

When the Day Has No End Time: Schedule Unpredictability, Withdrawal, and Turnover in Volume- Driven Distribution Work

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In volume-driven distribution work, the length of a shift is set by customer orders and by how many workers arrive, so employees often do not know when their day will end. This conceptual paper argues that the resulting uncertainty, rather than long hours alone, can set off a self-reinforcing cycle of early departures, next-day absence, and longer days for those who remain. Drawing on conservation of resources theory, it treats that cycle as a resource-loss spiral, and it takes a social-psychological perspective in which withdrawal is shaped by crew norms, perceived fairness, and newcomers' conformity to the norms they encounter. The argument draws on a participant-observer account from a regional distribution center and on published research in labor economics, occupational health, and organizational psychology. In the author's records from that facility, roughly 70 percent of the order selectors hired during the year had left by mid-October, and every new hire worked a schedule without consecutive rest days. A descriptive check of the author's records of daily hours found that early departures were about two and a half times as frequent per shift on long days as on short days, a pattern that held with Sundays excluded and was clearest in the dry section. In models accounting for repeated observations of the same workers, long days were also associated with higher odds of next-day absence and lower individual picking rates, but there was little evidence that departures cluster beyond what day length predicts. The records cannot yet separate the effect of an unpredictable day from the effect of a long one.

Five bodies of evidence are reviewed: the relationship of long working hours to output, injury risk, recovery, and work-family conflict; work and schedule unpredictability as a stressor distinct from workload; the social transmission of absence through team norms; organizational justice; and role stressors. The paper integrates these findings into a model of an uncertainty-withdrawal spiral, states testable propositions, weighs rival explanations, and identifies factors the literature suggests may dampen the cycle, including schedule design. Because most of the reviewed evidence comes from retail, manufacturing, hospitality, and office settings, the model is offered as a framework for research in distribution operations rather than as an established finding there.

Keywords: schedule unpredictability, absenteeism, absence contagion, organizational justice, role ambiguity, warehouse work, overtime, turnover, recovery, conservation of resources, presenteeism, social norms, equity

Much of the research on unpredictable work schedules concerns retail and food service, where employers adjust staffing to forecast customer traffic. Distribution centers face a related but distinct problem. Their daily workload is fixed by orders received before the shift, but the time needed to complete it depends on how many workers are present, and attendance itself responds to the expected length of the day. This paper examines how that interaction can produce long, unpredictable shifts and cascading absence.

The setting is a regional distribution center in the United States, observed by the author in his role as the facility's warehouse trainer. Order selectors there build pallets from customer orders and work to engineered productivity

standards, a common practice in the industry. Daily volume varies widely with customer demand and can roughly double from one day to the next. A projected day length is posted at the start of each shift, but actual shifts frequently diverge from it. A posted ten-hour day may end after eight hours or after fourteen.

The episode that prompted this paper occurred over several consecutive days. On a Sunday, the scheduled crew of selectors numbered in the thirties. As workers learned the day would be long, some used sick or vacation time to leave early, and others followed. By the end of the shift, 16 selectors remained, and work continued until about midnight. The author worked approximately 15 hours; most

remaining workers worked 13 to 14. Next-day call-outs were elevated, and the following two days ran about 12 hours each, with supervisors picking orders to cover the gap. The facility then designated Sundays as blackout days on which time off could not be taken.

Two further observations shaped the analysis. First, the author maintains a performance display that projects the shape of the day as sections progress. Workers who saw a long day ahead appeared to disengage, while those who saw an approaching finish appeared to speed up. Second, departures seemed to spread socially: workers who saw colleagues leave were more likely to leave themselves.

The Sunday was not an isolated event. Long days recurred over the following weeks, and supervisors again selected orders to cover open positions. By the author's count, at least eight workplace injuries occurred over roughly six weeks of this period. Several selectors have resigned in recent months, citing missed incentive pay and late hours as reasons, and others have said they are considering leaving. Complaints about lost family time are common. Experienced selectors have also declined supervisor positions, citing the hours and time away from their children.

Two features of the absence pattern bear on the analysis. First, in the author's observation, early departures and call-outs on long days were concentrated among a relatively small group of workers and were most likely when the displayed volume for the day was high. Second, departures sometimes followed directly from other departures. One selector explained that he left because the coworker working near him had left and he did not want to work alone in the cooler.

The author's own records, kept since about April, indicate the scale of the problem. The selector crew is budgeted at about 55 positions, but on a typical day 40 to 44 selectors are present, and on Sundays and Tuesdays about 30. Over roughly six and a half months, about 34 selectors left: roughly two-thirds were terminated and one-third quit. That is equivalent to about 60 percent of budgeted positions in half a year. The author's understanding is that most terminations followed accumulated attendance points, which means absence is not only a daily staffing problem but the main route by which workers leave. The smaller loader crew lost three workers over a similar period.

For comparison, total monthly separations in the broader transportation, warehousing, and utilities sector ranged from about 3.6 to 4.7 percent of employment between October 2025 and January 2026 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2026). About 34 departures from about 55 budgeted positions over six and a half months is roughly 9.5 percent a month, more than twice that range. The comparison is loose. The sector figure covers all occupations and employers, while the facility figure covers one physically

demanding job that was staffed this year largely by new hires.

Staffing and workload are also mismatched by day. In recent weeks, Sunday volume fell in the middle of the weekly range, so the day with the fewest workers did not have the least work. In the author's records from July to mid-October, Sunday crews also picked more slowly than any other day's, at about 141 cases per labor hour against 151 to 176 on weekdays, which is consistent with their heavier reliance on the newest workers, and the median Sunday ran about 10.4 hours, the longest of the week. On the Sunday described above, about 16 selectors completed a volume for which a crew roughly twice that size had been scheduled. Losing high-output selectors deepens the shortfall: when a selector who regularly produces the work of two or more people leaves, headcount drops by one while capacity drops by more. At the crews' average picking rate, the week's volume would require about 47 selectors working eight-hour days, against roughly 40 scheduled.

