

Case Study: Heavy Industry





Emirates Aluminium

New shift patterns prioritise work-life balance for Emirates Aluminium employees

“Working Time Solutions were very professional in their approach and provided us with a structure and methodology that enabled us to assess our shift patterns for optimal performance and work-life balance amongst our workforce. We were keen to ensure that our working patterns supported our efforts to recruit and retain the people we need to run our business”.

Dr Mohamed Salem, Deputy VP HR at EMAL.

Executive Summary

In its sustained drive for continuous improvements, Emirates Aluminium (EMAL), based in Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), conducted in 2013 in collaboration with Working Time Solutions (WTS), an important project to re-examine its shift patterns with the aim to improve the work-life balance of its employees. The successful results of the exercise led to the introduction of new shifts which greatly improved the satisfaction of the company employees. The newly introduced shift-patterns resulted in an increase of staff retention with a significant decrease in absenteeism. The work conducted with WTS involved a review of the existing shift patterns in close collaboration with the Operations division and its employees. The project examined all possible options to ensure that the patterns proposed were fit for the purpose, taking into account impact on productivity, health and safety.

Profile: Emirates Aluminium

EMAL is one of the world’s largest single-site aluminium smelters producing 750,000 tonnes of aluminium per annum. It is a new global player in the aluminium industry, with a sister site, Dubai Aluminium (DUBAL) based on the outskirts of Dubai.

EMAL has invested heavily in new, modern equipment with varying levels of automation, and additional large scale expansion continues. Despite this, the Smelter Operations division still have some of the most physically demanding jobs in industry today. There is extensive manual work involved in all aspects of production, and the majority of employees are exposed to heat generating equipment with the residual heat related to molten aluminium. The nature of the work, compounded with incredibly hot and humid summers, results in challenging working conditions.

Furthermore, the UAE are experiencing a period of massive industrial growth and EMAL has a challenging task to retain its employees considered by the competition, as a result of their solid training and technical skills, a perfect pool for poaching by the neighbouring employers.

Therefore, to sustain its engagement towards the well-being of its employees, EMAL decided to undergo a review of their current shift patterns and develop alternative working patterns with an aim of increasing the commitment of its staff and ensuring their retention in front of an aggressive competition. EMAL wanted to ensure that, as far as possible, the new working patterns would have a positive impact on well-being, safety and productivity.

Work-life balance and meeting employee aspirations

EMAL has achieved, in less than six years of operation, a rate of twenty percent in Emiratisation, which is considered as a clear achievement. EMAL's workforce is made up of a combination of Emirati Nationals and expatriate employees from different national origins. Each group has specific domestic, social, cultural, expectations and requirements. For example, Emirati nationals generally prefer to spread their annual leave throughout the year and have weekends off to spend with their families. Furthermore, it is not unusual for Emirati nationals to commute for one to three hours from home to their workplace, meaning travel time must be taken into account when scheduling working patterns. The average travel time of an EMAL employee is one and quarter hours each way. By comparison, the majority of expatriate employees prefer to take all of their annual leave within one period to give them a long stretch of time off to return to their home country. A large majority of expatriates live in accommodation within a short distance of EMAL, therefore, do not need to allow for a long travel time.

EMAL decided to seek some expert advice and turned to Working Time Solutions (WTS) for auditing and designing new working patterns that would meet employee aspirations and improve work-life balance. ***“WTS delivered practical and non-academic work based on a proven method and structure, which was very different from some of the other consulting companies in the market”*** says Dr Salem.

Analysing the previous working arrangements

Under some of the previous working arrangements, demand was met, with, however, a need to re-examine the issue of work-life balance. Many employees, especially UAE Nationals, rarely enjoyed complete scheduled weekends off, and there was a lack of effective rest days between runs of shifts.

Employees had commented that 'it's important to get Fridays and Saturdays off for social events, sporting events and family occasions' and that 'rest facilities have been provided, but why would we want to sleep at work...we just want to get home'.

The consultants from WTS evaluated current working arrangements, including scheduled shift patterns and overtime. Labour demand and supply characteristics were clarified to ensure that any new working patterns would meet business demand. An in-depth review of historical attrition, absence, and overtime data was completed to identify trends.

Developing new shift patterns

EMAL wanted to ensure the best possible shift patterns were worked across the site that met business demand, operational constraints, terms and conditions, regulatory requirements and maximised work-life balance for employees to best ensure retention. Using its WORK Suite scheduling software, WTS consultants reviewed the existing patterns and devised multiple 8 and 12

hour shift pattern alternatives. The project team fully evaluated and considered the relative ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ of each option, considering the possible effects of risk and fatigue for each. Dr Salem commented that **“Working Time Solutions’ software applications allowed us to consider many different options and to work with our staff to assess those patterns that best suited the nature of the work and the workplace”**.

