

TACKLING CRITICAL HUMAN RESOURCE ISSUES

Tips for recruiting, hiring and retaining great employees.

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Your name may be on the office door, but let's face facts — dermatology visits are usually short, so patients may spend more time with your office staff than with you! Patients don't just judge your practice based on the clinical care they receive. They consider the way they are treated on the phone when they need an appointment and the receipt of test results on a timely basis. They look at the way your staff greets them upon their arrival, and they pay attention to the way your staff helps with insurance and payment issues. Your staff is your most valuable asset, so how can you recruit, hire and retain great employees? Here are some tips.

TIP #1: START WITH YOUR PRACTICE

Your practice mission, goals, values and priorities make you unique. These features also make your practice either a desirable or an undesirable place to work. The better your workforce understands why you practice medicine, the way in which you want to treat patients and your expectations for staff, the more likely you will be to create a positive work environment. An effective workforce begins with you and your practice.

Consider this example of a patient's experience with two dermatology practices in the same community. Leslie, the patient, wanted to schedule laser hair removal for dark facial hair. Colleagues at

work had suggested Dermatologist A, who was part of a four-person practice. On the day of the appointment, Leslie checked in and learned from the receptionist that the physician with whom Leslie had requested the appointment had scheduled a vacation day. Leslie had already taken time off from work and driven 45 minutes, so she decided to keep the appointment and see one of the other physicians. The physician recommended the appropriate treatment and told Leslie to come back for another visit. The next available appointment was in 2 months. Leslie returned, only to find that the equipment was broken and would not be fixed for 3 months. By now Leslie was



employees who had been with him for 20 years. His mission, goals, values and priorities were clear. Leslie left Practice B confident that she had found a competent and caring dermatologist.

TIP #2: PREPARE BEFORE YOU RECRUIT AND HIRE

Here's a common scenario. An employee leaves your practice unexpectedly, creating a vacancy that you want to fill as quickly as possible. Well-meaning friends and relatives suggest people who might help, and you hire right away, without thinking about what you need and want. If you're lucky, your choice will be a good one. Most likely, though, you will discover quickly that you have offered the position to somebody who is unqualified to do the job.

Back up and ask yourself several important questions before you recruit, interview and hire a new employee. Do you want to hire someone who does exactly what your former employee did, or should you make a change in your staffing that you have long considered? Do you want somebody with the same skill set as your former employee, or should you consider somebody with different talents? For example, if you plan to upgrade your information technology, would an individual with good computer proficiency be desirable? What will you pay your new employee and what benefits will you offer? **Table 1** provides a suggested format for job descriptions. **Table 2** contains a list of the most commonly offered employee benefits.

TIP #3: FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH RELEVANT FEDERAL AND STATE LAWS

As an employer, your practice is subject to the requirements of many employment laws. Make sure you understand each one and how it affects your hiring decisions. Your attorney can give you specific information on the Civil Rights Act (1964 and 1991), the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 and Amendments, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1987, the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Genetic Information Nondiscrimi-

ready to call a different practice. On the advice of her primary care physician, she called Dermatology Practice B. Her experience was completely different. Although there were no available appointments for 3 weeks, the office staff assured her there would be a cancellation before then. Indeed, Leslie's appointment was set for 3 days later. She saw the physician within 10 minutes of her scheduled appointment time. He recommended the same treatment as Dermatology Practice A and asked his staff to perform the procedure at the time of the visit so Leslie wouldn't have to make a second trip. He also took the time to tell Leslie about his goals for the practice and about the em-

Table 1. SUGGESTED JOB DESCRIPTION FORMAT

- Job title
- Reporting relationship
- Span of control/supervisory responsibility
- Required initiative/leadership/decision-making
- General summary of duties and responsibilities
- Priority and secondary functions
- Working conditions
- Required physical and mental effort
- Time commitment/flexible hours
- Performance requirements: knowledge, skills, education, experience, certificates and licenses

Table 2. SAMPLE EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

- Health insurance
- Dental insurance
- Short-term disability
- Long-term disability
- Life insurance
- Pension and profit sharing
- Tuition reimbursement
- FlexPlan combining sick, vacation and holiday time off

nation Act of 2008, and other relevant statutes. Make sure you are well-informed about the temporary COBRA premium subsidy that is included in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. That provision provides for a 9-month, 65% employer-paid subsidy for the cost of COBRA premiums for employees or dependents who became eligible for COBRA due to an involuntary termination between September 1, 2008, and December 31, 2009. The subsidy applies not only if COBRA applies but also if a comparable state program requires healthcare continuation coverage.

