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Navigating Today's Workforce Challenge

Looking for short-term solutions to stem the tide of a vexing problem.

Betsy Bray, R.D.H., B.S.

If you are having difficulty staffing your dental office, you are not alone. Workforce challenges, namely, recruiting, hiring and retaining qualified and competent employees, are nearing crisis level in all areas of healthcare. The pandemic only exacerbated staffing disruptions and obstacles.

How will we build a sustainable future for dentistry? Understanding the current employment landscape will help us navigate the future. In the U.S. today, unemployment is at its lowest rate (3.4%) since 1964.¹ According to labor trending, the percentage of full-time employees (ages 16 to 64) who worked year-round dipped from 52.9% to 50.5% between 2019 and 2021.² At the same time, the United States Census reports that the number of people working from home has tripled in the last three years. These variables equate to fewer viable candidates to add to the dental workforce.

While we work to identify long-term solutions by evaluating education, licensing obstacles and industry disruptors, dentists need short-term solutions today.

When it comes to staff recruitment and retention, the game has gotten harder to play. We must learn how to discern both the priorities of candidates and our own challenges for adapting to healthcare's changing landscape.

Once upon a time, offering another dollar an hour than the practice down the road seemed to do the trick. Attracting and retaining candidates in today's market requires asking the right questions and listening to what motivates and satisfies them. According to the ADA Dental Workforce Shortages Report, 3.75%

of hygienists surveyed (5,122) voluntarily left the workforce in 2021.³ While we know roughly five percent left due to COVID safety concerns,⁴ a staggering 42.9% of those surveyed reported their reason for leaving the field was workplace culture.

Although many complex variables exist in care delivery today, the environment in which we work is something we can control. You may be asking, how do I know if I have a positive workplace culture? And what steps can I take to nurture one? According to industry experts, it comes down to four key factors: praise, a sense of challenge, the opportunity to grow and economic reward.⁵ Creating an atmosphere that focuses on these key areas can reduce stress and lead to staffing stability. "The most misunderstood concept when hiring and retaining team members is that the formula will flip if the first three (praise, challenge, opportunity for growth) are not in balance" Majors (2022).

With no end to staffing shortages in the near future, it is important to work smarter, not harder. There are numerous technology products on the market to assist dentists to increase office efficiencies. These include online scheduling options, automated payment systems, incorporating teledentistry, and employment matching and credentialing.

Perhaps consider moving to a cloud-based practice management system. The latest software systems can streamline patient recordkeeping, insurance processing and help keep your files organized and accessible.

There are DSOs and small private practices whose strategy to compete with staff is purely financial (signing bonuses, hourly wages, etc.). It can be difficult for small private practices to compete with this approach.

To learn more, I asked Dr. Chris Salerno, chief dental officer at Tend, his thoughts on the challenges of developing and maintaining the dental workforce today.

BB: From your perspective, what are the top industry disruptors changing dentistry today?

CS: The top industry disruptor, in my opinion, is the data revealing current supply and demand. Research from the ADA Health Policy Institute predicts that the supply of dentists will increase through 2040, while demand for our services is not increasing at the same rate.⁶ The second disruptor is dental practices' profit margin squeeze, that is, rising costs that have been met with flat or even decreasing third-party payer reimbursements. The third disruptor is the workforce. While some hygienists and dental assistants left the profession during COVID-19, we are starting to see data supporting the hypothesis that many of those who remain are shifting to part-time work, which further burdens staffing.

BB: What are candidates requesting in interviews seeking employment?

CS: I am routinely asked about the culture of the practice and about continuing education. People want to work in a warm, equitable environment with a team that inspires them to be better. And they want clear opportunities to improve their skill sets through CE and mentorship.

BB: What is your advice to small practices competing with DSOs for staff?

CS: There are DSOs and small private practices whose strategy to compete with staff is purely financial (signing bonuses, hourly wages, etc.). It can be difficult for small private practices to compete with this approach. My advice to independent practices is two-fold.

First, determine if your practice is truly offering a fair wage. The current workforce challenge has led to a market correction on wages. In some cases, this was long overdue. While your strategy for attracting team members shouldn't be purely finan-

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cial, you should take the steps to ensure that your offered compensation is fair, affordable and competitive.

Second, compete on your employer value proposition. Why should someone work for you rather than for someone else? What is unique about your practice? Your answers to that question should be clearly stated in your job posts and communicated in your interviews. Examples of non-financial incentives include office culture, continuing education and career growth opportunities, to name a few.

BB: In your experience, have licensing rules and regulations been an obstacle for recruiting associates?

CS: Yes, unfortunately. The licensing process is unnecessarily complex. The less egregious examples involve additional approvals and notarized paperwork that add time and potential for incompleteness to the process. These “soft barriers” are still concerning, as employers can lose out on potential employees who take a position where they are already licensed.

Most concerning are the harder barriers, such as when a state board refuses to admit a candidate simply because they did not take its preferred licensure exam. For example, a dentist who has been practicing without incident for several years but who was licensed on a mannequin exam would have to take a live-patient exam if they wish to practice in Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, South Carolina, Wisconsin, West Virginia or Wyoming. Why does our profession continue to raise these artificial barriers that limit portability?

Critical Review

While we work to address both short- and long-term solutions for workforce shortages, take a good look at your practice. Evaluate your platforms, current workflow and gauge employee satisfaction. Improve efficiencies by assessing your current systems and look for ways to streamline. Ultimately, these steps will make your practice healthier in the long run.

In the coming months, NYSDA plans to highlight workforce resources created by the ADA to guide its members. Look for topics such as managing the dental team, hiring and training, and promoting dental team professional careers in your community. A partial list appears below.*

- **ADA.org/DentalStaff**

Managing the Dental Team

This page offers nine description cards with links that will take you to a variety of ADA resources, including articles, dental staff position descriptions, podcast episodes, ADA CE online courses and more.

- **ADA Career Center**

Official online job board to recruit, connect dental professionals.


- **ADA.org/Allied Career Flyers**

Promoting Careers as a Dental Team Professional

This page includes downloadable PDF flyers that dentists and their staff can use to help promote awareness of dental team careers. Further down the page, you’ll find a listing of many other sources of information for hiring, training and retaining dental staff. Click on any of the headers, under the section titled “Additional resources to hire and train your dental staff” and you’ll see links to these additional resources.

- **HPI dental profession education trending**

Allied professions research and trending

Please note: Resources marked “Member Exclusive” require a user ID and password to view the full content. 

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