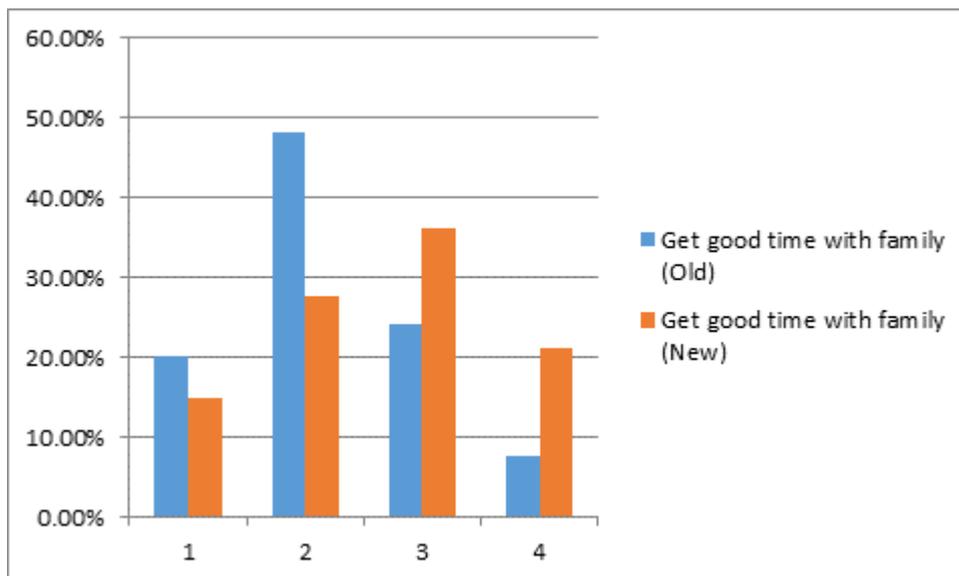
An important element of the reform process for EMAL was the need to improve staff satisfaction and motivation. Employee involvement and engagement in the process of selecting new working patterns has a positive impact on well-being. The workforce were provided with a number of different shift pattern options for their consideration and had influence in the final design of the roster patterns adopted.