TIP #4: SPREAD THE WORD REGARDING YOUR OPPORTUNITY

Once you have created a job description, decided on an appropriate salary range and confirmed the benefit package that you will offer, you are ready to spread the word about your position vacancy. Your employees may know people

in other practices who would like to make a change. Patients who have had first-hand experience with your practice and who have the appropriate background and experience may be good job candidates. If you are recruiting a practice administrator/manager, check with the Medical Group Management Association (MGMA), the professional organization for practice administrators and managers. The national organization and state and local affiliates have job placement services. Consider posting the position online with Web sites that are dedicated to healthcare recruiting (eg, trianglemedicaljobs.com) or that get a lot of traffic (eg, Craig's List). If you decide to advertise in the newspaper, don't overspend. Community monthly papers that are available throughout a 30-day period are often a better investment than the daily paper that runs your ad for a shorter time.

TIP #5: REVIEW RESUMES AND IDENTIFY POTENTIAL JOB CANDIDATES

Depending on the job market in your community, you may be surprised with the number of resumes that you receive. Review all the responses, and eliminate those candidates whose qualifications don't match the requirements in your job description. If you turn somebody down, send a note or make a call to say thanks. You just never know when good manners may help you turn interest in a position into a new patient!

TIP #6: CONDUCT TELEPHONE AND PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

After you have a pool of qualified candidates, begin your telephone and personal interviews. Telephone interviews have great value. They let you hear how your candidates sound on the phone. After all, there will be lots of phone and direct contact with patients. Conduct the personal interviews in a standard way, making sure to ask each candidate the same set of questions. Invite your staff to participate in the interviews. **Table 3** provides suggested questions, and **Table 4** identifies topics for which you must ask the questions in the right way in order to comply with laws and regulations.

Table 3. SUGGESTED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Why do you want to work for this practice?
- What is appealing about the position for which you have applied?
- Why do you think you would enjoy working here?
- Why should we hire you over other candidates?
- If you heard a phone other than your own ringing, would you answer it?
- What are your strengths?
- On what skills do you need to work, and how would you do that?
- Do you work well on your own or are you more comfortable with specific instructions from a supervisor?
- How comfortable are you with information technology?
- Why did you leave your previous job?

Table 4. TOPICS REQUIRING CAREFUL PHRASING OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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| • Legal working age | • Availability for weekend work |
| • Citizenship | • Disabilities or handicaps |
| • Arrest or conviction record | • Drug or alcohol use |
| • Attendance record | • Education |

Table 5. QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING REFERENCE CHECKS

- When did CANDIDATE work for your organization?
- What job did CANDIDATE perform?
- Did CANDIDATE carry out his/her responsibilities to your satisfaction? If not, why not?
- Did you encounter any problems with CANDIDATE's performance? If so, what were they?
- As a potential future employer, is there anything else I should know about CANDIDATE's ability to perform his/her job?

TIP #7: CHECK QUALIFICATIONS

After you have identified several candidates who you think would be suitable for your position, take a deep breath and stop. Check references, criminal background, professional licenses, and other credentials that may be required for the job. For reference checks, as with the candidate interviews, maintain consistency. **Table 5** contains suggested questions.

