ELMO

FOR THE RETAIL INDUSTRY

Your Peak Trading Roster Readiness Checklist 2026



"I only find out a roster blew the budget after we've paid for it."

In retail, the roster is the budget, and peak trading is when it costs the most. Between late November and the January sales, stores take on new casuals, trade longer hours and pay public holiday rates. A small mistake on the roster, such as one extra person on Boxing Day, a missed break or a casual on the wrong rate, gets multiplied across every store and every shift.

This checklist follows the season in five phases. It starts with getting the right people ready, moves through building rosters to demand and budget, and finishes with a payroll check and a January review. Tick items off as you go, and share it with your store managers, HR and payroll teams. Peak trading only goes smoothly when all three are working from the same information.

1

6–8 WEEKS OUT

Get your people ready

2

3–4 WEEKS OUT

Build rosters to demand and budget

3

PEAK WEEKS

Hold the line on the floor

4

BEFORE THE PAY RUN

Check before the pay run

5

JANUARY

Review and plan the next peak

This checklist is general information, not legal advice. Award entitlements change, so check current rates and rules with the Fair Work Ombudsman.

KEY DATES

The 2026 peak trading calendar

Christmas Day falls on a Friday this year. That means Boxing Day lands on a Saturday, and some states will add a weekday public holiday afterwards. Lock these dates in before you build a single roster.

Date	Day	What it means for your roster
27 Nov	Friday	**Black Friday.** Expect a demand spike in store and online, plus a heavier fulfilment load through the weekend.
30 Nov	Monday	**Cyber Monday.** Plan for online and click-and-collect volume more than foot traffic.
24 Dec	Thursday	**Christmas Eve.** Late trading, and a part-day public holiday in the evening in some states.
25 Dec	Friday	**Christmas Day.** A public holiday everywhere, and most stores are closed.
26 Dec	Saturday	**Boxing Day.** The biggest trading day of the year, and a public holiday.
28 Dec	Monday	A substitute or additional public holiday in some states, because Boxing Day falls on a weekend. Public holiday rates may apply.
31 Dec	Thursday	**New Year's Eve.** A part-day public holiday in the evening in some states.
1 Jan 2027	Friday	**New Year's Day.** A public holiday everywhere.
26 Jan 2027	Tuesday	**Australia Day,** at the end of the January sales and the back-to-school period.

Watch out: public holiday rules differ by state and territory. Before you finalise rosters, check your state government's public holiday list for every location you operate in, particularly 28 December and the part-day holidays on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve.

PHASE 1 · 6–8 WEEKS OUT

Get your people ready

A peak roster is only as good as the people you can actually put on it. This phase is about hiring, onboarding and setting the ground rules before the rush starts.

Hire and onboard your Christmas casuals

- [ ] Work out how many extra casuals each store needs, using last year's peak headcount and this year's trading hours.
- [ ] Issue contracts or letters of engagement that state the casual basis, the award and the classification/level of the role.
- [ ] Complete right-to-work checks and collect tax file number, super and bank details before the first shift.
- [ ] Run induction covering store procedures, safety, and what to expect on Boxing Day.
- [ ] Set up each new starter once, so the same details are ready for rostering and pay without being re-keyed.

Record skills and qualifications

- [ ] Note who is trained on registers, opening and closing, cash handling, the forklift, or online fulfilment.
- [ ] Confirm each employee's classification under the General Retail Industry Award, and junior rates where they apply.
- [ ] Identify your peak leads: experienced staff who can run a section or support new casuals.

Set leave and availability rules early

- [ ] Open leave requests for the peak period and set a firm cut-off date.
- [ ] Name your blackout days, such as Boxing Day, and explain how you'll handle emergency leave.
- [ ] Agree a fair rotation for public holidays. For example, anyone who worked Boxing Day last year gets first pick to have it off this year or consider substitute public holidays for employees
- [ ] Collect availability from every casual, including students on holidays and anyone with a second job.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Most roster problems at peak are really people-data problems, such as a casual who isn't fully set up, a missing qualification or leave that hasn't been approved yet. When HR, rostering and payroll share one employee record, getting someone ready once means they're ready everywhere.

PHASE 2 · 3–4 WEEKS OUT

Build rosters to demand and to budget

The aim is simple: know what each roster will cost, and whether it's compliant, before you publish it, not after you've paid for it.

Forecast demand

- [ ] Pull last year's sales and foot traffic by store, day and hour for the same peak dates.
- [ ] Adjust for what's changed: new stores, extended trading hours, promotions and the timing of Black Friday.
- [ ] Set a labour budget for each store, either as a wage cost percentage of forecast sales or as total hours.
- [ ] Plan cover for click-and-collect, online fulfilment and stock replenishment, not only the shop floor.

Or use software like ELMO Workforce Management to forecast demand and provide auto-scheduling recommendations.

Build the roster

- [ ] Match staffing to forecast peaks by hour, and avoid flat cover across the whole day.
- [ ] Put in place an agreement for part-time employees to change their guaranteed hours up front to manage overtime costs
- [ ] Put a peak lead on every busy shift.
- [ ] Roster rest and meal breaks into every shift. Don't leave them for managers to fit in on the day.
- [ ] Check that casual shifts meet minimum engagement rules.
- [ ] Check span of hours, maximum hours and the break needed between shifts before you publish.
- [ ] Only roster staff with approved availability and leave.

Cost it before you publish

- [ ] Cost every roster with penalty rates, casual loading and public holiday rates applied.
- [ ] Compare each store's roster cost with its labour budget, and fix any variance before you publish.
- [ ] Look closely at the most expensive days, such as Boxing Day, 28 December and Sundays, and question every extra hour.
- [ ] Publish rosters with the notice required by the award, and tell staff how to request swaps.

