Several POS and I/P vendors also offer separate business intelligence (BI) data analysis modules. These can pull data from multiple F&B systems into high-level reports to simplify the analysis, yet allow drill down into the underlying detail to investigate exceptions. These can provide excellent insights into the operation and are invaluable for multi-site operations in analyzing sales, usage, the profitability of each outlet, the accuracy of par levels vs. re-ordering cycles, delivery times, seasonal/day-of-week variations and much more.

Independent BI vendors' systems such as Avero's Slingshot, Compeat, CrunchTime!, erestaurantservices.com, Posera's Maitre'd and ProftSword also offer the ability to pull data from multiple different vendors' systems. As with all BI systems, though, it's important to ask them the right questions. They can all help you become better informed; the key to maximizing their worth is to act on that information to identify and correct poor business processes.

LABOR MANAGEMENT

Labor scheduling continues to be a major challenge. More detailed data on how an outlet's business varies over a day, week, month and year is really the only way to get a better handle on forecasting, but flexible and intuitive scheduling management tools do help. Better integration with hotel and catering management systems can also help forecast the volume of group and transient guests likely to show up in the restaurants, and at what times. Convention meeting schedules are also important aids in scheduling staff for food and beverage outlets.

Time management at the outlet level varies all the way from simple clock-in/clock-out time stamps on a POS terminal to sophisticated time and attendance systems such as Time Management's TMx or Commeg's TimePro. Many systems prevent staff from clocking in more than ten minutes earlier or five minutes later than their scheduled shift times without a manager's override, to prevent socializing on company time. Labor management systems can also be used to force managers to meet labor percentage targets based on projected revenue. By requiring both the upcoming schedule and the revenue and cover forecasts to be entered in the labor management system, the system can kick back schedules that exceed company labor percentage standards. These systems can be programmed to put up these red flags based on weekly standards, daily standards, and even meal period standards. They can also be programmed to limit labor scheduling and spending based on job classification. The labor management system could, for example, limit hostess hours on a Monday to twelve. Therefore, if a manager scheduled one hostess for six hours and another for eight, the system would disallow that schedule. Also, if those hostesses made ten dollars per hour and the system limit for spending was $120, it would also disallow that schedule. A manager could schedule more hostess hours, but would have to utilize employees who make a lower hourly rate.

Since labor costs are such a major part of the budget, each week's schedule should be prepared individually and not just copied from the previous week. Actual figures for the prior period should be checked against the forecast to identify factors that would improve accuracy, and both should be compared to the theoretical baseline. The coming week's forecast and any special events that have an impact on business are then considered, and the schedule adjusted to suit.

If cover and revenue forecasts are created by someone above the unit level (by a regional manager or food and beverage director, for instance) they should be entered into the unit's labor management system and the unit manager preparing the schedule should be barred from changing the forecast. Again, if the schedule does not meet company labor standards based on the forecast, the system should not allow the schedule to be printed or posted. The labor management system should also report on scheduled versus actual labor hours by dollar and by position for each hour of the day. Ideally, this capability should be merged with the POS system so that management can access this data in real time and make staffing adjustments as necessary.

Labor management systems also monitor position applications (which can now be online and paperless), recruitment, personnel information, I-9 status, tax status, availability, vacation, and benefit information. Actual time worked is recorded, data on tips entered and later reported per IRS guidelines, and paychecks calculated.

Many POS systems now include computer-based training courses, either on their workstations or available via the internet. This is especially important to multi-unit chain operations to ensure brand and service consistency, but can provide useful introduction and refresher training for independent outlets, too. By placing these training programs on the internet, companies also ensure that all employees receive exactly the same training in exactly the way management wants them to. General industry training programs such as those from the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation are also highly recommended.

Automation can also help with getting the right staff in the first place; the restaurant industry paradox of dealing with high employee turnover while striving for a quality guest experience isn't going to be solved any time soon. Using a good applicant tracking and hiring management system such as those from Unicru and Taleo can help speed up the process and keep a useful database of candidates available to fill the inevitable future slots.

CENTRALLY HOSTED SYSTEMS

Centralized systems for multi-unit operations are quite common in the F&B world, principally to collect sales and operations data from multiple outlets and, in the case of multi-unit branded chains, to feed down menu and pricing