Work schedules compound the mismatch. Selectors work one of three schedules. Of the 38 selectors who worked in mid-October, about 15 worked Sunday through Thursday, about 11 worked Monday through Friday, and about 12 worked a split schedule. Workers hired this year are on the split schedule: they work Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, with Tuesday and Saturday off, so their two rest days are never consecutive. Many workers dislike this schedule and say it does not leave enough time to recover. It also shapes who works on the hardest days. Because Monday-through-Friday workers are off on Sunday, the Sunday crew draws only on the Sunday-through-Thursday group and the split-schedule group, which consists entirely of this year's hires. The day with the fewest workers therefore relies most heavily on the newest workers, who also have the least opportunity to recover between shifts. According to the author's records, most of the roughly 34 selector departures during the period came from the split-schedule group. Of the roughly 42 selectors hired this year, about 29, or roughly 70 percent, had left by mid-October, and most of those still employed had been hired within the previous two months. At least six departures came from workers on standard schedules, and their exits had varied causes, including attendance points, a conduct issue, and resignations. The concentration among split-schedule workers cannot by itself separate the effect of the schedule from the effect of being new, because at this facility the two overlap completely: every new hire is on the split schedule, and every split-schedule worker is a new hire. Early departures may reflect the schedule, the demands of a selector's first months, or both.

These observations are informal and unsystematic, recorded by a participant in the events described. They are used here to motivate questions, not as evidence. The

sections that follow ask what published research says about each element of the episode, and whether that research supports a coherent explanation.

The author's position bears on these observations in a specific way. As the facility's trainer, he built and maintains the performance display described above, so the information workers receive about the shape of their day is partly his own work. His observations of how workers respond to that display are therefore observations of an environment he helped create. He also trains most new selectors, which gives him close knowledge of the newest workers and less of others. These features are stated so that readers can weigh the account accordingly.

The review that follows is narrative rather than systematic. Studies were chosen because they speak to a specific link in the episode, with preference for meta-analyses, field experiments, and large or longitudinal samples. Each is described with its sample and design so readers can judge how far its findings travel, and the review does not claim to cover every relevant study.

The paper approaches the problem as a social psychologist. Long hours, fatigue, and injury risk are treated as the conditions under which withdrawal occurs, and the evidence on them is drawn from occupational health and labor economics. The processes of central interest are social: how coworkers' behavior shapes what counts as acceptable absence, how workers judge the fairness of schedules and attendance rules, and how newcomers absorb the norms of the crews they join.

One theory organizes the review. Conservation of resources (COR) theory holds that people strive to obtain and protect resources such as time, energy, and a sense of control; that losing resources weighs more heavily than gaining them; and that people who have already lost resources are more vulnerable to further loss, so that losses tend to cascade into loss spirals (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). COR theory also predicts that people whose resources are threatened act to protect what remains, and withdrawing from work is one such act. Each body of evidence reviewed below describes a way that long, unpredictable days drain a resource: recovery time, control over the day, family time, perceived fairness, or role clarity. The integrative model below treats the resulting cycle as a loss spiral in this sense.

Long Hours: Output, Injury, and Family Time

The relationship between hours worked and output is nonlinear. Pencavel (2015) analyzed records of British munition workers, most of them women, collected during the First World War. Weekly output tended to be proportional to weekly hours up to about 48 hours; beyond that, output rose at a decreasing rate. The shape of the

relationship varied across workers and types of work. Records of hourly output within a shift showed a similar pattern on a smaller scale: the output added in each hour rose over the first few hours of work and then declined. Because the data are a century old, they are best read as evidence about the shape of the relationship rather than about any specific modern threshold.

Shepard and Clifton (2000) examined the same question with panel data for 18 U.S. manufacturing industries from 1956 to 1991. In their main estimates, more overtime was associated with lower output per worker hour in all but two of the 18 industries, and in most industries a 10 percent increase in overtime corresponded to a 2 to 4 percent decline in productivity. The size of the effect varied widely across industries, and some alternative specifications found significant effects in fewer of them. Because the data are industry aggregates, they describe a pattern across industries rather than the output of individual workers.

Long hours also carry a safety cost. Dembe et al. (2005) analyzed the work histories of 10,793 U.S. workers in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth from 1987 to 2000, when participants were in their twenties to early forties. After adjusting for age, gender, occupation, industry, and region, jobs with overtime schedules had a 61 percent higher injury hazard rate than jobs without overtime. Working at least 12 hours per day was associated with a 37 percent higher hazard rate, and working at least 60 hours per week with a 23 percent higher rate. Injury risk rose steadily with hours, and the authors concluded that the pattern was not explained by long hours being concentrated in hazardous industries or occupations.

Who works the long days also matters for safety. In Ontario workers' compensation data, Breslin and Smith (2006) found that injury claim rates fell as workers accumulated time in their jobs, at every age, and that workers in their first month had several times the lost-time claim rate of those with more than a year of tenure. Where the newest workers are concentrated on the most understaffed days, the risks of long hours and of inexperience fall on the same people.

