



Mary H. Osborne, Resources

PRACTICE RENEWAL

A Leadership Guide for Dentists

Competing for Talent

It doesn't matter what group I'm addressing or where I'm visiting, I hear the same comment: "I don't know how it is where you are, but in _____ (add in your town's name) it's really hard to find and keep good people." I've heard that comment consistently in the years I have been speaking and consulting with practices, but I believe it is more true today than it has ever been. The job market is changing dramatically. Not only do we have record low unemployment, but there is a shift in attitude about employment that cannot be ignored.

Finding a secure work situation where one could spend the rest of his or her work life is becoming a thing of the past. In today's world of rapidly changing technology, greater mobility, and unlimited opportunities for growth, it takes more than decent working conditions to attract and retain talented people.

According to Trends Research Institute, one of the most significant trends for the coming age will be that of *right livelihood*. Right livelihood refers to a position that offers job satisfaction, creativity, and freedom to the individual.

Your practice cannot afford not to choose from the most talented people. The traditional model of a dentist and a group of loyal, hardworking "auxiliaries" hired to do what they are told doesn't fit with the

future of a high-tech, consumer-oriented profession.

Practices that thrive today and in the future will be those which have the ability to consistently hire and retain exceptionally talented people. The more discretionary your services, the more discerning will be the patients you attract.

Those patients who are most open to your finest clinical services are more likely to expect an exceptional level of service throughout your practice. You must commit to a continual process of finding and supporting employees who have the ability to serve your patients on that level.

Organizational Model

The traditional model in dentistry has been based on rigid and limiting job descriptions for assistants, hygienists, and administrators. We have hired based on their skills, experience, and knowledge of tasks in a narrowly defined area within the practice.

Although team members may have worked cooperatively, their responsibility for individual tasks was clearly delineated. For example, an assistant might develop a

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“hygienist’s” x-rays. A hygienist may scrub “the assistant’s” instruments. Someone else may pull charts or enter treatment for the “person at the front desk.”

As the dental computer replaced the appointment book, the pegboard, the recall files, and the spreadsheet, the organizational model has continued to change. The days when all information was held by the “girl at the desk” are gone. The front desk is no longer the only place where business can be conducted. Employees other than the receptionist can accept payments and make appointments to assist your patients and raise your practice’s service to higher standards of convenience and care.

The service model in all industries is changing. The stereotype of the waitress who says, “It’s not my station,” has been replaced by an expectation that everyone who works in a business should be responsive to the needs of the customer. With information about almost anything readily available to everyone in an organization, we are becoming less patient with individuals who can’t tell us what we need to know or help us find it quickly.

The first step in finding and keeping the right people for your practice is to rethink what it takes to get the job done. Dentistry has changed dramatically over the years, but the organizational model in many practices tends to lag behind the curve. Sometimes it seems as though we are still

hiring for people to smile, scrape teeth, pass instruments, or enter data into computers. Simplistic job descriptions for hygienists, dental assistants, and receptionists simply do not apply today as they did in the past. As in all industries today, there is less room for an employee who has a single focus.

Beyond Job Descriptions

Progressive practices recognize the need to put the patient in the center of the model, and organize the gifts and talents of each team member around how to serve the patient best. In this model, no matter whose schedule a patient is on, it is each employee’s responsibility to see to it that each patient is well-served. The x-rays are not “the hygienist’s” x-rays; they are *the patient’s* x-rays. The instruments and the charts are *the patients’* instruments and charts. While some tasks may remain the same, **this realization refocuses the team on the *primary* responsibility — to utilize everyone’s talents to better serve each patient.**

In a progressive practice a hygienist may spend more time talking with patients than scaling their teeth. A dental assistant may work through scheduling or financial problems with patients. A person who works in the front office may help a patient learn how to care for his or her mouth.

Mary H. Osborne’s *Practice Renewal* is published by Mary H. Osborne, *Resources*. This leadership guide is designed to challenge, inspire, and support dentists and their teams. Mary H. Osborne, *Resources*.