TIP #8: EXTEND A JOB OFFER

Once you and your staff have agreed upon your top candidates, call the individual who is your first choice and extend a verbal job offer. Follow up the conversation with a letter that contains the terms that you have outlined on the phone. At the very least, include the start date, the starting salary, the benefit pack-

age, the time period for the first performance evaluation and any special conditions that might apply. Special conditions might include completion of a successful probationary period prior to the start of some of the benefits. Many practices wait at least 30 days before providing health insurance and/or 90 days before allowing new employees to take time off from work. If your practice is part of a larger organization that requires pre-employment drug screening, mention this item in the letter. Specify the date by which you want a response to your offer letter.

You never know if your first choice candidate will respond positively to your offer, so don't rule out your second and third choices until you hear back from your first choice.

TIP #9: DEVELOP AN ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR ALL EMPLOYEES

If you are filling a vacant position, you may be so relieved that a qualified candidate has accepted your offer that you skip the employee orientation to your practice. Avoid the temptation to jump right in with daily operations and share with your employee at least the following information: history of your practice; mission; goals and priorities; important values; benefit package; organization chart; responsibilities of all workforce members; methods for communicating internally and externally (eg, phone, e-mail); guidelines for customer service; code of conduct; confidentiality; important laws such as HIPAA, the new Red Flags rule, OSHA, FMLA, and ADA); job description; employee relations; training; disciplinary action; and method and timing of performance evaluation.

Two of these items deserve special mention. *Develop a process for disciplinary action prior to the time when you need it.* Clear job expectations, processes for verbal and written warnings and grounds for dismissal are best discussed before something goes wrong. Your attorney can provide guidance. *Performance evaluation, like disciplinary action, should be in place before you hire.* I learned this lesson the hard way when I worked for a multidivisional organization that was so focused on business growth that it never bothered to create a formal performance evaluation system for 50 employees. By day two on the job, I knew we had problems!

A good supplement to your employee orientation program is an Employee Handbook. When employees first join your practice, they will be on a steep learning curve. The Employee Handbook can reinforce information that you share verbally.

TIP #10: ENCOURAGE AND REWARD TEAMWORK

Although each of your employees has a unique job description and primary set of responsibilities, one great employee is no substitute for a team of employees who work well together. Dermatology is fast-paced, and the only way you can keep up with your busy schedule is to make sure that your entire team collab-

orates on an ongoing basis.

Teamwork means helping each other both on a daily basis and on major projects. On a daily basis, you want your staff to be able to cross-cover for each other. If you introduce new technology, services or products into your practice, encourage your staff to participate in the decision and the implementation. Incorporate teamwork into the formal performance evaluation of each employee. Tying a financial incentive to good teamwork can certainly motivate your workforce. For example, you might reward team members for achieving specific targets for reduced waiting time prior to seeing the physician.

TIP #11: ESTABLISH AND USE A FORMAL PERFORMANCE EVALUATION SYSTEM

Several years ago a cosmetic surgeon and his wife formed a partnership to open a new cosmetic surgery practice. Lacking a formal way to evaluate employees' performance, each partner used a different method for annual reviews. Employees quickly realized that their reviews and corresponding raises depended on which partner did the review. The benefit of a formal performance evaluation system is that it clarifies goals and priorities, lets you measure performance against these standards and doesn't depend on subjective personal opinion.

I recommend letting both employees and supervisors review performance. Some practices also ask peers to participate in the review, keeping their input both anonymous and confidential.

Divide the expectations for each employee into two categories. The first category includes duties and responsibilities that are specific to the position. The second category includes behaviors and attitudes that apply to everybody. For example teamwork and the ability to take the initiative are two important items in the behavior and attitude category. Make sure to identify areas for improvement and specify specific steps that the employee and/or supervisor can take. Consider assigning numerical values to the different measurements so you can calculate a total score. Most important, administer the performance evaluation system consistently and on a timely basis.

TIP #12: FOSTER PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Medical practice management is challenging. Changes in healthcare financing, in the regulatory environment, and in clinical practice mean that nothing stays the same for long. Even your smartest employees can't know everything, any more than you can know everything about the clinical practice of medicine. Foster a learning environment in which staff members like learning new skills, new information and new approaches to problem solving. Pay for memberships in professional associations, workshops, seminars, webinars and other methods of continuing education.

