The world is going digital, and dentistry is no exception. As practices strive to stay up-to-date, digital technology can be incorporated into practices to enhance and simplify procedures, helping dentists to achieve the maximum return on investment in more ways than one. Newer technology allows dental offices to offer advanced, more streamlined services, accept more patients and provide treatments with greater efficiency.

Integrating technology into practices requires a delicate combination of clinical and management skills and should not be undertaken without careful planning. Because technology is an investment of time, money and human adoption, a detailed, sequential plan of action can help a practice realize its objectives and goals more effectively. Here are some considerations for developing such a plan to ensure implementation and financial success when making a fundamental change with technology at the core.

**Understanding changes in the dental practice**

Practices may find it easy to make minor changes, but major changes, such as switching to a new practice management system, may be more difficult. Many practices struggle the most when it comes to fundamental changes, a category under which integrating advanced technology such as CAD/CAM, digital radiography or laser dentistry generally falls. Fundamental change requires a change in mindset, which many people do not want to experience, especially when it will disrupt their normal habits and comfort zone.

Introducing CAD/CAM and changing how we provide restorations involved more than just the technology and equipment. It also involved scheduling patients for single-visit restorations and altering the way appointments were handled. Patients come in for fewer visits but for longer periods of time. There was initial hesitation amongst the staff to learn a new way of doing restorations; it was unfamiliar and intimidating. Now, it is a seamlessly integrated process for the practice, and we can’t imagine not having it.

**Integration objectives and specific measures**

When considering implementing a new process, procedure or technology, it’s worthwhile for dentists to consider its economic feasibility.
Understand that a return on investment may not be immediately realized. So if new equipment is not needed, it may not be wise to make a purchase for the sake of buying something new. For example, if you do very few indirect restorations per month, you may find your current technology and processes serve your purpose. It is important to distinguish between what you need and what you want.

However, it can be helpful to integrate new technology even if the expected return on investment is not very high nor urgently needed. My practice proved to be economical in ways we hadn’t considered. We drastically cut down on our patients’ radiation exposure, procedures are much more streamlined, and patients are much happier with the care they receive.

Additionally, using CAD/CAM can enhance productivity by allowing an assistant to design restorations in the office. Techniques become more streamlined, and the entire process is simplified when performed in-office.

Managing the human side of technology

Dental professionals must stay abreast of new technologies. Opportunities for learning are easily accessible, especially online, where webinars, discussion groups and communities of dentists can be found. Dental professionals should take advantage of these options to develop and enhance their skill sets, as well as for continuing education.

When dentists first began taking impressions, it was a frustrating experience, required a lot of effort and no one knew how to do it correctly. Introducing new technology is the same way. Once new procedures are learned and mastered, office productivity soars.

One of the biggest mistakes a practice can make is giving up too quickly. This is easy to do when change is frustrating, success is not immediately realized, or integration is unwelcomed by staff. This underscores the need for a detailed plan for integration that incorporates staff opinions. When everyone sees that change does not just mean the introduction of new technology but a new mindset and approach to how they will practice, they can become active participants in the transformation.

The dentist’s multiple roles

During any given day, dentists wear one of three hats: clinician, manager and practice owner. As a clinician, we consider what is best for patients. As a manager, you are responsible for your staff, so you can involve them in decisions that affect them so they will be more receptive to change. As a practice owner, you also can consider what will be best for the practice.

Digital technology, therefore, should provide you with a return on investment, whether through a monetary profit, new patients, enhanced patient care or more efficient and productive teamwork flow.

Asking the right questions

A well-thought-out plan that addresses the right questions can accelerate your return on investment. It is critical that the staff have an open mind, are willing to move forward with change and see the change as a paradigm shift in the practice, not just the installation of new equipment.

Underlying problems with a practice need to be honestly addressed ahead of time. These changes become a great opportunity to recalibrate systems and procedures that may have been overlooked. Incorporating new technology into a practice does not fix what is wrong, but it will enhance what is already working well.

No matter what changes need to be implemented, know that you must be willing to provide leadership and focus to your staff throughout the process.

About the author

Gary Kaye, DDS, FAGD, completed his graduate dental school training at the Columbia School of Oral Medicine in New York City. He is recognized as one of the first general dentists in the United States to be certified in Invisalign; is the founder of Kaye Dentistry PLLC, a world-class reconstructive, cosmetic and implant dental practice; and is the founder and director of the New York Center for Digital Dentistry. Kaye consults with other dentists and dental manufacturers, lectures on topics including ceramics, occlusion and digital dentistry, and performs live patient demonstrations to dentist audiences. He is a graduate of the Dawson Center for Advanced Dental Training, a member of the International Speaker’s Academy and is on the guest faculty for Planmeca University in Richardson, Texas.