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The model I'm describing may include cross-training, but it doesn't stop there. It requires deep understanding of what the profession of dentistry is all about. The events I've described don't happen by delegation, but by an employee's ability to prioritize the use of his or her gifts and talents to respond to the needs of each patient.

Progressive practices today are organized more around talent than tasks. They hire people for intelligence as well as skills, for creativity as well as experience, and for passion as well as knowledge. Those practices have an ongoing commitment to finding, attracting and maintaining people who are capable of that kind of commitment.

This model is not merely pragmatic. It is intentional and operates out of the highest standards of professionalism. Dr. L.D. Pankey described professionalism as "the use of superior knowledge, skill, and judgment toward the benefit of another person . . . prior to any consideration of self-interest." That standard requires practices to hire employees who are capable of understanding and owning the philosophy and mission of the practice. It requires retaining people who have the ability to act with integrity and competence on behalf of the practice.

Stepping Out of the Box

In the lifetime of any business the lives of its employees will change, and some individuals will move on. Birth, death, illness, as well as opportunities for personal and professional growth, are all part of the cycle of life. No business is immune to those changes. Unfortunately, most practices lose sight of that fact until they come face to face with the loss of key team players.

Ideally, every practice would have an ongoing commitment to attracting people who will serve the patients as well as the employees who are leaving that practice. **Developing relationships**

with talented people who share your values — even when you are not searching for new team members — will put you in a very different position for those times when you are interested in hiring new people.

A dentist, who is a friend and client, contacted a placement agency when she was replacing an administrative person. They found a very bright young woman with a background in psychology whose most recent experience was working in the prison system. She can handle the administrative tasks, and they know she will take her role in the practice beyond an administrative one into helping their patients make choices about their health.

When another dentist was visiting their practice, she recognized this young woman as a patient of hers and said, "If I had known she was interested in working in dentistry, I would have hired her." The young woman was not "interested in working in dentistry." She was looking for a job that would allow her to use her gifts and talents. This practice will not let a job description limit this young woman in any way. They value the unique contribution she can make to the practice and helped her see the position in their practice as a unique opportunity for her.

In spite of conventional wisdom about the job market, there are talented people out there who can be successful in dentistry today. I've talked with them. They may not have dental experience, but they have other qualities which lend themselves well to today's dentistry. They are people who are comfortable and creative with computers. They are bright, enthusiastic, and many of them have business, communication, and marketing experience that bring new energy to dentistry.

If you confine yourself to people who have experience in dentistry, you dramatically limit the pool from which you can draw. I do not want to minimize the challenges of training someone with no experience in dentistry, but I see practices every day who are delighted they accepted that challenge.

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A Marketing Plan for Hiring

How would your hiring process be different if you had a marketing plan in place for hiring? What if your practice became known as “*the place to work*” in and out of the dental community? When talented people call *you* and ask to come to work in your practice, you know you have an effective hiring strategy. I know a number of practices where that is the case, but it rarely happens by accident.

Just as you intentionally communicate your clinical philosophy to distinguish yourselves in the minds and hearts of your patients and potential patients, you can distinguish your practice as a unique place to work. Just as you see everyone you meet as a potential patient, you can see everyone you meet as a potential team member.

When I was practicing hygiene, I remember a hygienist who stopped by one day to drop off a résumé. We had no need for a hygienist at that time, but we invited her in, introduced her around, and she ended up spending most of the morning with us. Before she left we had conducted an informal interview, and she came away with a great deal of knowledge about the practice and each of us.

We kept her résumé and called her when we needed a hygienist for a day I was going to be out of the office. When I returned, I found a note from her in my treatment room warning me to check under my car for dynamite. “I want your job!” the note read. We stayed in contact with her, and a year or so later when we wanted to add a hygienist one day a week, she left her job to come to work with us.

How often have you accepted a résumé without pursuing the relationship further? That hygienist’s résumé could have been a worthless lead in our files. She was not unhappy in the job she had

taken. If we had not established a relationship

with her she would have just told us she already had a job. But she didn’t just want a job, she wanted to work in *our* practice.