Some of the best training may not be specific to healthcare. A good example is the Disney University Professional Development Programs that are now part of the Disney Institute. These programs are available to those outside the Disney community and address such topics as people management, quality service, creative leadership, orientation, HR management and customer loyalty.

Your financial support for personal and professional growth can send a clear message to your employees — you value their contributions to your practice and will support their ongoing learning.

TIP #13: RECOGNIZE AND REWARD EMPLOYEE INITIATIVE

With few exceptions, everybody likes thanks and recognition. Not long ago, I assisted a practice that selected an Employee of the Week 52 weeks each year. The reward was a special parking place, a free lunch or something similar. The employees in this practice loved the program, and they went out of their way to make patients feel comfortable in the practice. One of my clients who provides care to many members of the local ballet company treated employees and their families to a night at the ballet as a way of saying, "Thanks, we appreciate what you do for us." A New Orleans physician once phrased his approach to employee recognition very well: "Catch one of your employees doing something positive for your practice — each and every day."

TIP #14: INCORPORATE VOLUNTEERISM INTO YOUR PRACTICE

In most practices, employees juggle work and home life, leaving them minimal time to volunteer in their communities regardless of good intentions. You can help your employees contribute to non-profit organizations at the same time as you promote your practice.

Here are two seasonal examples. In the hot summer months, protection from the sun is a great topic for discussion. In the winter, you can change the focus to dryness and flaking. Take your message to organizations that you and your staff think can benefit from the advice. Let your staff participate in the decision about which organizations to help. You can select one organization that you help on an ongoing basis or rotate your goodwill among different groups.

TIP #15: REGULARLY REVIEW EMPLOYEE SALARIES AND BENEFIT PACKAGES

At the end of the day, employees come to work because they like the work environment that you have fostered. Never forget, however, that the salaries and benefit package that you offer also affect their loyalty. Regularly review salaries and your benefit package by benchmarking both against industry standards.

A good source of information for salaries is the regular benchmarking information published by the Medical Group Management Association (MGMA). (Visit www.mgma.com for more information.) State and local affiliates of MGMA may have information that is specific to your geographic area.

With respect to benefits, check with a benefits consultant if you use one or go back to the vendors and carriers with which you work directly to see if you can get better rates. It's appropriate to regularly solicit new bids.

TIP #16: HOLD AND ENJOY REGULAR STAFF MEETINGS

There are two opinions about staff meetings — love them or hate them. Regular staff meetings reap great benefits. You can set the tone for teamwork, share information on the big picture (eg, new regulations, new service), talk about



your financial situation (if you share that information), review daily operations, and identify and resolve problems. A well-run staff meeting makes employees feel as if they are truly a part of your team.

TIP #17: BE CREATIVE IN RESPONDING TO VARIATIONS IN LIFESTYLES

Today's workforce varies in many ways. Chances are that your practice mirrors the demographic mix in your community with respect to variations in age, sex, gender and lifestyle. Your employees come with differences in education and workforce experience. Some may be more comfortable with technology than others. Some are caring for young children and/or aging parents. Your challenge is to recognize, respect and capitalize on the differences.

Here's an example. A mid-size dermatology practice with three physicians had a total of 12 employees. Some were close to retirement age, and others were right out of school. The older employees had developed great telephone skills, and their phone interactions with patients resulted in a steady stream of satisfied patients. The younger employees were less articulate, but their computer skills were superb. The practice owner needed both types of employees to make his practice successful, and he cultivated everybody's skills.

TIP #18: HAVE FUN!

Finally, make the workforce environment an enjoyable place to work. Celebrate special occasions in your practice as well as in your employees' personal lives.

Here's an example of an event in a North Carolina pediatric practice that

could have been treated as a crisis or a cause for celebration. The practice made its transition from paper to electronic health records by involving not only the staff but patients. On the day of the big change, balloons decorated the waiting area. Signs asked patients to be patient while the practice implemented new technology that would improve the patient experience. That positive approach set a much better tone than treating the day as doomsday! ■

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