teams.

Let's be clear: workforce management is not a panacea. The age of austerity will still lead to jobs and services being cut. But by allowing councils to work smarter, these systems can soften the blow inflicted upon local government considerably.

Neville Henderson is principal consultant at Pasfield-Curran, the consultancy arm of Crown Computing. Further information at www.pasfieldcurran.com and www.crowncomputing.co.uk.



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publicservice.co.uk Ltd, Ebenezer House, Ryecroft, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire ST5 2UB
Tel: +44 (0)1782 630200, Fax: +44 (0)1782 740066, www.publicservice.co.uk
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