How days off are arranged may matter as well as how many hours are worked. Van de Ven et al. (2021) followed 223 Dutch shift workers in mostly physically demanding jobs for up to eight weeks, linking 6,195 daily fatigue ratings to their rosters. Compared with a day shift, fatigue was higher on the first day off after a workday and lower on the second and later consecutive days off. The authors suggest that workers recover from accumulated fatigue on their second day off. On this evidence, a schedule whose rest days are never consecutive would rarely reach that point. The study measured self-reported fatigue rather than injuries, attendance, or turnover, and its participants worked in entertainment and hospitality rather than warehousing.

The interval between shifts matters as well. Vedaa et al. (2016) systematically reviewed research on quick returns, intervals of less than 11 hours between the end of one shift and the start of the next, in rotating shift work, and found them associated with shorter sleep and greater sleepiness and fatigue. A shift expected to end in the evening that instead runs until midnight, followed by a normal start the next morning, produces a quick return that no one planned. The reviewed studies concern planned rosters, largely in health care, so applying them to unplanned overruns is an extension.

Long hours also reach into workers' lives outside work, and that conflict is consistently linked to the intention to leave. Three research syntheses agree on the direction. When work interfered with family life, the average correlation with turnover intention was .29 in Allen et al. (2000), .21 across 24 samples in Amstad et al. (2011), and .32 across 90 samples in Li et al. (2025). Li et al. also report a larger correlation (.45) for overall work-family conflict, but that estimate rests on only 17 samples and has a wide confidence interval. Two qualifications matter here. Most of these studies measured intention to leave rather than actual departures. And work-family conflict showed essentially no relationship with absenteeism: $r = .03$ across five samples in Amstad et al. and $-.02$ across two studies in Allen et al. This literature therefore supports the paper's turnover concern more than its call-out concern.

For a distribution center, the implication is that a short-staffed day lengthens by more than the staffing shortfall alone would predict. The remaining workers are asked to cover more volume while working further along the declining portion of the hours-output curve. This is an inference from the output studies above, not a measured result in warehouse settings, and it is stated as such in the integrative model below. The same long days may also raise injury risk and, through conflict with family life, the likelihood that workers leave.

One feature of the setting should be stated plainly, because whether extra hours are chosen or required plausibly changes their effect. At the observed facility, selectors are required to stay until their section's work is complete, so additional hours on a long day are mandatory, although workers may use sick or vacation time to leave. Many of the studies above do not distinguish chosen from required overtime. The model below assumes that required, open-ended overtime is the more harmful kind, an assumption that should itself be tested.

Unpredictability as a Distinct Stressor

Several lines of research treat unpredictability as harmful in its own right, separate from how much a person works. Schoellbauer et al. (2022) offered three theoretical

reasons, which the study did not test separately: unpredictability can be experienced as a lack of control, as a lack of confidence in mastering the day, and as an added burden of planning and self-regulation. In a diary study of 105 German-speaking employees in knowledge-intensive jobs, with 666 daily observations over two work weeks, days with more work unpredictability brought higher strain after work, which in turn predicted lower serenity in the evening. The relationship held when time pressure was controlled. Two limits apply here. The study measured unpredictability in the content of the workday, such as tasks, methods, and time requirements, rather than in the length of the shift. Its sample also excluded physical work, so applying it to warehouse shifts is an extension.

Evidence from hourly work points the same way. Henly and Lambert (2014) studied 112 hourly employees, all women, across 21 stores of a U.S. women's apparel retailer. Independent of other features of nonstandard hours, schedule unpredictability was associated with greater work-life conflict and perceived stress. Employee input into schedules was associated with lower conflict, but the authors found little evidence that input weakened the effect of unpredictability itself. Schneider and Harknett (2021) surveyed 37,263 hourly retail and food service workers recruited through targeted Facebook advertisements. Workers who received shorter advance notice, worked on-call shifts, experienced last-minute cancellations or timing changes, or had more volatile hours were more likely to report hunger, housing, medical, and utility hardships. Because the sample was not drawn at random, the authors caution that it may not represent the broader workforce.

The strongest causal evidence comes from a workplace experiment. Kesavan et al. (2022) ran a randomized field experiment in 28 Gap stores in the San Francisco and Chicago areas over nine months in 2015 and 2016. The intervention combined several practices designed to improve the consistency, predictability, and adequacy of schedules and employees' control over them. Store productivity rose 5.1 percent, the product of a 3.3 percent increase in sales and a 1.8 percent decrease in labor hours. The authors attributed the gain to improved store execution, with employees putting in additional effort and adhering more closely to the scheduled labor plan.

These studies address schedules set days or weeks ahead. The distribution setting adds a second layer. Some uncertainty about shift length is irreducible, because volume and attendance are not known in advance. But some is informational: the gap between a posted estimate and what actually happens. This paper distinguishes the two and argues that the informational component is the more tractable. That distinction is the author's, not a finding of the studies above.

Absence as a Socially Transmitted Behavior

Absence decisions are shaped by what coworkers do. Nicholson and Johns (1985) proposed that work groups and organizations develop an absence culture: shared beliefs and practices about how much absence is acceptable and under what conditions, which shape individual absence beyond personal circumstances. Later research has tested parts of that idea directly. Ten Brummelhuis et al. (2016) combined social learning theory and social exchange theory to explain why. In a vignette study of 299 U.S. employees recruited through an online panel, respondents were more likely to call in sick when coworkers were often absent, because they held more tolerant absence norms and more economic, rather than cooperative, exchange norms. Most respondents still chose to report for work. Of those who called in after reading that coworkers were often absent, 57.1 percent said they did so to get even with coworkers, and 40.5 percent said they needed a day to recover.

In the same article's second study, which surveyed 514 employees in 97 teams at 24 Dutch organizations, including a logistics center, employees were more likely to call in sick when their coworkers were often absent, and that likelihood was lower in teams with high cohesion and task interdependence. Two details qualify the result. Absence was self-reported for the previous three months. And among employees who did call in, high cohesion was unexpectedly associated with more days absent, not fewer.

