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Strategies to Retain Your Best Employees

Enhancing the Stability of Your Practice

Retaining good employees is crucial to both short-term productivity and long-term sustainability of practice performance. When a key employee leaves, the practice and the doctor immediately experience stress. Significant time is wasted on recruiting and training a replacement. In addition, temporary workers may need to be hired as the practice scrambles to minimize impact on patients and its own bottom line. Practice performance inevitably declines and several months may elapse before the practice is restored to its previous level of patient care, customer service, production, and collections.

Turnover also has an adverse impact on remaining employees, who must shoulder the increased workload and must pacify dissatisfied patients who are quick to spot inferior service, errors in billing, and other quality lapses. The

loss of one employee often triggers the departure of one or two others as well, which plunges the practice into "crisis" mode instantly.

Annual revenue at a dental practice can drop anywhere from 3 to 10 percent due to the loss of a single good employee. Because the cost of turnover is not listed on the year-end financial balance sheet, this cost is widely underestimated and often goes unnoticed.

Retention: The stealth asset

The flip side of this is that retaining key employees will provide your practice with a huge competitive advantage. If your competitors have unstable work forces, they are forced to invest tens of thousands of dollars in recruiting, training, and increased supervision. They are constantly dealing with conflict, inefficiency, and mistakes within their practice. And, without staff continuity, they will have a hard time establishing good relationships with their patients. Patient loyalty is fragile today and patients are more likely to leave such a practice. All of these challenges will make it far more difficult for such practices to compete with you.

Practices with a stable workforce are able to build and maintain close relationships with patients. They usually have greater expertise and capacity, as well as consistency and quality in the delivery of service, because they have more employees who know what they are doing. Staff members who are part of stable organizations usually are able to work more cohesively as they understand each other well and will have been cross-trained to fill in for absent team members.

Staff continuity is the stealth asset that enables practices to perform well year after year. So, how do you improve the odds of keeping your best people? And why do they leave? The key to retention is to understand what good employees want today. My conversations with dental employees



have generated the following list of what people want. This was not a scientific survey, but it provides anecdotal evidence of what employees are looking for in their place of employment.

The issue of salary and benefits was intentionally left out, as it only muddles the interpretation of such surveys and discussions. Everyone expects to be paid a competitive salary. With the exception that most single employees wanted health insurance, nothing new was gleaned from a discussion of benefits.

What good employees want

Based on my conversations, employees want the following, starting with the most important:

1. Be treated with respect, consideration, and fairness by their supervisor
2. Good co-workers
3. Opportunity to learn and grow
4. Contribution and input valued and appreciated
5. Sympathy towards personal problems
6. Reasonable work hours

Compare this list with what your practice offers and see how well these expectations and desires are met. This list also may reinforce and confirm your thinking and give you the confidence to invest more in certain areas.

Item No. 6 reflects a desire for work-life balance. Late hours are undesirable for employees who have children. There is a tension between what patients want and what employees want. Patients want the convenience of early morning, after-work, or Saturday appointments, but these are the very hours that employees dislike. Make a decision regarding your office hours after careful consideration of all of the issues and then stick with it.

Retention strategies

Here are six areas that you need to consider carefully in order to improve retention of good people at your office:

No. 1: Quality of supervision

Most employees don't leave jobs or companies. They leave bosses. Here are some things you can do to make sure poor supervision doesn't cost you good employees.

Treat employees with respect. Each individual has unique talents, capabilities, and behaviors. Look to capitalize on an employee's strengths. Give that employee some independence and flexibility, based on his or her capability. Treat all employees as professionals and talk to them with respect. If they are not worthy of your respect, you probably should have never hired them.

Clarify expectations. Give clear, unambiguous direction. Explain the reasons for your thinking. Have a written set of job expectations and the results expected from them.

Provide timely feedback. Poor communication is one of the major reasons for good employees departing. Provide prompt, specific feedback, which will help employees take corrective action before things boil over.

Show patience. When mistakes are made, be slow to anger. Employees appreciate mature leaders who exercise self-control and avoid flying off the handle. Give your employees some room for failure and keep things in perspective. Take every mistake as an improvement opportunity. Remember: It could be a deficiency in your systems or training program, rather than negligence on the part of the employee.

Carefully consider your

supervisors. One area that needs particular attention is the selection and training of any staff member who might be managing other people. Many

practices drop the ball in this area. They often choose an unsuitable person for the position of office manager, which results in disgruntled employees and increased turnover.

