

RISK MANAGEMENT ARTICLE

11 Strategies to Address Staffing Challenges

The nationwide shortage of dental hygienists and assistants has reinforced the need for dental practice leaders to shift their approach to staff recruitment and retention, as staffing shortages take their toll on remaining staff and, in some cases, quality of care. Research by the American Dental Association (ADA) Health Policy Institute (HPI) has [estimated](#) that vacant positions for dental assistants and dental hygienists have reduced dental practice capacity by 10% nationally. Further, recent HPI [surveys](#) have found that one in three dentists identified “trouble filling vacant staff positions” as a contributing factor preventing them from filling their appointment schedules.

Dental practice owners know that investing in their workforce yields financial rewards. High-quality support from dental hygienists and dental assistants helps to reduce the likelihood of [patient safety events](#) and costly medical [malpractice](#) lawsuits related to missed errors. Administrative staff are also essential for any dental practice to function properly and to ensure patients have a positive experience. Ensuring appropriate staffing levels is key to the financial health of dental practices, which means engaging in effective recruitment and retention strategies.

Recruitment

You need to work closely with human resources professionals to ensure recruitment processes are efficient and effective.

Craft ads that work. First impressions count. Everyone is your competitor for a limited pool of talent, so do what you can to make your practice stand out as an attractive place to work. Be sure images in recruitment ads reflect who works for the practice, particularly when it comes to diversity. Some organizations feature their own staff in ads, which can have the additional benefit of employee recognition.

Reach out early. Ask colleagues or others who work with dental, dental assistant, and dental hygienist students to identify those who might make good employees when they graduate. Then get to know the students and encourage them to apply when the time comes.

Promote digital efforts. Dental practices' websites often miss the opportunity to feature dental hygienists and dental assistants. Your practice's website should have a special section highlighting the role of dental hygienists and assistants, including stories that feature individual staff members. In addition, your organization's job application process should not be so cumbersome that potential employees give up in frustration.

Individualize benefits. Avoid a “one size fits all” approach to benefits. Instead, offer a menu that staff can choose from. For example, a late-career dental hygienist may be more interested in retirement-matching funds, but a newer-to-practice dental assistant may be attracted to a flexible schedule, tuition or student loan assistance, or child-care benefits.

Provide optimal onboarding. This is often discussed as a retention tool, but it also falls under the recruitment category, as potential employees want to know how supported they will be in their new role. Be sure staff feel warmly welcomed. For example, some organizations send a signed welcome card to the employee's home before their start date. Others post the employee's name and photo in a visible location in the office.

Check in regularly with new staff to see how they are adjusting, such as weekly for a month, then every other month or so, and then after 6 months.

Retention

The [Society for Human Resource Management](#) estimates that it costs about one-third of an employee's annual salary to replace them, due to expenses related to recruitment, temporary replacement workers, and lost productivity. This makes retention a key component of a dental practice's staffing strategies.

Conduct "stay" interviews. Stay interviews help you identify employees who might be thinking about leaving the organization and identify what factors are most important for helping them stay. You can use the information to create an individual retention plan and to inform your larger retention efforts for the practice. Here are some examples of questions that can help elicit useful information during stay interviews:

- *"What do you look forward to each day when you commute to work?"* This question focuses on the present and helps identify factors other than pay and benefits, such as relationships with colleagues.
- *"What are you learning here, and what do you want to learn?"* This helps managers focus their career coaching.
- *"Why do you stay here?"* Staff may have not thought about this before, so help them reflect on their reasons.
- *"When is the last time you thought about leaving and what prompted it?"* Everyone sometimes thinks about leaving their job, but what prompted those thoughts can be informative.
- *"What can I do to make your job better for you?"* Once you hear the response, be honest about what you can do and not do.

Employees often think about leaving their positions around their work anniversary date, so leaders should try to conduct stay interviews 60 to 90 days beforehand.

Promote a healthy work environment. For example, implement zero tolerance policies for patient or visitor violence against staff and policies that discourage staff from bullying their colleagues. Beyond policies, it is also important to ensure lines of communication are open, so your staff feel comfortable speaking with you when they identify problem areas. You can foster open lines of communication by taking time to get to know your staff on a more personal level, without crossing boundaries. For example, asking about a grandchild or a new pet takes little time, but signals your interest.

Make rounds daily and listen to staff closely, even though you're busy and face multiple pressures of your own. Ask them questions such as, "What do you need to do your job more effectively?" If it's something that you can take care of, do so and let them know it's been done. If you can't address the issue, explain why and, if appropriate, note that it may be able to be addressed in the future. For instance, a requested new piece of equipment might have to wait until the next budget cycle.