The Place To Work

Becoming known as “*the place to work*” is a great process, and one that won’t happen overnight. When it does, it will be a reflection of your values and the values of your community. There is no formula, but there are three very definite steps you can take:

- ♦ Identify what makes your practice a good place to work now.
- ♦ Make your workplace even better.
- ♦ Spread the word!

1. How Attractive Is Your Practice?

Begin by considering what there is about your practice that makes it an attractive place to work. If you were looking for a job, what would make you want to work here? How does what you offer compare with other employment opportunities in your area? Consider all the advantages of working in your practice: relationships, working conditions, opportunities for growth, salary, hours, and benefits.

If you have current team members who possess some of the qualities you want to find in a new hire, ask them what they like about working in your practice, why they chose your practice, and why they stay.

If you have a very open and honest relationship with people on your team, ask them if they have a good friend who has the qualities you want in an employee, and would they encourage this friend to apply for the position? If so, what would they tell them about the practice? Spend some time on this to identify exactly what it is that makes your practice a unique place to work.

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2. What Would Make Your Practice More Attractive?

If you have the courage to hear their responses, also ask valued team members what reservations they might have about encouraging a friend to apply for a position. What would they share candidly with them about what it's like to work in your practice? No workplace is perfect, and most of us would want a friend to know both the good and the not-so-good things about a position we were encouraging them to apply for.

I know it may not be easy to hear things that people might see as drawbacks to working in your practice. However, I encourage you not to shy away from it, especially if you have had trouble filling a position. You might want to have someone facilitate the discussion.

Open yourself to the process of understanding how your practice is seen by the people who know it best: your current employees. Their perception is only their perception, but understanding it is vital to this process. There is nothing more attractive to potential employees than genuine and unqualified enthusiasm from your current employees.

In listening to reservations your team members might raise, listen for what is true in what they are saying. Try to resist defending your position. For example, if they say you are a perfectionist, you can stifle the discussion by justifying perfectionism in dentistry. Instead, you can think about how realistic your expectations are, and how you communicate about your expectations.

You may hear concerns about appreciation, compensation, hours, or relationships with others on the team. Whatever the issue, try to appreciate their courage in raising it with you, and talk about what it would take to eliminate it. Approach the discussion from the perspective that your practice is fine, and it can be better. If it were not a good place to work, then you would not have these good people working with you.

It's not one person's responsibility to "fix" anything in these discussions. Sometimes just understanding the challenges of the job will be enough. No expectation is unrealistic if it has been stated and agreed to. The purpose of the discussion is to understand clearly both the advantages and disadvantages of working in your practice.

Everyone on the team benefits from hiring good people, so everyone has a stake in making the practice a better place to work. The goal is to make it not just a good place to work, but *the place* to work. It's easy to fall into complacency about our workplace and to put up with conditions that are less than desirable. You can't create the perfect workplace, but you may be surprised at what you can do to make your practice a more enjoyable place to be.

3. Spread the Word!

When you have a clear picture of what makes your practice special, start talking about it. Not just to candidates, but to everyone and anyone.

- ◆ Tell patients and friends what you like about working in your practice. Not just when you need a new person, but whenever you see an opportunity to talk about what a great place your practice is to work.
- ◆ Talk about your practice at continuing education meetings, at church and community meetings, and at family gatherings. You never know who is looking for a great job opportunity or who knows someone who is job searching.
- ◆ Develop a relationship with dental and other placement agencies in your area. Invite the owner to lunch and let him or her know you have an exceptional practice and want to meet exceptional people. If you don't have a place for them now, you can help them explore other opportunities. Set yourself up as a resource for growth in your community.

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- ◆ When you are hiring, talk about your hiring process as an opportunity rather than as a burden. If patients comment on the length of the process, let them know you are not willing to hire just anyone to serve them. Tell them you know they have come to expect a lot from your practice, and you all agree that you don't want to let them down.
- ◆ If your practice has a reputation from past history of not being a good place to work, address the reputation directly. Especially in the dental community, word can spread quickly about a bad situation. Don't ignore rumors or dismiss "old stories." They have a long shelf life and should be addressed as directly as possible by saying, *"We are aware that this has been a problem in the past, but our practice has changed."*

Talking about what you like about your work has a lot of benefits, only one of which is helping you attract good people. Just as we can become complacent and ignore opportunities to improve our workplace, we can also miss opportunities to appreciate and celebrate it. The profession of dentistry and your practice have a lot to offer talented people.