The office manager must have experience in this position and demonstrated proficiency. Ideally, potential candidates for office manager should attend at least a few good leadership courses before they receive management responsibility. Without this experience and training, subordinate employees are not likely to respect the office manager and the relationship is inherently doomed to fail from the outset. It is better not to have an office manager at all than to have someone who is unqualified. Your practice and your people are too important to be left in the hands of a novice.

No. 2: Relationships with your employees

An employee's association with a practice is an emotional relationship, not one based on logic or rationale. If an employee has strong emotional bonds with co-workers and supervisors, that employee is more likely to remain with the practice. The following are simple ways to build relationships with your employees:

Care about people as individuals. Get to know your employees so you can relate to them on a personal level. You can do this by meeting one-on-one with each of your staff members in an informal way on a regular basis. Talk to them about their successes, as well as any difficulties or frustrations that they may be experiencing. These may be work-related issues or personal issues.

Address work-related issues by removing obstacles and providing the necessary resources and support. Early intervention is preferred, as problems are often more easily solved when they are small. These individual meetings also are your opportunity to express sincere appreciation for your employees' contributions. In many cases, your best employees may have gone beyond the call of duty to

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accomplish something important but are hesitant to brag about it. It is up to you to acknowledge it and thank them for it.

When it comes to personal issues, sympathize with your employees and offer simple solutions if appropriate. Employees are not necessarily looking for you to intrude into their personal lives and solve all of their problems; they just want some consideration. By listening to them and showing genuine concern, you are showing that you care about them as individuals. Have an open-door policy and make yourself available anytime they need help.

Stand by your people. Conflict and disagreement are part of work. During the course of their work, your employees will run into difficulties with patients at some point. When these situations arise, defend the employee if he or she has done the right thing for your practice.

If the employee's approach was not the best solution, handle the situation in a diplomatic manner. Make it clear that you still support the employee personally, but not the manner with which he or she handled the specific situation. Help the employee understand what went wrong and propose a better solution. Stick up for your employees whenever possible.

No. 3: Training and learning opportunities

High achievers are hungry for personal and professional development. They want opportunities to learn and grow. They want to expand their skills and take on more challenges. When was the last time you took your staff offsite to a course or workshop? How about having an expert present a seminar at your office? Equip your staff with better tools, methods, and strategies so they can enhance their own performance as well as practice performance.

No. 4: Employee involvement and engagement

Top performers want to be involved in the growth of your practice. They want to contribute. Solicit your staff for ideas. Hold a monthly staff meeting and seek staff members' input on how to improve issues within your practice and then act on good ideas.

No. 5: Rewards for longevity

Reward employees who have a long length of service at your practice. By doing so, you are sending a message to other employees that loyalty is something you value. Structure your benefits and compensation so that benefits increase significantly with tenure. Vacation time should increase

with tenure, for example. In addition, you could consider increasing other benefits (increasing continuing education reimbursements, increased practice contribution, etc.) at the two-year, five-year, and ten-year marks. Clearly describe the increase in benefits in your human resources manual and be sure to review it with all employees periodically. You also may consider giving a special one-time bonus for employees who have been with your practice for five or 10 years.

No. 6: Onboarding process for new employees

“Onboarding” is the process by which a new employee is integrated into the practice, but onboarding is as much about retaining talent as it is about getting people settled in their new job.

A systematic onboarding process will help the employee develop a sense of belonging, promote behaviors aligned with practice goals and values, demonstrate your commitment toward them, and expedite the process for them to become productive. It is the first step toward long-term retention of any new employee.

The first 90 days will set the tone for the employee's long-term employment. Assuming you've recruited the right person, the level of effort that the employer puts forth during this initial period will determine the length of his or her stay, as well as how quickly he or she achieves optimum productivity. Your onboarding process should include the following:

- On the first day, discuss and deliver written job descriptions, job expectations, and key results that are to be achieved on the job. Also, provide the employee a list of training objectives that must be completed in 30 or 60 days.
- A rigorous training program which addresses items on the list, one at a time.
- A formal weekly meeting to compare progress with job expectations.
- A formal performance review at the 90-day point.

Your onboarding process should do everything possible to increase the odds of the new employee succeeding in your office.

Your future

To retain good people, compensate and treat them fairly, build a relationship with them, invest in their development, and engage their hearts and minds. Implement a systematic onboarding process to get any new employees started off on the right foot. Dentists who put these principles into action will have a dependable talent pool for future growth and a stable, low-maintenance practice with happy employees and satisfied patients.



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