

Section Three: Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

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In this issue of *Invested*, the first in our four-part series on employment in New England, we dive into the role that work schedules play in overall job quality and business sustainability. Schedules [factor heavily](#) in the stability and success of both workers and businesses, but creating a fair, transparent, and workable schedule that meets the needs of the business can be a difficult task given all the considerations and obstacles that come into play. The challenge is most significant for those in service sectors, healthcare work, and the trades, where variable hourly shifts are the norm or workloads significantly change over the course of the week or the year. Over 60 percent of New England's workforce is employed in these industries.

A fair and predictable schedule is an essential component of a quality job. Workers need to have a reliable sense of when, where, and how often they will be working in order to schedule other aspects of their lives, from transportation and childcare to classes, shifts at a second job, and medical appointments. Knowing how many hours they can expect to work each week also allows employees to plan ahead financially, to ensure they can pay bills, cover their rent or mortgage costs, and save for emergencies or the future. For lower-income workers, in particular, upsetting these plans for their time and finances can mean the difference between a stable, healthy life and one consumed by stress and exhaustion. When a worker's schedule changes at the last minute, problems also ripple through the schedules of those whose lives intersect with that worker, including their caregivers and family members.

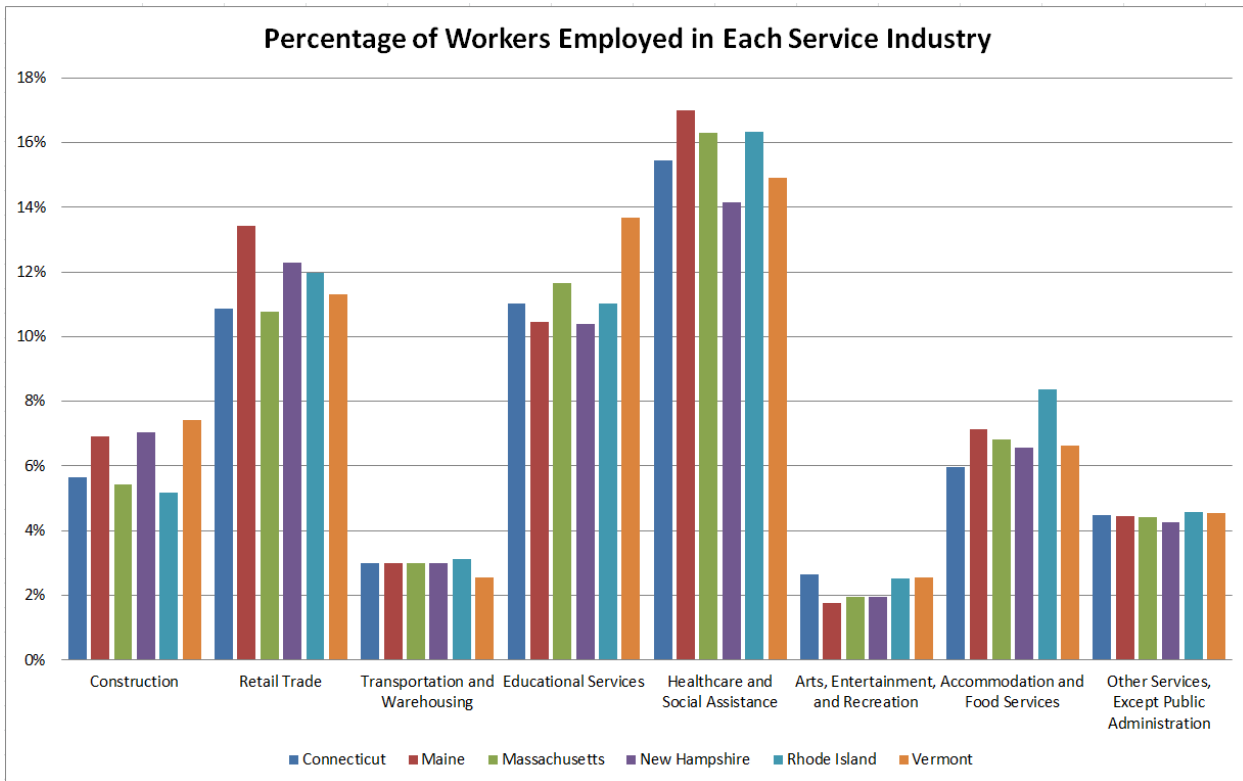
Fair schedules have become another element of worker advocacy campaigns along with higher wages and other worker protections, with some [making the argument](#) that a higher hourly wage alone won't improve conditions for workers if they can't reliably secure a minimum number of hours each week or shift schedules that they can actually manage with the other responsibilities in their lives.

Predictable schedules also matter for businesses, in part because labor is often one of the most significant operating costs for employers. When a company's scheduling practices truly work, employers reap the benefits of lower turnover, reduced training time and expense, and reliable, pleasant employees who are well-rested and ready to serve customers during their shifts—a business advantage especially in a strong economy in which employers compete for talented workers.

Some employers have adopted employee-centered scheduling as a core component of their business philosophy. For others, brand impact may be a key consideration. Given the expansive reach of social media and news, an employee's bad experience with a difficult schedule can have immediate negative effects on a business's reputation. Finally and most directly, businesses must ensure that they are adequately staffed to meet customer demand and stay afloat, and effective schedules are essential to meeting those needs.

All in all, fairer and more predictable scheduling is a complex challenge that nonetheless holds great benefits for the workplaces that are able to develop a system that works for them. The interviews presented here take a first-hand and often personal look at the realities of creating, managing, and working under different kinds of schedules across a range of industries, roles, and locations. Taken together, our interviewees' perceptions and

insight around this crucial, complicated, and sometimes misunderstood element of stable employment and resilient businesses provide us with a valuable look into how New Englanders are working now, the challenges they face, and the emerging solutions that hold promise for enhancing the quality of jobs in our region.



Source: 2015 five-year American Community Survey estimates.

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