What Attracts Talented People

Many practices have never thought about their ability to attract talented people. The emphasis tends to be on what is "out there." If response to an ad is not good or if other practices are having trouble hiring, the assumption is that there are no good people "out there." It's as if the only variable is the number of people available to hire at any given time. While the unemployment rate or the number of people graduating from hygiene school are factors, they are only part of the equation.

Corporate America has understood for a long time the importance of attracting talented people. Tom Peters writes about becoming a "Con-

noisseur of Talent." He suggests that employers become students of talent and begin to think like sports franchise general managers who are talent-obsessed.

In today's market, where employee loyalty can be counted on less and less, being connoisseurs of talent is even more critical. In a survey of over 1,800 employees conducted by Aon Consulting Inc., it was determined that it would take a raise of less than ten percent to make nearly a quarter of them leave their current job. Dentistry is not immune to this trend. Not only are talented people harder to attract and retain, but they are more critical to our success than ever.

What will attract the most talented individuals? There are a lot of variables, but research shows the following five topics to be very important to employees: individualized treatment, training, two-way communication, commitment to their financial success, and right livelihood.

Individualized Treatment

Aon Consulting's study found that the most effective way for companies to build loyalty was by recognizing the personal and family needs of the employees. Dr. David Stum, co-founder of Aon said, "It's not so much that they want the company to fix the problem, just recognize that it's tough." He said that interpersonal indifference causes people to turn away from companies.

From their Organizational Development Analysis, SRI Gallup found significant correlation between an organization's financial success and their employees' perception that the company cared about them.

Talented employees want to be treated as individuals, and they have a lot of choices about where they will work. They don't want rigid policies and programs; instead, they want a culture that allows for some flexibility when it makes sense. They want to know that their needs are being taken into consideration.

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Training

One of the perks offered by the most successful organizations is company-sponsored training. *Fortune* magazine's listing of "The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America" indicates that extensive employee training and development is emerging as the retention strategy of choice among top companies. The opportunity to learn and grow through their work is very attractive to employees today.

Years ago, I learned that a young woman from a practice I knew well was considering leaving because she was offered a rather prestigious position in another field. She struggled for some time before deciding to stay in the practice. One of the things she said she was aware of was that if she had left, she would have missed participating in a workshop on coaching that the practice was planning to attend. I'm not suggesting that is the reason she stayed, but it was certainly a part of the equation for her.

In study after study, the best companies are shown to have a commitment to the growth of their employees. They don't just *allow* continuing education, they *promote* it on every level. They may offer employees seminars, formal academic education, in-house training and facilitation, or reimbursement for books or software. The message that learning is a priority in the organization is clear, and it is very attractive to people who want to grow through their work.

Two-Way Communication

In the Information Age employees want to be involved on more than a "need to know" basis. Current technology makes that easier and more important. I have always believed that people who work in dental practices know more about the business than most dentists believe they do. In computerized practices there is greater access to all information about the practice. The more you

offer information to creative people, the more likely they are to find good ways to use it.

The best and the brightest people want access to the information *they think* they need in order to be effective. "What we found is that there is a real hunger for truth," Stum said.

Workers want to know where the company stands and where it is going. Employees also want communication to be a two-way street. They want their input to be welcome and valued. They want the opportunity to significantly influence the direction of the organization.

Commitment to Employees' Financial Success

It is vitally important that employees believe their employer wants them to be financially successful. They want to know that their effectiveness will be rewarded. Stock options are among the most significant factors which attract and retain employees. Certainly, there is an element of phenomenal potential for wealth, as in the case of the "Microsoft® millionaires."

More realistically, the message employees get from stock option packages is that the owners want the company to be profitable, and they want employees to reap the rewards of the business' success. That message goes beyond "good pay for good work." It speaks to the intention of the ownership as well as to its generosity. It indicates that there are no limits to what employees can achieve financially if they are effective team members.

