Most of us would jump at the chance to improve our dental practice free of charge if we were given the chance. This is, of course, unlikely to happen unless we win a competition or someone just hands us the money. In reality, it’s a totally different story. Making improvements to surgery costs a lot, so a large sum of capital will be required, and is usually borrowed at a cost that might haunt you in the future.

The hidden costs
Change rarely happens easily and the stresses brought to bear on you and your staff are not insignificant. Few people deal readily with building work going on around them. The alternative to closing your surgery while building work is carried out merely adds to the cost. There is also the risk that the end result falls short of the standard you envisaged. There may be technical problems that are difficult to correct. Your new equipment might have looked sensational at the trade show or showroom, but not so good in your new environment. Designs that look clever on paper, might be dysfunctional in practice.

Most dispiriting of all, is the thought patients might regret rather than approve of the changes. They might see it as a cost they’ll have to bear, and when you come to sell your surgery, it may be difficult to recoup your investment. These are the downside factors against change.

Creating a space
There are few professions more confining or restrictive in a physical sense than dentistry. Most dentists spend eight hours a day, five days a week, in a cell. Why then would you not want that cell to be as perfect as you can make it, with design, equipment, lighting, air exchange and general ambiance all functionally and aesthetically optimal? Why would you want to subject your back and neck, eyes and ears to more strain than is necessary?

A question of pride
What about your self-esteem? And that of your employees? How do you feel your patients feel about your place of work? A place to be tolerated (or worse, endured), or one to be praised at Saturday night dinner? Your surgery and reception room are your shop-front, your ‘come hither’ showcase, an essential part of your extended being. To be seen as less than excellent is to be less than excellent, and you pay a price for that, perhaps greater than the price you would pay to see it as the best. There is a very simple test: how do you feel when you walk to and through your front door? The answer is anything less than ‘great’, you are selling yourself and your profession short. That aforementioned cell will be no more welcoming than a prison cell, and you will feel just as imprisoned.

On the other hand, walking into a newly-created or refurbished, functionally designed, state-of-the-art practice can lift your spirits, improve your output, increase your earnings, protect your body, reduce your staff turnover and please your patients. Which of those would you not wish to have, whatever the cost?

Most dentists spend eight hours in a cell.

The Sceptic presents
The case for... and against...
Improving your practice will make it more appealing, but there are many pitfalls. Ed Bonner weighs up the pros and cons

The 10th Dimension
The power of 10...
...a series of articles by Dr Ed Bonner BDS MDent, Sloan Fellow London Business School, practice development consultant & coach

Managing Time
‘What is done, cannot be undone’
‘Time and tide wait for no man’
‘When in the chronicle of wasted time...’ (Shakespeare sonnet)
‘The abbreviation of time, and the failure of hope, will always die with a browner shade the evening of life.’ (Edward Gibbon, English historian)
‘The moving finger writes, and having writ, Moves on: not all thy piety nor wit Shall have it backwardenced to cancel half a line, nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.’ (The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam: Edward Fitzgerald)

What message does all of the above (and many other proverbs and poems) have in common? That of all the resources available to us, time is the scarcest and most valuable of all. We don’t value it when we have it in abundance, and fret when we don’t have it. Stephen Covey (First Things First).

Consider the following list of time wasters in practice:
1. Failed and cancelled appointments
2. Having to redo dental work through poor technique by self and/or dental technician; greasing or re-cementing provisional restorations
3. Misplacing laboratory work; misfiling x-rays and files
4. Defective equipment breaking down during procedures
5. Down-time between patients
6. Not having appropriate instruments and materials to hand
7. Inadequately trained staff
8. Pausing tooth preparation to answer phone calls etc
9. Being interrupted during clinical procedures by suction or rinsing
10. Spending more time than necessary striving for perfection when good is good enough.

Each of these statements would contribute to inefficiencty, together, to frustration, loss of earnings, annoyed patients, and poor interpersonal relationships.

Just think who gets stressed when you run 15 minutes late; your patient; the next patient in the waiting room; your nurse, your receptionist, and not least, you! Time management is a necessary skill to be learned and applied, and begins with a considered and systematic analysis of one’s daily activities. That said, it is worth employing someone to sit in your surgery with a stop-watch and note-pad and observe and measure your daily routine.

However, this is only a starting point, for what you will be quantifying is the percentage of your time you are using inefficiently. Stephen Covey defines ‘efficiency’ as getting more done in less time. However, doing more is not necessarily doing better. To do better is to become more effective, and this should be your goal. One way of becoming more effective is to prioritise your time, and scrap what’s unnecessary. Just think: improving your time by 20 per cent is equivalent to working one day less per week, having a day off to play golf, or read or spend with your family. This creates a better balance among the various roles in your life... not worth striving for?

Got a comment on this article? Email and tell us at editor@dentaltribuneuk.com and let us have your views.