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# Work Like Magic

## Tips to Make Your Training Stick

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Special Feature  
PRACTICE  
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**E**ffective employee training is the foundation of a successful dental practice. In many practices, employees are unsure of what to say to patients or how to perform vital tasks correctly. In the absence of a rigorous training program, employees tend to adopt their own methods, which may not be optimal or correct. These mistakes lead to stress, inefficiencies, rework, low patient satisfaction, and loss of revenue. By developing and implementing a successful training program, dentists can improve the skill level of their team and ensure that all employees work to the best of their abilities.

Many practices have no provisions for training. New employees often are recruited, thrown into their position, and expected to perform the job with proficiency without adequate training or orientation. It is also common to find long-standing employees doing their jobs in the same way they have for years—without refinement or improvement.

### What's not working

Many dental offices have ineffective training methods. Possible reasons include:

- Inadequate training materials. Study materials, such as manuals, CDs, or DVDs, may not

be available. Or, in some cases, the materials are available, but they are outdated or lack sufficient detail, or they may not be appropriate for a trainee's skill level (e.g., too basic or too advanced).

- Use of the trial and error method. When a practice lacks a structured training program, employees who are given new responsibilities are expected to learn by watching others or by trial and error. This may teach employees how to do a job adequately—but not optimally.
- Ineffective training program. The training program may not be adaptable to different styles of learning, with the result that the employees have a hard time absorbing the material.
- Improper management and follow-through. A system may not have been established to verify that a new employee has fully assimilated the training material and is able to apply it correctly and consistently. In addition, there is no system in place to confirm that the employee is still doing things correctly several months after training was administered.

### Crafting materials

Developing or purchasing training materials or programs is a sound investment for your dental office. These materials will greatly reduce the

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time you need to spend training new employees. Staff turnover is a common problem in dental offices, which makes it even more imperative that you have good training materials on hand. These materials also allow you to periodically review and reinforce important concepts to your entire team. Written materials should be available for both front office positions and clinical positions. For the dental assisting position, you need to develop a manual that details the setup and standard operating protocol for each procedure.

For front office positions, you should have a manual or an audio CD that spells out the language and script for handling new patient phone calls, scheduling, treatment presentations, and financial presentations. You should also review your scheduling template and have a plan in place to train employees on your practice management software. All training materials should be updated and revised once a year to reflect new techniques and advances in technology.

### Customize your training

Because people have different ways of learning, your training methods need to be adaptable. There are four different learning styles:

- Seeing—Looking at demonstrations and visuals
- Reading/Writing—Reading manuals and taking notes
- Doing—Being hands-on and doing the task after basic instruction
- Hearing—Listening and asking questions

Ask each trainee how he or she learns best and adapt your methods accordingly. This will accelerate the employee's ability to learn and make training a more enjoyable experience for all.

### Managing the program

Many employers falsely assume that employees know what they are doing after the first few weeks. To verify that an employee has fully assimilated the training material and is able to apply it correctly and consistently, you need to establish a system of evaluation.

A system should be developed for proper management of the training program, including the sequencing of tasks and feedback. Be sure not to overwhelm the trainee with too much information at once. You should plan to complete the administration of the training program within two to four weeks.

In managing and implementing a training program, you may find the following process useful.

**1** **Develop a list of tasks.** Make a complete listing of all of the tasks that the job entails. Essentially, this is a short summary of your training program. For each item on this list, assign a rating scale from one to five. A rating of one implies that the employee has not understood the material and needs additional training, while a rating of five indicates that he or she is fully proficient.

**2** **Set a time frame for training.** Decide on a date by which you want the employee to be fully trained. The

pace of training will depend on the workload of the practice, the amount of time allocated to training, and the quality of your training materials, as well as the aptitude and motivation of the trainee. You should consider training the employee on days when the office is closed, as much more can be accomplished when there are no distractions.

**3** **Assign responsibility for training.** Decide which person within your office will take responsibility for providing training. One option is to have an employee with the same or similar job function spend a working day with the trainee, demonstrating how to do certain things. Ask the trainer to work through the training checklist one item at a time, starting with the simplest tasks, and then progressing to more complex tasks.

If the trainee is a new employee, the dentist should take the time to set out the vision for the practice before turning things over to the trainer. He or she should describe the basic goals of the practice. Why do certain tasks need to be done? What is the larger purpose? How will the new employee contribute to this purpose?

### When to stop training

There is such a thing as too much information. How can you tell if the trainee has fully understood the material? There are three things to consider:

- When demonstrating and teaching, stop periodically and ask the trainee to restate the main ideas to show that he or she understands what has just been covered.
- When the trainee's body language implies boredom, inattentiveness, or exhaustion, it may be time to test his or her competence on that task and move on to a new topic of instruction. This kind of body language may also indicate that he or she is not motivated or interested in the job, in which case you need to confront the issue immediately and see if he or she is truly suitable for the position.
- Have the trainee perform the task while you monitor, assist, and correct. Once he or she has mastered the task, you are ready to move on to the instructions for the next item on your list. The trainee needs to score at least a four on your rating scale before you progress to the next task. You should ask the trainee to sign his or her name or initials next to each particular task on the training program list.

Investing in strong training programs makes sense, as they help new employees succeed, bring consistency and excellence to your operations, nurture talent, and improve the stability of your practice. Well-trained employees will allow your practice to perform at an even higher level. ♦

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