Norm conformity also unfolds over time. Dello Russo et al. (2013) traced recorded absence from 2006 to 2009 for 744 white-collar employees at the headquarters of a large Italian company. Employees with more than three years of tenure showed flat absence trajectories, while those with three years or less gradually increased their absence to conform to the organization's dominant norm. More positive perceptions of top management were associated with a slower increase; more positive perceptions of coworkers, with a faster one. Perceptions of immediate supervisors were unrelated to the rate of change.

Two cautions apply. Both studies concern absence, not leaving partway through a shift, and the extension to same-day departures is the author's. Still, a departure in progress is a highly visible signal, so if norm-based imitation operates for absence, there is reason to expect it for departures as well. The second caution is practical. The Dello Russo et al. finding suggests that newer workers are the most likely to adopt whatever absence norm prevails, which matters in facilities with high turnover. That study, however, followed office employees in a single organization, so its application to warehouse crews is an extension.

Social psychology distinguishes two kinds of norms that bear on this extension. Descriptive norms convey what most people do; injunctive norms convey what most people

approve or disapprove of (Cialdini et al., 1990). Watching a coworker leave on a long day is a descriptive cue, but whether it changes behavior depends on whether leaving is also seen as acceptable within the crew. The distinction implies two routes by which withdrawal could spread. The first is immediate imitation within a shift, in which a visible departure prompts others to follow. The second is gradual drift in what a crew treats as normal, in which repeated departures over weeks shift the injunctive norm itself, especially among newcomers who are still learning what is expected. The trajectories reported by Dello Russo et al. (2013) are evidence of the second route rather than the first.

Fairness, Mandated Attendance, and Withdrawal

Organizational justice research grew out of social psychology's study of fairness in exchange. Equity theory proposed that people compare the ratio of what they contribute to what they receive with the same ratio for others, and act to restore balance when the comparison is unfavorable, including by reducing effort or withdrawing (Adams, 1965). Later work distinguished several kinds of fairness. Distributive justice concerns how outcomes and burdens are allocated; procedural justice, how decisions are made; and interpersonal and informational justice, how people are treated and whether decisions are explained. Colquitt et al. (2001), in a meta-analysis of 183 studies, found that these dimensions are related but each adds explained variance in fairness perceptions. Their relationships with outcomes differed. For withdrawal, a category that includes absenteeism and turnover, the strongest correlations were with distributive justice (corrected $r = -.50$) and procedural justice ($-.46$), followed by informational justice ($-.24$). Interpersonal justice was essentially unrelated to withdrawal ($-.02$).

Cohen-Charash and Spector (2001) meta-analyzed 190 samples totaling 64,757 participants. Counterproductive work behavior was related mainly to procedural justice. The original article also reported that job performance was related mainly to procedural justice, but a published erratum corrected this: in field studies, the relationship of procedural justice with performance was not much larger than that of distributive justice (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2002). Organizational commitment and trust were also related mainly to procedural justice, though substantially to the other types as well.

This literature bears on a common organizational response to absence on high-volume days: restricting time off on those days. No study reviewed here tests such a policy directly. Justice theory suggests, however, that its effect may depend less on the rule than on how it is made and explained. A restriction that workers see as imposed without explanation, or as placing the burden of uncertainty entirely

on them, would be expected to lower commitment and trust. One that comes with an explanation, some worker input, and a visibly shared burden may be received differently. The concern is sharper when absence is concentrated among a minority of workers, because a blanket restriction then places the cost on those who were already attending. In equity terms, their contributions rise while their outcomes do not. These are propositions for testing, not established effects.

A restriction on time off also has a likely side effect. Presenteeism, attending work while ill, is common, and Johns (2010) identifies strict attendance policies and job insecurity among its likely causes, alongside its costs to productivity and health. A points system that ends in termination, combined with days on which time off cannot be taken, gives an ill or injured worker strong reasons to come in anyway. In physically demanding work, that is a plausible route from attendance policy to injury, which links this section to the safety evidence on long hours reviewed above. The route has not been tested in warehouse settings.

Informational justice also connects this section to the research on unpredictability. An accurate, explained forecast of the day is itself a form of informational fairness. A posted estimate that is repeatedly wrong may be experienced not only as unpredictability but as a lapse in candor.

Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict

The most recent large synthesis of role stress research supports looking beyond workload. Sawhney et al. (2026) meta-analyzed 515 studies and 588 samples, with a combined N of 787,959. They examined three role stressors: role ambiguity (unclear expectations), role conflict (incompatible demands), and role overload (more work than can be done).

Role ambiguity was the leading driver of seven of the 14 outcomes examined. It accounted for over 80 percent of the explained variance in task performance and organizational citizenship behavior. Role conflict explained the most variance in outcomes including burnout and turnover intentions, and role overload contributed most to negative emotions and physical symptoms (Sawhney et al., 2026). One result tempers the use of this work here: together, the three stressors explained only 1.7 percent of the variance in absenteeism, the smallest share of any outcome studied, and no single stressor dominated it.

