

HR Techniques to Strengthen Your Practice

Today's headlines are replete with news of ongoing changes in the employment market and the impact on every sector of business. Unfortunately, most of what we read offers little more than unsubstantiated opinions, vague projections and generally commiserates about the current condition. We know all too well that the dental field has been deeply affected by economic factors and workforce changes, making it challenging to stay ahead of the curve and provide the care our patients need. Practices seeing success in this regard focus on these vital components in their approach to HR.

- Allocate adequate resources to the HR needs of the practice.
- Pivot from hiring to ongoing recruitment.
- Consider the action of building and strengthening your team as an ongoing endeavor.
- Make staff retention a priority.

Many practices find themselves short staffed and in response, engage in inadequate measures to remedy the problem. It isn't enough to post an ad and hope that one dream hire will make the practice different overnight. Just one vacancy on a team can take dozens of hours and thousands of dollars to fill, and often must be addressed while navigating a busy patient schedule. You may also go through dozens of applicants to garner just one truly qualified candidate.

We like to differentiate between active and passive recruitment phases for a practice. In a passive phase, you may not have an immediate hiring need, but acknowledge this is an ongoing necessity, and use that time to build your resources.

To avoid the mistakes that can happen when we are desperate for solutions and prone to making ill-advised hires, develop an ongoing action plan for coverage when an employee is absent or a position is vacant. Sometimes family members, previous employees or part-time employees in other offices or fields are able to fill in. Maintaining an ongoing relationship with various temp agencies gives offices an opportunity to grow temp relationships and make them more workable when help is needed. Offering internships in your practice gives you exposure to students entering the field, helps you refine your own training methods and often results in direct hires for your practice.

Taking the time to determine who can, formally or informally, best fill the role of HR administrator and allocating a specific schedule for this type of work *every day* makes all the difference. You may find that one team member (or a recruiter, former employee, family member or independent contractor) can write and place ads, screen applicants and schedule interviews. This allows a manager and/or practice owner to focus on conducting interviews, making employment offers and planning start of work for a new employee. Over time, HR administrators accumulate the ad drafts, job descriptions, onboarding plans, training schedules

and knowledge of successful sequences that keep hiring actions moving as swiftly as the market demands.

Practices should have at least five outlets for advertising open positions. The use of mainstream job posting sites, hiring services, social media announcements, staff incentives for recruitment, maintenance of an internship/temp pool, and networking activities should remain ongoing efforts for the practice.

Be prepared to act quickly. Delays in gathering information and making decisions can cost practices quality hires. You can avoid the frustration of having a candidate consider or accept another position simply by swiftly moving through initial steps and taking a concise approach. Consider condensing interviews and working interviews into one appointment. Have an offer letter and the details of a total compensation plan prepared in advance, so you can adjust a few details based on the terms discussed and proceed right away. Have resources in place for initial testing, background checks and reference checks so these vital steps can be completed in hours, not days.

When a practice owner makes resource building a priority in a passive HR phase, the result is the ability to deploy successful methods that have been honed right when they are needed. This brings composure and results to an otherwise frantic activity.

When you do hire, your team will be impacted. Looking forward to the relief of having more staff is motivating, but we all know it can get worse before it gets better. Onboarding and training new team members takes a toll. In this regard, the best defense is a good offense.

Be sure to properly assess the training task before you. It is workable to hire less experienced staff with the right personality and attitude, but you will need to rely on better training materials and techniques. Practices that have a clear vision, employee handbook, job descriptions, procedure guides, protocols, onboarding plans, training checklists, and performance review processes get new team members contributing to the needs of the practice and the patients quickly and efficiently.

These same tools help practice owners to support existing team members. We routinely conduct surveys of employees in dental practices and identify the factors that motivate them, drive performance and contribute to longevity. Over and over, they tell us they want *clarity* and *consistency*. Team members respond to:

- Transparency – they end up doing what they were told they'd be doing at the time of hire
- Feedback – positive or even timely/corrective communication about performance
- Support – the ability to request and receive training if objectives can't be achieved independently

- Simplicity – known tasks and responsibilities with the tools and coordination needed to make things work

In today's market, retaining staff must remain a focus and a priority in every position in every practice. It can be tempting to address this through lowered expectations or arbitrary pay raises, hoping staff will just "stick around". In the long run, practices that use these tactics spend more money and see below-average staff retention rates, not to mention the frustration and wear and tear experienced by management and the remaining team.

Our firm's clients are guided through steps that closely monitor and enhance staff development and oversight efforts. Dental practices often underestimate the need for continuous follow up and coaching of staff that will strengthen infrastructure and lie at the heart of practice growth. We train managers in the specific areas of the practice to address and how to objectively measure improvements. When the team can rely upon healthy and consistent communication about individual and group goals, strategy, and outcomes, you will see them respond with more initiative and responsibility.

It takes leadership and planning to incorporate the necessary management and HR processes into everyday practice life. Doctors must have managers and/or outside resources they can work with on effective recruitment, proper training and staff retention strategies. The time and effort that goes into building these systems pays off many times over, and practice owners see far fewer hiring and retention issues, even in the most difficult employment climates.

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