Stock options have very little to do with rewarding effort and everything to do with rewarding effectiveness. They are not doled out at the whim of the employer, but are stated clearly in advance and easily tracked by information available to anyone who is interested. They encourage employees to take responsibility for their own success and for the success of their co-workers. They reflect a spirit of openness, mutual risk, and mutual commitment.

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Right Livelihood

Beyond issues of financial gain, more people want the opportunity to make a difference. They want their work to be more than just a way to earn a paycheck. They are less willing to invest their time and energy *only* into making money for themselves or their employer.

Many people today begin their careers with early retirement as their goal or with a plan to move on to more meaningful work at some time in the future. Some people realize late in life that their work has no meaning to them, and choose to change careers. They believe that work doesn't have to be drudgery, and that it is both desirable and *possible* to enjoy the time they spend at work.

They want their work to enrich — rather than compete with — their family, fun, and community activities. Freedom to pursue that kind of satisfaction is becoming more important to potential employees.

How You Can Compete

How does recent research on attracting and retaining talented people relate to your practice? How can you compete for the most talented employees if your practice is one that wants the best people? You can compete very well if you choose to. I believe dentistry has a lot to offer in the current job market.

I had the opportunity to interview a candidate for a practice I know well. The dentist was impressed with her and asked me to follow up on what he had learned. I interviewed her by phone and sent the doctor a recording of our conversation. It was a wonderful experience.

She was a bright, articulate young woman who had never worked in dentistry. She had an interesting and varied work history. I asked her what she thought she might enjoy about working

in a dental office that had prompted her to apply for the position. She responded candidly that she hadn't ever thought about working in dentistry until she saw the ad this practice ran. *She was attracted by the qualities the ad sought rather than by a job description.* As we talked, I learned that she was committed to personal and professional growth and loved to learn new things. Her role models were people of strength and compassion. *She wanted her work to have meaning.*

At the end of the interview I asked her if there were questions I might answer for her. She asked me what I liked about the profession of dentistry. I shared my beliefs with her about the opportunities we have to positively influence people's lives through dentistry. I talked with her about dentistry as one of the few health professions that actually works with healthy people rather than sick people. She said at the end that she had never thought of dentistry in the way that I described it, and I could hear the excitement in her voice.

This story illustrates that, while you might not have Microsoft's stock options, there are other things you can offer exceptional candidates. Among other things, you can offer flexibility, recognition, opportunities for growth and worthwhile work.

Flexibility

Dental practices have a great deal of flexibility. We can choose our own hours, fees, services, and employment agreements. If we want to provide our patients with individualized care, why would we offer employees any less?

Within the boundaries of the law of course, we can create individual agreements that meet the needs of individuals in the practice. There is no corporate structure that limits us. For instance, I've known practices that allow employees to bring babies or dogs to work. Some practices support higher education for a team member or arrange hours to suit the needs of another employee.

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Remember, the research showed that employees were not asking employers to solve their problems, just to be sensitive to them. I'm not suggesting we can create a workplace that suits everyone's needs perfectly. You must have standards for performance that allow you to meet the needs of your patients at the level to which you have agreed.

However, if you set that as the standard, rather than arbitrary "policies," ***you can offer opportunities that employees cannot get any place else: opportunities that make employees feel valued and, therefore, enhance their loyalty.*** The goal, after all, is to make it difficult for people to leave your practice.

Recognition

Abraham Maslow identified pride in achievements, and having those achievements recognized by others, as a high level of personal growth. One of the most frequent things I hear team members ask for is recognition and appreciation. What a simple request. The only thing you have to pay is ***attention!***

When I was in hygiene school, we were asked the question, "What would you do if the doctor you work for never complimented you on your work?" We all said we'd want to leave, but that was the "wrong" answer. We were told not to expect any compliments. We were paid to do a job and that was supposed to be enough. People who needed recognition for their work were seen as needy and "high maintenance."

I have come to understand that for people whose needs are lower on Maslow's hierarchy, getting paid may be enough. But it is not enough for high achievers. Those who take pride in their work want recognition. Different people want that recognition in different ways. Some of us want a standing ovation, some prefer awards by our peers, and some want a simple word of thanks. Everyone wants it to be authentic.