The episode described in the introduction involves at least two of these stressors. Not knowing when the day will end is a form of ambiguity about what the shift will demand. Supervisors pulled into order selecting while still responsible for supervision may face role conflict. The author has also observed experienced selectors declining supervisor positions because of the hours, which suggests

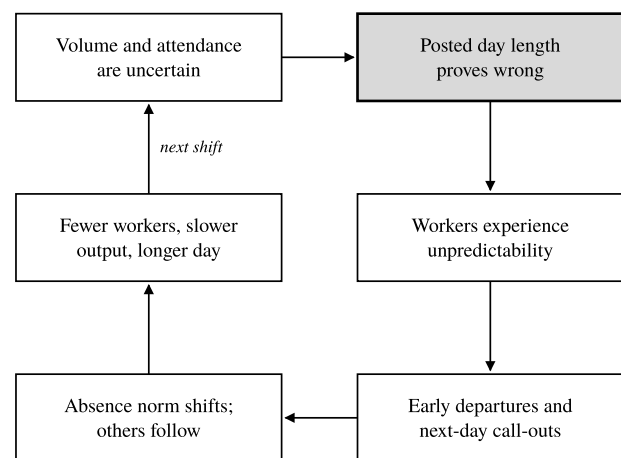
the schedule may affect the supervisory pipeline as well as the crews. None of these applications was measured. The meta-analysis describes ambiguity as uncertainty about goals, expectations, and how performance will be evaluated, so treating uncertainty about shift length as ambiguity is an extension of the construct.

An Integrative Model: The Uncertainty-Withdrawal Spiral

The findings above can be combined into a reinforcing loop, which in the terms of conservation of resources theory is a loss spiral (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Volume and attendance are uncertain, so the posted length of the day is often wrong. Workers experience this as unpredictability and ambiguity. Some withdraw, by leaving early or calling out the next day. Visible withdrawal shifts the team's absence norm, so others follow. Fewer workers must then cover the same volume at declining hourly output, the day runs longer still, and the loop repeats on the following shift.

Figure 1

The Uncertainty-Withdrawal Spiral



Note. Each stage feeds the next, and a long, short-staffed day makes the following shift's attendance less certain. The shaded stage marks the informational gap the paper treats as most tractable.

Each stage feeds the next, and a long, short-staffed day makes the following shift's attendance less certain, which restarts the loop.

The model yields five propositions, each traceable to the sections above:

1. The gap between a posted day-length estimate and actual shift length predicts early departures and next-day absence, beyond the effect of shift length itself.
2. Early departures by coworkers increase the likelihood of further departures on the same shift, as absence

imitation would predict.

3. Shift length increases disproportionately as staffing falls, because remaining workers operate at lower hourly output.
4. Team cohesion and task interdependence weaken the imitation effect in Proposition 2.
5. Procedural and informational justice in attendance policy and in shift forecasting weaken the link between unpredictability and withdrawal.

Propositions 1 through 3 describe the loop; Propositions 4 and 5 describe conditions that may dampen it. The model also implies two costs outside the loop: long, short-staffed shifts should be associated with higher injury rates, and with turnover through conflict between work and family life. Where attendance is enforced through a points system, the loop has a further path: absences accumulate into terminations, which reduce headcount and lengthen the days of those who remain. A blackout policy that raises the cost of a missed day could accelerate that path among workers already struggling to attend, a possibility that should be tested rather than assumed. Finally, where new hires are concentrated on schedules without consecutive rest days, and those schedules supply a large share of the weekend crew, the model predicts higher absence and turnover among new hires than among more senior workers on standard schedules. None has been formally tested in a distribution setting, to the author's knowledge; the following section offers preliminary descriptive checks of several of these links.

Placing the model in withdrawal and turnover research

The model treats early departure, absence, and quitting as related responses, which is how much of the withdrawal literature treats them. In a meta-analysis, Berry et al. (2012) found that lateness, absenteeism, and turnover were positively related to one another, which fits models in which these behaviors are linked expressions of withdrawal rather than independent events. The points system at the observed facility makes that link mechanical as well as psychological, because accumulated absences end in termination.

Turnover research adds two further points. First, the unfolding model holds that many departures begin with a shock, a distinct event that prompts a person to reconsider the job, rather than with slowly declining satisfaction (Hom et al., 2017; Lee & Mitchell, 1994). A 15-hour Sunday that ends at midnight is the kind of event the model describes. Second, turnover is commonly highest early in tenure, and realistic job previews, which tell recruits plainly what the job involves, reduce voluntary turnover mainly because recruits come to see the employer as honest (Earnest et al., 2011). That finding connects newcomer turnover to the informational-justice argument above: a recruit told

candidly that days are long and unpredictable may react differently from one who discovers it on the floor.

Rival explanations

Several explanations could produce the same observations without the mechanism proposed here, and a test of the model would need to rule them out.

The first is physical depletion. Long days are also heavy days: in the author's records, cases per selector present were higher on long days in every section (see the preliminary check below). Fatigue from volume, rather than uncertainty about the end of the day, would predict the same rise in early departures. Separating the two requires a measure of forecast error, which the author's records do not yet contain.

The second is newcomer status. Because every new hire at the facility is on the split schedule, the concentration of departures in that group could reflect the ordinary difficulty of a selector's first months, unrealistic expectations at hiring, or both, independent of schedule unpredictability.

The third is pay. Selectors who resigned cited missed incentive pay. If incentive earnings depend on meeting a rate standard, long days at declining hourly output could lower incentive pay even as hours rise, which would make leaving early an economically sensible response. How the incentive is calculated, and how long days affect it, should be documented before the model is tested.

The fourth is income targeting. In a study of New York City taxi drivers, Camerer et al. (1997) found that many drivers, especially inexperienced ones, worked fewer hours on high-wage days, consistent with quitting once a loose daily income target was reached. Hourly workers on a long day with overtime pay may reach such a target sooner, and a departure for that reason would reflect a decision about earnings rather than withdrawal.