Avoid sign-on bonuses. Sign-on bonuses may help to ease staffing woes short term, but don't ensure commitment, and can even lead to resentment from current staff. Instead, focus on improving staff pay scales or offering retention bonuses to show appreciation for your staff's commitment to the organization.

Recognize employees. Recognition is an easy, but often underutilized, retention tactic. Take every opportunity to offer words of praise. To reinforce the behavior, specify what specifically was done to earn praise; for example, a staff member may have taken extra time to help a patient with a billing issue. In these days of digital communication, a handwritten note can stand out, particularly if sent to the person's home. Small rewards such as gift cards can also be effective- but try to match them to the individual's interest. For example, a dental assistant who drinks coffee every day may enjoy a Starbucks card, but one who loves to read might prefer a card from Barnes & Noble.

Support career development. Explore staff members' professional goals and how you can help meet them during stay interviews and other conversations. It's a good idea to keep a mental list of options such as serving as a manager or mentor and leading project teams. Offer meaningful opportunities for professional growth based on performance, rather than solely based on tenure. Outline for your staff the types of experiences or skills that are most valuable for advancement and reinforce the value of experience for your staff members' long-term career growth.

Consider a job embeddedness approach. Job embeddedness (JE) focuses on why people stay in their jobs as opposed to why they leave. JE looks at ties related to employers and the community where they exist. These ties are considered in three dimensions: *links* (formal and informal connections people have with their employers or communities), *fit* (how compatible people feel with their employers or communities), and *sacrifice* (material and psychological losses people would experience by leaving their employers or communities). You can leverage these dimensions to promote retention. For example, to help promote JE within the practice:

- Links: Involve staff in problem-solving committees and practice management.
- Fit: Recruit staff whose goals align with the practice's goals.
- Sacrifice: Align vacation time and retirement plans with the time of service.

A multifaceted approach

Staffing challenges are unlikely to ease anytime soon. Dental practice leaders will need to be creative and take a multifaceted approach to staff recruitment and retention. These efforts will help gain—and retain—staff. Doing so in turn helps support optimal patient outcomes.

References

- Advisory Board. *Struggling to keep entry-level staff engaged? Try a performance-based career ladder*. 2017. <https://www.advisory.com/blog/2017/02/pef-career-ladder>
- ADA Health Policy Institute. *Dental workforce shortages: Data to navigate today's labor market*. October 2022. https://www.ada.org/-/media/project/adaorganization/ada/ada-org/files/resources/research/hpi/dental_workforce_shortages_labor_market.pdf
- ADA Health Policy Institute. *Economic outlook and emerging issues in dentistry, week of September 12, 2022*. September 2022. https://www.ada.org/-/media/project/adaorganization/ada/ada-org/files/resources/research/hpi/sept2022_hpi_economic_outlook_dentistry_report_main.pdf
- Agovino, T. To have and to hold. *Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)*. 2019. <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/to-have-and-to-hold.aspx>
- CNA & Dentist's Advantage. *Dental Professional Liability Claim Report: 2nd Edition*. 2021. <https://www.dentists-advantage.com/Prevention-Education/Claim-Reports>
- Pink D. When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing. *Riverhead Books*; 2019.
- Reitz O, Anderson M, Hill PD. Job embeddedness and nurse retention. *Nurs Admin Q*. 2010;34(3):190-200.
- Saver C. Retaining nurses in a post-pandemic era—Part 1. *OR Manager*. 2021;37(9):12-15.
- Sherman RO. *The Nuts and Bolts of Nursing Leadership: Your Toolkit for Success*. Rose. O. Sherman; 2021.

Note: This information is provided for general informational purposes only and is not intended to provide individualized legal or tax advice. Readers should consult with a lawyer or tax professional if they have specific concerns. Neither Affinity Insurance Services, Inc., Dentist's Advantage, NSDP, nor CNA assumes any liability for how this information is applied in practice or for the accuracy of this information.

© Dentist's Advantage, 2024 © The National Society of Dental Practitioners, 2024

Risk Management services are provided by Dentist's Advantage and the NSDP to assist the insured in fulfilling his or her responsibilities for the control of potential loss-producing situations involving their dental operations. The information contained in this document is not intended as legal advice. Laws are under constant review by courts and the states and are different in each jurisdiction. For legal advice relating to any subject addressed in this document, dentists are advised to seek the services of a local personal attorney. The information is provided "AS IS" without warranty of any kind and Dentist's Advantage and NSDP expressly disclaims all warranties and conditions with regard to any information contained, including all implied warranties of merchantability and fitness for a particular purpose. Dentist's Advantage and NSDP assume no liability of any kind for information and data contained or for any legal course of action you may take or diagnosis or treatment made in reliance thereon.