



white paper

## Managing Incidental Worked Time



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Incidental worked time (IWT) refers to additional time a staff member is on the clock before or after the start or end of their original shift or during a scheduled meal break. Most often associated with employees paid on an hourly basis, IWT occurs as a result of unplanned circumstances. Generally, in nursing, diagnostics or therapies, there is sound clinical justification for 40 percent of incidental worked time. The remaining 60 percent, however, represents a tremendous savings opportunity.



Avantas research has projected that the average department / unit has an annual savings opportunity of \$28,000 per year tied to IWT. For example, a single med-surg or critical care Nursing unit would each have this opportunity. For a 300-bed hospital with 20 Nursing units, this would mean a \$560,000 savings.

This white paper walks through the various causes of IWT and provides solutions to reduce it.

## Cause

There are many employee action types that lead to IWT, including:

- **Unscheduled** – arriving for a complete shift that has not been scheduled
- **Early Arrival** – clocking-in before the start of a scheduled shift, unless requested by a leader
- **Missed Lunch** – remaining on duty through a planned meal break
- **Late Departure** – remaining on duty after the end of a scheduled shift, unless requested by a leader

## Goals

Since many legitimate and unpreventable circumstances create a need for IWT, most organizations have a reasonable tolerance level. This is especially true for time tied to providing safe patient care or finalizing critical operational processes at the change of shift. IWT goals are often associated with the opportunity to identify and eliminate preventable and / or repetitive circumstances. Avantas suggests arranging the leadership response according to the category under which these circumstances fall:

**Unpreventable:** Single incidents frequently represent unpreventable situational circumstances, often with a clinical cause, and require little or no leadership action. When aggregated these unavoidable instances can represent up to 40% of all incidental worked time.

**Preventable:** On the other hand, repetitive incidents are entirely avoidable and therefore necessitate immediate leadership intervention.

## Types of Employee Actions

### Unscheduled

Preventable – An employee arriving for an unscheduled shift, unless by request from a leader, while likely an unusual circumstance, is entirely preventable and especially worrisome in the instances where it is repetitive. Since it seriously impacts the workforce plan and labor budget, an urgent leadership intervention is required to immediately reduce the number of staff members working within the department for that shift. To prevent understaffing on an upcoming shift, the disparity between the actual schedule and the individual's understanding of their schedule must also be corrected.

### Early Arrival

Preventable – Arriving early for the shift, unless by request from the leader, is a habit among those who take the responsibility to be reliable very seriously. While the attribute is admirable, this tendency can have a highly negative impact on the labor budget as well as creating a disruption to the planned workflow of the outgoing team. A leadership intervention is required to reset the expectation associated with punch-in time.

### Missed Lunch

Unpreventable – Critical clinical, operational, and business needs may occur at a moment's notice. During such events it may be impossible to relieve an employee so they can take their scheduled meal break.

Preventable – Employees deserve and need meal breaks. Leaders are responsible to examine incident rates by individual employees or departments and take corrective actions when incident levels exceed the tolerance level (see the Opportunity section on the following page).

### Late Departure

Unpreventable – Just as for missed lunches, critical clinical, operational, and business needs may prevent an employee from departing according to their schedule.

Preventable – Leaders are responsible to examine incident rates by individual employees or departments and take corrective actions when incident rates exceed the tolerance level (see the Opportunity section on the following page).

## Opportunity

### Process

Examining workflow to expedite smooth shift-to-shift transitions is one extremely effective method for eliminating preventable IWT. Identifying teams achieving consistently low IWT may offer “best practice” workflow and process improvement opportunities for similarly-situated departments.

### Employee

Employee incidence rates exceeding tolerance levels are preventable and most effectively managed initially through a leadership intervention to reset expectations. Secondary intervention may require a study of time management habits and / or partnering individuals with colleagues whose time management skills are exceptional. Final steps typically involve formal improvement planning co-managed with the organization’s HR department.

## Impact

### Productivity

If your organization has not segmented a portion of the labor budget to accommodate IWT, all incidences will unfavorably impact the department’s productivity outcomes. As your department gains a better understanding of its IWT utilization, you may wish to account for it within the annual budgeting process by setting aside a portion of your labor budget as may be your practice for other types of work time such as education, meetings, and advanced acuties.

### Morale

Employee satisfaction is clearly affected by scheduling incidences related to the opportunity to take an uninterrupted meal break or leave work at the expected time. Additional work stress is created when various team members are treated differently, as is the case when IWT practices are not uniformly administered.

## About Avantas

Developers of the HELM® methodology (healthcare enterprise labor management), Avantas helps healthcare providers better manage their workforce. Its proprietary approach to managing labor consists of consulting services and a scheduling and productivity solution, Smart Square®. This comprehensive approach provides its clients with tailored best practice labor management strategies designed to drive substantial and sustaining cost and quality improvements across the enterprise through automation.



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