



HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR OPTOMETRIC TECHNICIANS



Prioritizing your team is a critical element of growing your practice.

BY SULMAN HANS, OD, MS, FFAO

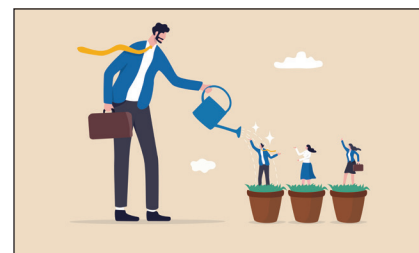
Without a doubt, the practice of optometry today is quite different than it was years ago. Advances in technology and scope have allowed optometrists to function at a level never seen before. Although equipment is often a priority for those attempting to grow their practice, the value of support staff in this process should never be overlooked.

As optometrists, we recognize the importance of using all available resources to help us deliver the best

patient care. To that end, it is imperative that any practice be invested in the training and well-being of its optometric technicians. There are several ways to go about this, which I will review below.

IMPROVE YOUR MANAGEMENT STYLE Build Your Team Wisely

Perhaps the most important way to ensure that you have a well-oiled team of technicians is to be selective about who you add to your lineup. Before hiring a new technician,



make sure their goals align with the mission of your practice and that they are compatible with the culture of your organization.

One way to do this is to involve existing staff in the hiring process and allow them to interact with potential candidates and give you their feedback before hiring. Completing the onboarding process and training of an employee, only to have them part ways shortly afterwards drains valuable time and resources that could have been put to better use.

Recognize When There Is a Problem

Employee turnover is exponentially more costly than retention.¹ According to Gallup Survey estimates, employee turnover costs businesses in the United States \$1 trillion annually.² Turnover is especially difficult when it involves seasoned, valuable members of your technician team, as it can greatly affect the morale of remaining team members and even cause them to follow suit.

Consider the state of your staff and your practice's work environment. Are

BURNOUT

Explained

Burnout is characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and a low sense of personal accomplishment at work.¹ Burnout can be caused by excessive workload, administrative burdens, limited input in scheduling, and lack of organizational support.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us many lessons about the negative effects of burnout on health care workers. In a Gallup Survey, 52% of voluntarily exiting employees reported that their organization could have taken action to prevent them from leaving their job, and 51% reported that management did not speak with them about their job satisfaction or future within the organization during the 3-month period preceding their departure.²

Recognize when your staff may be exhibiting signs of burnout, including:

- Increased irritability,
- Withdrawal from friends and family,
- Impaired judgment,
- Excessive alcohol or substance use,
- Reduced ability to manage emotions and impulses, and
- Decreased personal hygiene.¹

1. Office of the Surgeon General. Health worker burnout - current priorities of the U.S. Surgeon General. U.S. Department of Human Health and Services. Accessed February 25, 2023. www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/health-worker-burnout/index.html

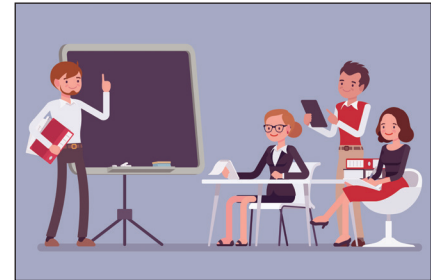
2. McFeely S, Wigert B. This fixable problem costs U.S. businesses \$1 trillion. Gallup.com. March 13, 2019. Accessed February 25, 2023. www.gallup.com/workplace/247391/fixable-problem-costs-businesses-trillion.aspx

your technicians overworked or burned out? (Learn the tell-tale signs of burnout in *Burnout Explained*.) As providers, it is easy for us to get caught up in patient care and to lose sight of the fact that our technicians are likely experiencing the same difficulties we are. Take the time to communicate with them throughout each day. They will thank you for it, and you will have a better pulse on the work environment of your clinic.

Express Gratitude

Make sure to express your appreciation for your technicians and recognize their accomplishments. Our group practice has implemented staff appreciation initiatives, including an Employee of the Month recognition. We found that rewards as simple as a gift card or a rotating preferred parking spot created incentive for our technicians to stay motivated in the workplace.

In the same vein, when you uncover missteps and errors, use these as opportunities for training. You don't have to look further back than your own experience as a student to recall the value of forbearance and sound guidance.



