Finders Keepers
Solving staffing issues by Kate Russell, the HR Headmistress

We all know that maintaining high standards is essential for business success. This success largely comes from being able to attract and retain employee talent. We also know that it’s increasingly hard to source and keep great workers. In my experience, the major headache for busy dental practices is staffing issues.

Many practices don’t give staff retention the priority it deserves. You can pay a heavy price if it is ignored. Some of the main impacts of poor staff retention include:

- the costs of recruiting permanent or temporary replacements
- the loss of practice and/or technical knowledge and skills
- additional pressure on the practice manager who is responsible for recruiting to the vacant post and inscribing and training the new recruit
- service disruption, lower levels of customer service and loss of new business; and
- a climate of uncertainty and low morale among remaining staff, particularly if several employees within the same section or team leave within a short timescale.

Reasons for staff turnover vary from practice to practice and you will have to investigate the reasons and create a plan to address any common causes of dissatisfaction. There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution to reducing turnover, but there are a range of strategies that you can use to boost staff retention.

Start by selecting people who are right for the role and the practice. Commit to recruiting the best possible person for each position and don’t compromise. Be prepared to pay for the right talent. It is far less costly in the long run to pay more for the right employee than it is to keep getting it wrong. Involve existing staff in the recruitment process.

Create a pipeline of suitable candidates. This is more easily said than done, so as well as using the more traditional routes, for example, placing job advertisements in trade journals, think creatively to source candidates.

For example, keep a list of patients who inquire about job possibilities for future reference. Other good sources are local schools, community colleges, or referrals from other staff members. The use of commercial job boards, corporate websites, and social media platforms are also useful.

Identify the essential job-related selection criteria so

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that job requirements can be matched to the skills and experience of candidates. Don’t just take on a pair of hands because you’re desperate. It’s tempting but believe me, you’ll regret it. Make sure you collect relevant data and only progress the best candidates. Your choice of selection tools should be based on job-related criteria. Use testing in conjunction with a competence based interview.

When you are interviewing encourage candidates to talk about themselves and their work experiences. Use open-ended questions to do this, for example: “What did you like best about your former role?” Ask questions and/or test all the essential areas. Probe for more information if you're not satisfied or not clear about the data you're getting.

Once you have appointed your employees, take positive steps to encourage the right people to stay.

Involve them by creating a vision for your practice and let your staff know what it is, what it means for them and what they need to do to support it.

Surveys consistently show that what employees want most, even more than money, is appreciation and recognition. Look for opportunities to give regular positive feedback. Offer balanced and objective praise where appropriate and make suggestions for areas that need improvement. Provide clear and measurable standards of performance and give examples of what success looks like. Help employees achieve optimum performance and give objective feedback if they don’t meet all your standards. Where you do have to give criticism make sure it’s done in private.

I have already referred to this but if you want to achieve high standards of performance you will need to appoint above-average performers. It means you must pay above-average wages. Consider introducing performance related bonuses. If you reward the type of behaviour you want to receive, you will receive more of that behaviour. It creates a win-win for you. Employees enjoy a share of increased profits, and the practice achieves higher levels of productivity and profitability.

Create a great employee workplace. As well as good pay, make sure there is up-to-date technology which is straightforward to use and works well and ongoing development opportunities. Good staff enjoy working with other good staff so ask yourself the following question: “Would I want to work here? If I were looking for a job, would this be an attractive opportunity?”

Communicate effectively. Have periodic staff meetings (once a month) to structure higher level practice feedback, plan forthcoming activities and provide information. Keep the meeting short (45 minutes), create the agenda and distribute several days before the meeting, to give participants time to prepare. Stick to the agenda and don’t allow yourself to be sidetracked.

Assembling the right team takes time and effort. So be rigorous about the recruitment process and when you have to achieved the right appointments make sure you take steps to keep them happy and wanting to stay with you.

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About the author
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