The fifth is the physical environment. Most of the injuries the author recalls occurred among new hires in the freezer, and cold storage imposes demands that do not apply in the dry section. The section results do not, however, point to cold storage as the source of the pattern: the rise in early departures with day length was clearest in the dry section, and the cooler showed none (Table 1). Conditions across sections are still worth measuring directly, because the sections also differ in crew size, order mix, and who is assigned to them.

A Preliminary Check Against the Author's Records

The author's records include the hours each order selector worked on each day, the cases each selector picked, and the section in which the selector worked that day: dry, cooler, or freezer. The analysis covers sixteen weeks, from June 28 to October 16, 2026. These records allow a rough, descriptive check of several links in the model. Because

each section finishes on its own timeline, a departure was judged only against the selector's own section. For each section and day with at least four selectors present, the median hours worked was taken as the length of that section's day, and a selector was counted as leaving early if he or she worked at least three hours less than that median. The median was used because a few short shifts would pull an average down and hide the pattern. Days were classed as short (a median under 8 hours), medium (8 to under 10 hours), or long (10 hours or more).

Two kinds of records were excluded. The first came from workers who regularly divide the day between selecting and other roles, such as a lead, or selectors who move to loading or forklift work during the shift, because their selecting hours reflect a change of job rather than a departure; the author's own records were excluded for the same reason. The second came from shifts worked on a selector's usual day off. Some selectors come in for a few hours on a day they are not scheduled, and those partial days would otherwise be counted as early departures. Each selector's schedule was inferred as the five weekdays he or she worked most often, and the 101 shifts worked on other days were removed. Where two weekdays tied for a selector's fifth most common workday, the later weekday was kept. Three records showing more than 20 hours, which occur when a

selector does not log out of the system correctly, were also removed, because they could not be reconciled with the selector's weekly payroll total. The analysis that remained covered 58 selectors and 2,858 shifts.

Early departures rose with the length of the day overall, but not uniformly across sections (Table 1). Because crews differ in size across sections and days, the table reports early departures per 100 shifts worked, with the per-day averages in parentheses. Pooled across sections, 3.0 of every 100 shifts on short days ended in an early departure, compared with 3.8 on medium days and 7.9 on long days. The long-day rate was about two and a half times the short-day rate (95 percent confidence interval 1.6 to 4.3). The pattern was clearest in the dry section, where the rate rose at each step, from 2.1 to 3.5 to 7.8 per 100 shifts. In the freezer, long days again had the highest rate, but short days ran above medium days, a reversal produced largely by a single day discussed below. The cooler showed no clear pattern; it had only nine long days, on which two selectors left early, too few to judge. These intervals treat shifts as independent, which they are not, because the same selectors work many days and departures on the same day may be related. They are therefore narrower than they should be; the models later in this section correct for this.

Table 1

Early Departures per 100 Shifts Worked, by Section and Length of Day

Section	Short days	Medium days	Long days	Long vs. short
Dry	2.1 (0.29; 28 days)	3.5 (0.55; 40 days)	7.8 (1.07; 28 days)	3.7 (1.7–7.9)
Freezer	4.3 (0.50; 20 days)	3.3 (0.41; 54 days)	8.6 (1.00; 22 days)	2.0 (1.0–4.1)
Cooler	3.3 (0.16; 19 days)	6.7 (0.33; 36 days)	4.5 (0.22; 9 days)	1.4 (0.2–8.0)
All sections	3.0 (21 of 696 shifts)	3.8 (56 of 1,478)	7.9 (54 of 684)	2.6 (1.6–4.3)

Note. Cells show early departures per 100 shifts worked; in parentheses, average early departures per day and number of days (for all sections, departures and shifts). Short days had a section median under 8 hours, medium days 8 to under 10 hours, and long days 10 hours or more. The last column gives the ratio of long-day to short-day rates with a 95% confidence interval that ignores clustering by selector and day. Data cover June 28 to September 18, 2026.

Several checks bear on whether the pattern is an artifact of the measure. First, a fixed three-hour threshold could count as an early departure a selector who went home after a full shift on a very long day. None of the flagged departures was of that kind: every selector counted as leaving early had worked less than eight hours. Second, the pattern does not depend on the threshold. Counting departures of two or more hours below the median, the pooled rates were 4.5, 4.6, and 10.7 per 100 shifts on short, medium, and long days; at four or more hours, 1.0, 2.8, and 6.9; and with a relative threshold of 70 percent of the median, 3.3, 4.0, and 7.7.

Third, the pattern is not only a Sunday effect. Twenty-six of the 59 long section-days fell on Sundays, and no Sunday was a short day, but with Sundays removed the long-day rate was 7.3 per 100 shifts, against 3.0 on short days. Fourth, one figure is sensitive to a coding decision. If both tied weekdays are treated as part of a selector's schedule, the dry section's long-day average rises from 1.07 to 1.18 departures per day, because a few partial shifts on days off re-enter the data. The direction of the finding is unchanged, but the dry-section figures should be read as approximate.

The increase is not explained only by different people working long days. Of the 56 selectors who worked both long days and other days, 25 left early at a higher rate on

long days, 17 at a lower rate, and 14 never left early. The split leans in the predicted direction, but a split of 25 to 17 could easily arise by chance (two-sided sign test, $p = .28$). Forty-four of the 58 selectors left early at least once during the period.

The records give modest support to the next-day absence link. A selector was counted as absent on a scheduled workday, between his or her first and last appearance in the records, if no record of any kind existed for that day. When the previous day was one the selector worked, next-day absence was 3.5 percent after short days, 5.5 percent after medium days, and 5.9 percent after long days; the long-versus-short ratio of 1.7 has a wide interval (0.9 to 3.0). After a day on which the selector personally left early, next-day absence was 8.1 percent, against 5.0 percent otherwise (ratio 1.6, interval 0.8 to 3.4), but that figure rests on 86 cases and seven absences, and a single illness or personal problem could cause both. The models below, which account for repeated observations of the same selectors, find the long-day effect reliable and the effect of leaving early oneself not. The measure cannot distinguish a call-out from approved leave.