FOCUS ON TRAINING Techniques and Procedures

Never underestimate the value of training your staff effectively. Make sure your technicians not only understand the procedures they are performing, but also the importance of performing them correctly. This will help them remain engaged, think critically, and avoid performing techniques robotically, which can lead to complacency and errors. Even veteran technicians can misunderstand the purpose or execution of entrance testing, which can be costly.

I recall an instance when I had some downtime between patients, and a group of our technicians approached me with questions about the correct testing distance for performing confrontation fields. I was surprised to learn that our lead technician, who was responsible for training other technicians, was placing their hands just a few inches away from patients' faces when performing this technique. I explained the importance of the correct testing distance and demonstrated the proper technique.

Within days, one of the technicians present for that discussion picked up on a subtle visual field defect in an asymptomatic patient presenting for a comprehensive eye examination. Further inspection revealed a retinal detachment less than 1 disc diameter from the macula. Although

it would have been hard to miss this pathology, the entrance examination findings still cued me in to the fact that something was wrong. This example underscores the importance of assessment and retraining of staff. Dedicating time to staff education will save you from having to troubleshoot as often in the future.

Another point to consider here is that your technicians should feel comfortable approaching you with any questions, even those that may seem well within their scope of understanding and experience. The best way to foster this type of environment is to refrain from reacting negatively anytime a technician or other staff member approaches you with “basic” questions, and to readily give them your attention. Had I not spent those few minutes I had between patients with our technicians that day, the issue of performing confrontation fields incorrectly would not have been uncovered.

Technology

In addition to training on techniques and skills, make sure your staff are proficient in using both existing and newly acquired equipment in your office. Your management team will likely understand the benefits of a new piece of equipment, but for best use, your technicians will need to learn as well.

For example, when our group

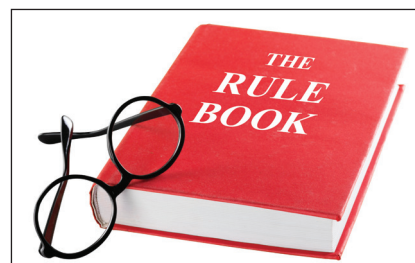
practice acquired new OCT machines, we decided to begin offering OCT screenings to our patients. We soon noticed a large disparity in the number of screenings performed between offices. Upon further investigation, we discovered that technicians were less likely to recommend screenings to patients at offices where less time was spent training staff on the benefits of OCT technology, thus resulting in less screenings being performed and lower revenue.



SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Providing opportunities for growth is another effective method to help your technicians perform at the highest level. ODs who are members of the American Optometric Association (AOA) can provide their technicians with complimentary AOA associate member status, allowing free access to its training programs and services. Technicians can also pursue additional certifications to further refine and expand their skillset. It is crucial that these efforts be recognized and incentivized by

management; otherwise, your technicians will be more likely to leave and find a practice that appropriately compensates them for additional training.



PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

One of the best ways to inspire those who work alongside you is to model the behaviors you want to see from them. Your practice handbook may outline best policies and guidelines, but it is your responsibility as a leader or practice partner to demonstrate them daily in your actions. If you tend to complain about late patients, double-bookings, and long days, your technicians will do the same. The opposite is also true. If you have a habit of consistently being calm in adverse circumstances, your technicians will respect and model your positive attitude—or at the very least, they will be less likely to complain when times are difficult at the office.

Technicians are the backbone of our practices. Taking the time to consider their well-being and growth will allow you to take advantage of all the talents they have to offer, provide the highest level of care to your patients, and help your practice stand apart from those of your competitors. ■

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ To ensure you have a well-oiled team of technicians, be selective about who you add to your lineup.
- ▶ Make sure your technicians not only understand the procedures they are performing, but also the importance of performing them correctly; this will help them remain engaged, think critically, and avoid performing techniques robotically.
- ▶ Your practice handbook may outline best policies and guidelines, but it is your responsibility to demonstrate them in your daily actions.

1. The ridiculously high cost of employee turnover. Workhuman. October 11, 2022. Accessed March 7, 2023. www.workhuman.com/blog/the-ridiculously-high-cost-of-employee-turnover/

2. McFeely S, Wigert B. This fixable problem costs U.S. businesses \$1 trillion. Gallup.com. March 13, 2019. Accessed February 25, 2023. www.gallup.com/workplace/247391/fixable-problem-costs-businesses-trillion.aspx

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