



HOW TO ATTRACT THE RIGHT ASSOCIATE OPTOMETRIST



Keep up with the changing times in optometry with your hiring practices.

BY CHRISTOPHER LOPEZ, OD

The optometric profession has experienced tremendous changes since its inception. Advances in technology, shifts in health care delivery models, and differences in patient expectations are several factors driving recent disruptions in the industry. Changes haven't solely affected the clinical side of optometry; however, as the human resources/management side has also been altered. In particular, hiring and retaining high-quality employees is becoming increasingly burdensome for office owners nationwide. In fact, some optometry practice owners whom I

have spoken with insist that, although there are more optometrists now than ever before, it has never been more challenging to hire an associate OD.

This article discusses the transforming landscape of hiring an associate OD and shares strategies for making your practice more attractive to potential new hires.

THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

Let's address this head on. Millennials and (Gen Z) have been labeled as entitled generations in the eyes of American society. Therefore, based on the sentiments of many

people from older generations, I (as a Millennial) must be selfish, lack work ethic, and expect handouts in lieu of real effort. In reality, the perception of younger people being more entitled has persisted throughout history; our grandparents said the same about the Boomers. There is not an objectively measured increase in entitlement from generation to generation. Rather, this perception is a reflection of generational differences in values and expectations.

One common sign of this sentiment regarding entitlement is how the negotiation process between employers and



job candidates for the role of associate optometrist has been playing out in recent years. We hear the chatter from practice owners about graduating optometry students demanding more from potential employers—more compensation, more paid time off, more monetary stipends. They seem to always want more, more, more! How can a middle ground be reached to ensure a mutually beneficial hiring contract for both employee and employer?

THE PROBLEM WITH HIRING NEGOTIATIONS TODAY

Some OD job candidates believe that a bit of dubious advice a friend gave them applies across all work settings in any market. This is not necessarily true. For example, through my work in career consulting, I have come across colleagues who claim they will only accept an associate position if the base salary is \$200,000 per year with no noncompete clause—numerous ODs believe this to be a standard set up. (Hint: It's not.) With some counseling, these colleagues quickly landed back on earth, accepted good associate gigs, and are pleased in their current roles.

For the aspiring associate OD, an effective negotiation tactic is to leverage several job offers to apply

some pressure on an employer to put forth the most competitive compensation package. Of course, hiring parties aren't ecstatic to be in this position, but it's fair game for an OD candidate to make the best of their opportunities. However, a significant issue occurs when broad assumptions are made, which happens on behalf of both the associate and the employer. That is, (most) private practices are offering compensation ranges that are not competitive enough with private equity and corporate optometry settings. This is due to factors beyond the scope of this article (eg, funding, economies of scale, etc). This inability to compete from a financial standpoint can lead to one side (ie, associates) believing that private practice owners are making lowball offers, whereas the other side (ie, practice owners) tends to think associates are simply entitled and inappropriately demanding excessive compensation.

Furthermore, given the increasing popularity of social media platforms and online forums, such as ODs on Finance, creating content that seeks to "level the playing field" with regard to the information discrepancy that exists in eye care, more associates are becoming aware of the income levels that their counterparts are achieving, and understandably, they want to

reach the same heights. In response to this, I've actually had practice owners attempt to discourage me from discussing salary and business matters with ODs because it leads to them having to discuss such topics with their associates. Imagine that.

STAND OUT FROM THE CROWD

These are the realities of the modern-day hiring landscape: Salary data are becoming more prevalent, a growing number of ODs are seeking part-time work, and still more are seeking opportunities to practice optometric subspecialties (eg, dry eye, myopia, specialty contact lenses, etc). These factors place even more stress on employers to remain competitive.

A "solution" to these problems has been used, in part, to justify opening additional optometry schools. However, increasing the numbers of ODs graduating every year has done little to truly combat hiring woes. Indeed, if more graduates were the answer, then practice owners (especially in rural areas) wouldn't still be struggling to attract associate ODs.

There are various strategies to position your practice opportunity in a desirable fashion for career seekers. In fact, many successful practice owners tout that hiring an associate is one of the best business decisions employers can make.¹ Below are some strategies to consider.

Pay Well

Please don't succumb to the opinion that all associates should be willing to accept lower pay for the simple prestige of working at a private practice. Few circumstances exist in which such an arrangement is beneficial. By and large, practices should pay market wages if they want to attract quality associates.

Get Creative With Benefits

Some corporate entities are already getting creative with the benefits they offer, and private

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AT A GLANCE

- Optometry as a profession has changed over the years, and with it, so too have the expectations of job seekers and hiring practices.
- For the aspiring associate OD, an effective negotiation tactic is to leverage several job offers to apply some pressure on an employer to put forth the most competitive compensation package.
- Strategies to position your practice in a desirable manner to career seekers include offering decent pay and creative benefits and being open to mentoring.



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practice owners should do the same. I have seen “bennies” such as paid volunteer days, paid voting days, gym membership reimbursement, and astoundingly high continuing education allowances, for example.

What matters most about these benefits is tapping into what is important to job candidates and customizing a package that caters to their specific interests.

Mentorship

I’ve said this before, and I’ll say it again: Mentorship is one of the best ways for private practice employers to stand out from the crowd. The majority of associates with whom I consult crave knowledge, as there is not enough time in optometry school to be taught about the “real world” after graduation.

There is a dearth of knowledge around practice financials; associate revenue, collections, and production; why production matters

and how it affects the practice; billing and coding; leadership; and more. Owners should carve out and schedule mentorship time with their associates to educate and learn from them. Most important is to establish a personal and meaningful connection for the long term.

Intangibles

Be open to considering offerings that associate candidates may not receive as readily in other practice settings. Discuss if ownership is on the table and seek out strategies that could help with a future practice transition. Feature your exceptional staff and office culture. Find out what associate candidates are passionate about, and offer that—money is important, but it’s not the most important thing to everyone. Emphasize work-life balance and ask what you can do as an employer to help the candidate achieve their personal, professional, and financial goals. Most of all, highlight how working in your office can

lead to the candidate feeling valued. All of this is much easier said than done, but with some effort, it is manageable.

BEND, DON’T BREAK

Our profession is different than it was decades ago and will continue to change moving forward. Attracting and retaining top talent will be crucial for business growth and meeting the demands of patient care. Private practice employers have an opportunity to stand out in the job market, and I hope they make the best of it. ■

1. Lopez C. Why you should hire an associate OD. *Modern Optometry*. 2024;7(2):61-62.

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