The records allow a rough check of Proposition 3 as well. Cases picked per hour worked were lower on long days than on short days in every section: 159, 151, and 143 cases per hour on short, medium, and long days in the dry section; 172, 148, and 141 in the freezer; and 214, 195, and 188 in the cooler. Long days also carried more cases per selector present. The pattern is consistent with declining hourly output as days lengthen, but it does not establish it. A heavier or harder order mix could both lower the hourly rate and lengthen the day. Case counts were not recorded for the first two weeks or for a few later shifts, about one in seven records in all, and those records were left out of this calculation.

The daily counts give little sign of same-day contagion (Proposition 2). Days on which two or more selectors left early were uncommon in every section. In the dry section they occurred on 6 of 28 long days, compared with 4 of 40 medium days and 2 of 28 short days; in the freezer, on 4 of 22 long days, 5 of 54 medium days, and 1 of 20 short days; and in the cooler, on none of its 9 long days, 1 of 36 medium days, and none of 19 short days. Multiple departures were more common on long days, as the higher per-shift rate alone would predict; whether they were more common than that rate predicts is tested below. The exclusion of day-off shifts mattered here. Before those shifts were removed, the dry section appeared to show multiple departures on 10 of its 26 long days, but much of that apparent clustering came from selectors working partial shifts on their days off.

One day had an outsized influence. On a short day in the freezer, five selectors left early, four of them after 4.6 or 4.7

hours. Departures that close together look more like a single event, such as a group sent home or pulled from the floor, than five separate decisions, but the records do not say which. That day accounts for half of the freezer's short-day departures. Without it, the freezer's rate rises at each step, from 2.3 to 3.3 to 8.6 per 100 shifts, and the pooled long-to-short ratio rises from 2.6 to 3.4 (interval 1.9 to 5.8). The day is retained in the figures above because nothing in the records justifies removing it.

Model-based estimates

Because the rates above treat each shift as independent, the main comparisons were re-estimated with models that account for repeated observations of the same selectors. Early departure was modeled with logistic regression estimated by generalized estimating equations (GEE), clustering shifts by selector, with day-length class, section, and a Sunday indicator as predictors. Relative to short days, the odds of an early departure were 2.8 times higher on long days (95% CI [1.6, 4.9]) and 1.3 times higher on medium days (95% CI [0.8, 2.4]). Treated continuously, each additional hour in the section's median day raised the odds of an early departure by about 50% (odds ratio [OR] = 1.53, 95% CI [1.31, 1.80]). Sundays carried no additional risk once day length was controlled (OR = 1.32, 95% CI [0.51, 3.39]). The long-day estimate was nearly unchanged when shifts were clustered by section-day instead of selector (OR = 2.6), when a linear trend across weeks was added (OR = 2.8), and when both selector and section-day were given random intercepts in a mixed model (OR = 2.9). Without the freezer day described above, it was 3.8 (95% CI [2.0, 7.0]).

The models also clarify how early leaving is distributed. Selectors differed substantially in their baseline tendency to leave early (random-intercept SD = 0.87 on the logit scale), which is consistent with the author's observation that departures are concentrated among some workers. The evidence that departures cluster within section-days, beyond what day length and these individual differences predict, is weak. When observed section-day counts were compared with counts simulated under independence, day-to-day variation was modestly larger than expected (dispersion ratio = 1.24, simulation $p = .03$), but much of that excess came from the single freezer day described above; without it, the ratio fell to 1.15 ($p = .13$). The 23 section-days with two or more early leavers were close to the 25 expected by chance. In these records, long days raise each selector's risk of leaving, but there is little sign that one departure triggers another; Proposition 2 is not supported at the level of the day. This tests only the first of the two routes described in the review of absence norms, immediate imitation within a shift. Gradual drift in what crews treat as acceptable, the

route Dello Russo et al. (2013) documented, would not appear in daily counts and remains untested.

For next-day absence, a model clustered by selector and controlling for section found that a long previous day raised the odds of absence on the next scheduled day by about 80 percent (OR = 1.83, 95% CI [1.10, 3.05], $p = .02$). Leaving early oneself had a weaker association that was not statistically reliable (OR = 1.58, 95% CI [0.69, 3.62]). When both were entered together, the long-day effect held (OR = 1.80, $p = .03$) and the effect of leaving early did not (OR = 1.52, $p = .29$), on a base of 110 absences. Finally, a within-selector model of productivity on shifts that did not end early found that the same selectors picked about 11 fewer cases per hour on long days than on short days (95% CI [7.9, 14.6], against a mean of 156), a decline of about 7%. That supports the hours-output link in Proposition 3 more directly than the section-level comparison does.

These models use the same records and inherit their limits: they adjust for who worked which days, not for the order or timing of departures within a day.

These figures are descriptive and carry three cautions. First, they are correlational. Departures can lengthen a day as well as respond to it, and daily totals do not show who left first or when. Second, a short shift is not always a voluntary departure. Light duty, voluntary time off, and being sent home when a section finishes early look the same in the records, so the measure identifies likely early departures rather than confirmed ones. Third, because a day's length is measured by the hours of those who worked it, heavy departures pull the section median down, which can make a long day look shorter and would, if anything, understate the pattern. The records cover one facility over one summer and early fall and were not collected as part of a formal study.

Finally, the records contain no posted or projected day lengths. None of these checks therefore distinguishes the effect of an unpredictable day from the effect of a long one. That distinction is the core of the paper's argument, and it remains untested.

