STAFFING

FIVE SIGNS YOUR DISPATCHER NEEDS BACKUP

The job can become impossible at volume.

Dispatchers answer phones, calm homeowners, juggle the board and route trucks. When that person burns out, you lose calls and hard-won knowledge.

- Calls roll to voicemail while they are working the board.
- Callbacks pile up during busy hours.
- Board mistakes rise on your heaviest days.
- They skip breaks or stay late to catch up.
- Their tone with customers changes.

Fix the workload first. Separate answering from dispatching at peak hours, even if only for a few hours a week.

WHY THIS JOB BURNS PEOPLE OUT

A dispatcher makes hundreds of decisions a day while being interrupted constantly. Customers are upset, techs are running late and the owner wants one more job squeezed in. When things go well nobody notices. When anything goes wrong, it's the dispatcher who hears about it.

Good dispatchers carry a huge amount of knowledge: which tech is good with which customer, which neighborhoods flood, who won't work past 5:00 on Thursdays. When one quits, that knowledge walks out too.

MEASURE THE LOAD

Before deciding that someone needs help, measure the work. For one typical week and one peak week, track:

- Calls answered and missed per hour

- Number of jobs dispatched
- How often the board changes
- Time spent on non-dispatch tasks, like invoicing, parts and collections
- Breaks actually taken

Ask the dispatcher to mark what they do during a normal day. Many owners are shocked by the list.

TAKE THINGS OFF THEIR PLATE

Start with what shouldn't be there at all:

- Answering general calls at peak times
- Chasing paperwork from techs
- Running parts orders
- Handling billing questions
- Being the only person who can reach the owner

Then add tools that take away repetitive work: reminders, on-the-way texts, technician status updates and a board that shows everyone the same picture.

SEPARATE THE TWO JOBS AT PEAK HOURS

Answering the phone and running the board need different kinds of attention. The first calls for patience and warmth. The second requires uninterrupted thinking. When one person does both, each suffers. Even separating them for the busiest three hours can make a big difference. Options include a second office person, a shared phone queue or an outside team that covers overflow.

PROTECT THE PERSON

- Guarantee breaks, and provide coverage so they can really take them.
- Don't let customers or techs abuse them. Back them up when it happens.
- Set up a clear escalation path, so tough calls don't always land on them.
- Give them authority to say no, within the rules.
- Avoid making the dispatcher the on-call person for nights and weekends as well.

- Pay for what the job really requires.

BACK UP THE KNOWLEDGE

Write down what's in the dispatcher's head: service areas, tech skills, customer quirks and routing rules. Cross-train at least one other person. Have them take over for a day each month, while the regular dispatcher is around to help. You'll learn what's missing long before an emergency forces you to.

HOLD REGULAR CHECK-INS

Meet weekly, even for 15 minutes. Ask three questions: What made today harder than it needed to be? What should I stop asking you to do? What would you change on the board? Then actually fix one thing.

KNOW WHEN IT'S TIME TO ADD CAPACITY

If you've removed the extra tasks and the signs are still there, you've outgrown the structure. Compare hiring another person, including pay, benefits, training and management time, with the cost of outside help. The outsourcing calculator and dispatch best practices can help you think it through.

Take the warning signs seriously. A dispatcher who starts skipping lunch in March may be sending you a resignation letter by July.

Sources: White Paper 09.

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BEST PRACTICES: AN OVERWHELMED DISPATCHER

MAKE IT A HABIT

What good looks like

> Phones and the board are not the same person's job in busy hours.

> The next day's board is built the afternoon before.

> Customers hear about changes before they ask.

The habits

1. Separate answering from dispatching during peak hours.
2. Build tomorrow's board by 3 PM, grouped by area.
3. Match job types to tech skills before the day starts.
4. Text customers about delays before they call.
5. Keep a short list of who to call when a tech runs long.
6. Debrief the day for 10 minutes: what slipped and why.

Signs it's time to get help

- Your dispatcher is putting callers on hold to move jobs.
- Customers call to ask where the tech is.
- Your dispatcher works through lunch most days.

Where we fit: Service ProCall takes overflow calls so your dispatcher can run the board, and ProCall Field helps with the board itself.

More on an overwhelmed dispatcher