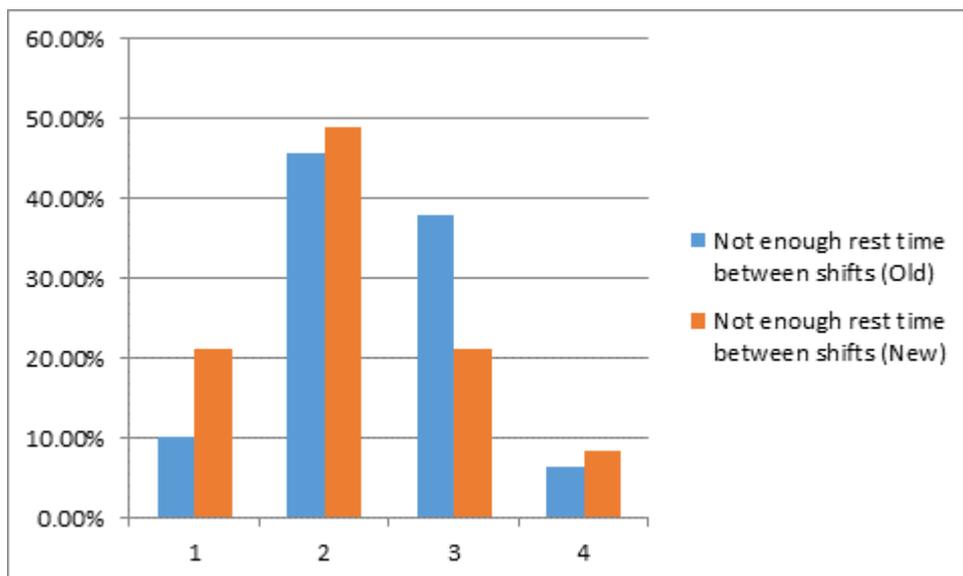
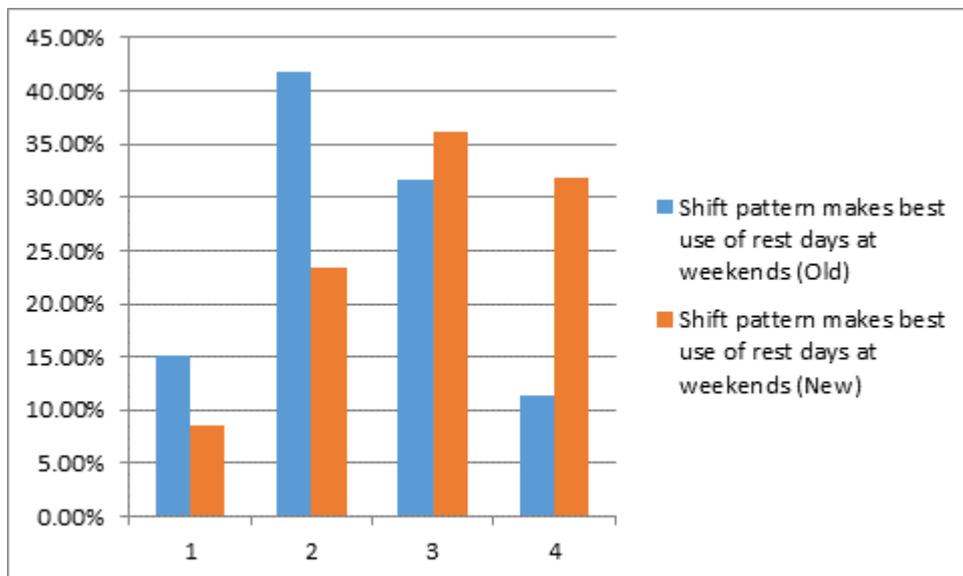
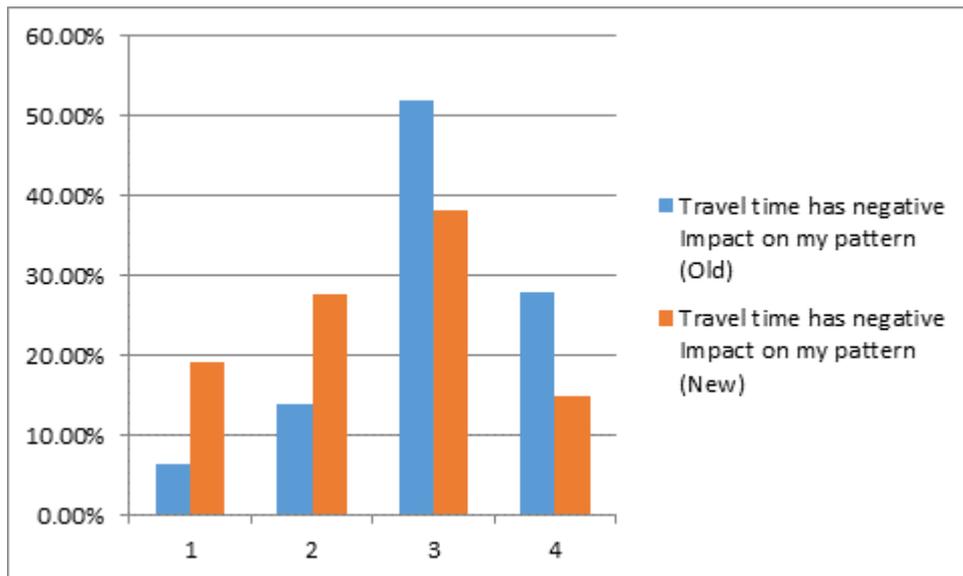
Engaging with the workforce and Employee Survey

Constant and regular communications, using a variety of methods ensured the workforce were fully and accurately informed. This included group meetings, one-to-ones and bespoke employee survey sheets were created to evaluate the pre and post-trial situations.

The below graphs provide a summary of results from the employee surveys and demonstrate how and where new working patterns have dramatically improved employees’ work-life balance in a number of ways. For example, when employees were asked whether their shift pattern makes best use of rest days at weekends, when working the previous shift pattern, 11% of employees strongly agreed with this statement whereas when working the new shift pattern, 32% of employees strongly agreed with this statement.

- 1 = strongly disagree
- 2 = disagree
- 3 = agree
- 4 = strongly agree





The new working arrangements

After a pilot period across the hottest part of the year (to ensure a thorough stress test) new shift patterns were agreed for introduction across three departments with others agreeing to retain current patterns as they were confirmed as the best options. Dr Salem commented that **“for some the decision was to remain on their existing patterns and for others there was a decision to change; for EMAL there was the knowledge that all possible options had been considered and presented to the workforce in a transparent and engaging way”**.

Measuring the impact

The project has been a great success both from a business and staff point of view. Where new working patterns have been implemented, employees benefit from an improved work-life balance. The new shift patterns include a greater number of complete scheduled weekends off and more useable ‘white space’ (time off between runs of shifts).

Furthermore, site management are confidently predicting increased productivity levels, improved staff retention leading to reduced recruitment and training costs and lower levels of absence. Management at EMAL are also predicting local ‘employer of choice’ status due to the dramatically improved work-life balance of employees and an increase in the percentage of ‘UAE nationals’ employed.