Implications for Distribution Operations

If the model holds, the most practical lever is information rather than hours. Distribution operations cannot remove the uncertainty in order volume, but they can reduce the informational gap between the posted day and the actual one. A single morning estimate could be replaced by a projection updated through the shift and stated as a range. This follows from the research on unpredictability and on informational justice reviewed above, though its effect in this setting is untested. Recording each projection as it is made would also create the forecast-error measure that Proposition 1 requires.

How a forecast is presented may matter as much as its accuracy. The author's informal observation is that a visible long day can demotivate, while a visibly approaching finish can energize. Whether near-term milestones counter the first effect is an open empirical question that a facility could test directly.

The absence research points to team structure. Ten Brummelhuis et al. (2016) found that cohesion and task interdependence reduced the likelihood that coworker absence would be imitated, which suggests that how crews are organized may affect whether one departure becomes many. The justice research suggests that attendance policies adopted in response to absence will be received according to how they are made and explained, not only according to their content.

Schedule design is a further lever. Assigning every new hire to a schedule without consecutive rest days places the least experienced and least rested workers on the most understaffed day. Comparing attendance and retention between split-schedule and standard-schedule workers, or giving split-schedule workers consecutive days off for a trial period, would show whether recovery time affects either. Simply eliminating the split schedule is not a solution at current staffing, however. With the facility closed on Saturdays, a five-day schedule with consecutive days off must run Sunday through Thursday or Monday through Friday. Removing the split therefore moves workers off the light Tuesday and leaves Sunday and Friday thinner; planning estimates from the author's records suggest those days would lengthen to roughly 11 to 12 hours. Two alternatives follow. The split schedule could rotate across the whole crew, so that no group carries it permanently, which preserves coverage while spreading its cost more equitably. Or staffing could rise to the level the volume requires, at which point the split schedule becomes unnecessary. These are considerations derived from the literature, not prescriptions validated in warehouses. They are best treated as hypotheses for operations to test against their own records.

Public policy has addressed parts of this problem in other industries. Predictive-scheduling, or fair workweek, laws in Oregon and several U.S. cities require advance notice of schedules and premiums for late changes, but they apply mainly to retail, food service, and hospitality, with Chicago's ordinance a partial exception that also covers warehouse services. California's Warehouse Worker Protection Act of 2021 (Assembly Bill 701) took a different approach, regulating how production quotas in large warehouses are disclosed and enforced. Neither type of law addresses unpredictable shift length directly, which suggests that the problem described here falls between existing protections.

Limitations and Directions for Research

This paper has six main limitations. First, the motivating account rests on one participant-observer's recollections and personal records from a single facility. Those records were not collected as part of a formal study, may be incomplete, and include some workers who left within days of being hired. Departures without a recorded hire date were counted as this year's hires, and departures before the records began in April are not captured, so the share of this year's hires who left may be understated. Second, the evidence base comes mostly from retail, food service, manufacturing, and knowledge work; none of the reviewed studies focused on distribution centers, and the human-factors literature on order picking has focused mainly on picker performance, ergonomics, and planning models rather than schedules or attendance (Grosse et al., 2017), although one field study (ten Brummelhuis et al., 2016) included a logistics center among its 24 organizations. Third, much of the cited evidence is correlational, with the Gap intervention (Kesavan et al., 2022) the main causal exception. Fourth, the absence-imitation research concerns absence rather than mid-shift departures. Fifth, the preliminary check against the author's records relies on daily hours rather than clock times, so it cannot show whether long days led to departures or departures lengthened the days. Sixth, and most important for the argument, the paper's central claim is that unpredictability, and not only length, drives withdrawal, yet none of the evidence assembled here separates the two. The author's records contain no posted or projected day lengths, and the strongest published evidence on unpredictability concerns schedules set in advance in retail, not shift length in distribution.

The propositions above can be tested with records many distribution centers already keep. Posted versus actual shift length, clock-out times, and next-day absence, linked by date and section, would allow a direct test of Propositions 1 through 3. Injury logs and exit records, linked to the same dates, would allow a test of the injury and turnover costs. Because schedule and tenure coincide completely at the observed facility, separating their effects on turnover would require comparing facilities that assign new hires differently, or observing a change in how new hires are scheduled. A facility that introduces a continuously updated shift forecast would create a natural before-and-after comparison. Team-level measures of cohesion and perceived fairness, collected by brief survey, would allow tests of Propositions 4 and 5. Records extending over a longer period would also allow a test of gradual norm drift: whether newcomers' rates of early departure and absence converge over their first months toward those of the crews they join.

Two further tests are within reach of facilities like the one observed. The Sunday blackout policy offers a natural

comparison: attendance, early departures, and next-day absence on Sundays before and after the policy took effect, set against the same measures on other days, would test the paper's predictions about attendance policy and the points system. And because the rival explanations considered above make different predictions, a test of the model should include case volume per selector, how incentive pay is earned on long days, and differences in conditions across sections.

Author Note

The author is employed by the organization in which the observations in the introduction were made. The views expressed in this paper are his own and do not represent his employer. The facility is not named. Observations come from the author's recollections and figures from his personal tracking; the figures are approximate and reported only as rounded aggregates, and neither was collected as part of a formal study. The preliminary check uses the author's records of daily hours worked and cases picked, reported only as section-level averages; no individual worker is identified. This is a conceptual paper; it began as an internal memo and was revised for a wider readership. No funding was received. Drafting, literature searches, and the supplementary calculations in the preliminary check were assisted by an AI tool; the author reviewed all cited sources against their full texts and is responsible for the content.

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