As an employer, there is no better reputation you can have than to be known as a person with the ability to express appreciation. If you build your skills in that area, you may discover that spotting people doing something well is enjoyable for everyone.

Opportunities for Growth

A dental office is a great place to grow and learn. The technology, science, and skill-building opportunities provide continual challenge. There are not many industries today that offer more in those areas on every level of participation. The relationship-building with patients and with other team members provides a learning laboratory for life skills that is unsurpassed. Listening with compassion and attention, communicating clearly and effectively in difficult situations, and understanding the financial implications of decision-making all translate easily to personal and community relationships.

For people who want to learn, your practice can be an exceptional gift. You can provide books, newsletters, and other publications. You have videotapes, audiotapes, as well as your own continuing learning to share. For those who want more, you can offer workshops, seminars, and exposure to some of the great minds of our time. Your practice can have a reputation as a very personalized learning environment that has a lifelong personal as well as professional positive impact on the people who work there.

I know there are times when employees will take the knowledge they've gained in your practice and go somewhere else. Part of what makes training most attractive in today's job market is its applicability to other situations. That is a risk you take when you invest in the growth of people in your practice.

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I'm not suggesting you invest indiscriminately in learning opportunities. It is important to ask yourself what return you will get on your investment. It may be more appropriate in today's employment environment to focus on short-term return on your investment instead of the long-term return. Your practice benefits every day you have an enthusiastic person with a love for learning to serve your patients and clients.

Worthwhile Work

Dentistry is a worthy profession. We can make a positive difference in the lives of those we serve. We can enhance our patients' physical health, self-esteem, comfort, appearance, and overall quality of life. We can build relationships based on trust, integrity, and mutual respect.

We can have a positive impact on children and teens in their formative years, on young adults when they are shaping their values about health, on anyone who is in a transition period who needs support, and on the elderly who want to maintain their dignity in a culture that does not always honor the advancement of age. If yours is a relationship-based practice which has a strong commitment to quality, personal fulfillment is a significant benefit of the job.

Have Faith

I wish I had easier answers for those of you who are struggling with hiring right now. I am often in the position of helping excellent practices find excellent people. I share their pride in watching people grow and their loss when good people move on. I sometimes feel frustrated for them when the hiring process takes longer than we'd like or when we struggle to figure out what it will take to fill a position.

Since I have the unique experience of being a part of the process in multiple practices, I also celebrate more often. Time and again, I see disappointment over someone who didn't work out turn into joy over finding someone who will take the position to the next level. I have faith that the

right people eventually find the right practice, and that they are worth the wait.

Classic & Current Resources

My work is influenced and informed by the wisdom of past as well as emerging new thinking. The following is a list of some of the sources I referred to while writing this issue of *Practice Renewal*:

"Forum" newsletter

America @ Work_Survey
Aon Consulting

Trends 2000

by Gerald Celent

Maslow on Management

by Abraham H. Maslow

A Philosophy of the Practice of Dentistry

by Lindsey D. Pankey and
William J. Davis

"Connoisseur of Talent"

Tom Peters, website
www.forbes.com

Inspirational Leadership

by Lance Secretan

Training magazine

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The Place To Work

1. How attractive is your practice as a place to work for potential employees?
2. What would make more your practice more attractive as a work place? If you have an open relationship with your team members, ask them.
3. Brainstorm ways to spread the word in *your* community about your practice being a great place to work. Develop a plan for doing so on a regular basis and implement it.

Attracting & Keeping Talented Employees

1. How do you treat your team members as individuals? How can you treat each person more uniquely and with more empathy?
2. How important is training and growth in your practice on a scale of 1-10? How is that demonstrated? Is it enough to stimulate and support highly-talented people?
3. Suppose I observed your practice continually for a month without any prior knowledge about the beliefs and values your team members possess. How would your practice be described in terms of two-way communication and recognition of your employees' contributions? How does each team member influence the practice's vision and direction?
4. How do your team members know the practice is committed to their financial success?
5. How can each team member feel a stronger sense of accomplishment and contribution in your practice? Ask them.