WHY THIS MATTERS

When the roster is the budget, the time to find a cost blowout is before you publish. Software like ELMO Workforce Management that costs rosters against the award as you build them turns this phase from a spreadsheet exercise into a check you can actually trust.

PHASE 3 · PEAK WEEKS

Hold the line on the floor

Rosters always change once trading starts. The goal is to change them without losing control of cost or compliance.



Filling gaps and handling changes

- [ ] Let staff swap shifts through an app, and have a manager approve each swap so qualifications and costs stay right.
- [ ] Keep a standby list of casuals who are trained and available for short-notice shifts.
- [ ] Before cancelling a shift, check what notice is required and whether a minimum payment applies.
- [ ] Record every roster change and the reason for it.

Tracking hours as you go

- [ ] Have staff clock in and out for every shift, and record breaks as taken.
- [ ] Compare actual hours with rostered hours daily, store by store.
- [ ] Flag overtime, missed breaks and shifts that run over before they reach the pay run.
- [ ] Escalate any store that's tracking more than 5% over its labour budget, while there's still time to adjust.

Looking after your people

- [ ] Check in with store teams after the biggest days. A quick thank-you goes a long way at peak.
- [ ] Watch for staff working back-to-back long shifts, and rest them where you can.
- [ ] Give new casuals a go-to person for each shift.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The gap between what was rostered, what was worked and what gets paid is where peak trading costs disappear. Closing that gap every day is much easier than reconciling it in January.

PHASE 4 · BEFORE THE PAY RUN

Check before the pay run

Peak trading pay runs carry the most risk of the year: more casuals, more public holidays and more penalty rates. A short check now avoids back-pay and an unhappy team in January.



- [ ] Confirm public holiday rates were applied to every hour worked on public holidays, including 28 December and the part-day holidays where they apply.
- [ ] Check that casual loading is applied correctly, including on penalty and public holiday hours.
- [ ] Make sure award rates and classifications are current, especially for new casuals and junior rates.
- [ ] Compare approved timesheets against rosters. Every difference should have a reason.
- [ ] Check that recorded breaks match entitlements, and follow up on any missed breaks.
- [ ] Look for missing or duplicate shifts, and staff paid at more than one location.
- [ ] Confirm that new starters' tax, super and bank details are complete before the first pay.
- [ ] Check that leave taken over the period has flowed through to pay and to leave balances.

WHY THIS MATTERS

When rosters, timesheets and payroll share the same employee data, mismatches show up before the pay run instead of on payday. Payroll can then sign off peak pay with confidence instead of crossing their fingers.

PHASE 5 · JANUARY

Review and plan the next peak

Most retailers stop on Boxing Day. A one-hour review in January makes next year's peak, and your Easter and EOFY sales, easier and cheaper.

What happened to labour cost?

- [ ] Compare wage cost as a share of sales by store and by week, against budget.
- [ ] Identify the days and hours where you were overstaffed or understaffed against actual trade.
- [ ] Total up overtime, roster changes and short-notice cancellations by store.

What happened to your people?

- [ ] Review absences and no-shows over the peak, and look for patterns by store or shift.
- [ ] Ask store managers and a few casuals what worked and what didn't.
- [ ] Pick the Christmas casuals you want to keep, then offer them ongoing shifts or add them to your standby pool.
- [ ] Note who worked the public holidays this year so your rotation is fair next year.

What will you change?

- [ ] Update your demand forecast with this season's actual figures.
- [ ] Write down three changes for next peak, each with an owner.
- [ ] Check whether your current tools let you see roster cost before you publish. If they don't, that's the problem to solve before next season.

What one extra shift costs on Boxing Day

Here is a simple illustration for a store rostering 10 casuals for 8 hours each. It assumes a base rate of $30 an hour.

Scenario	Rate applied	Cost for 80 hours
An ordinary weekday	125% (casual loading)	**$3,000**
Boxing Day (public holiday)	250% (casual public holiday rate)	$6,000

On Boxing Day, one extra casual rostered for a full shift costs about **$600**. For a 20-store retailer, that one habit adds **$12,000** in a single day. That's why the most useful thing you can do at peak is see the cost of a roster before you publish it.

Illustrative figures only. Confirm multipliers against the current General Retail Industry Award pay guide.



One record, from hire to payday

Every phase of this checklist depends on the same information: who your people are, what they're qualified to do, when they're available and what they should be paid. When that sits in separate systems, someone ends up re-keying it, often under pressure at peak.

ELMO Workforce Management builds rosters around real demand, with labour costs and award rules checked before anything goes live. Because leave balances flow in from payroll and qualifications come from HR, managers only roster people who are actually available and qualified. Once hours are approved, they flow straight through to pay, so what was rostered, what was worked and what was paid all line up.

Two ways to get ahead of your next peak

Run the numbers. Use the ELMO value calculator to see the potential hours saved, dollars reclaimed, and reduced turnover that a better, complete HR, payroll and workforce management system could grant you.

Calculate your value

Bring us your hardest roster week. Book a roster review with a local ELMO specialist, and we'll walk through your peak with you.

Book a roster review

ELMO

About ELMO. ELMO is The Complete AI Workforce Platform™ for Australia and New Zealand's mid-market. HR, payroll and workforce management run on one connected platform, with one record for every employee. ELMO automates the work first, giving teams back the capacity they need now. Then it adds the trusted insights and local expertise to confidently own the workforce decisions that come next.

ELMO Workforce Management is available in Australia.