



TIPS FOR SURVIVING A STAFFING SHORTAGE



Keep your optometry clinic running smoothly to avoid glitches in patient care.

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One of the toughest challenges of running a business—including an optometry practice—is maintaining the status quo when you are short-staffed. Staffing shortages tend to place strain on the remaining team members, doctors, and even patients, if not handled properly. To avoid such consequences in my office, I center all decisions and courses of action around two main goals: 1) mitigating the stress placed on my team and 2) ensuring patient care is not compromised. Through my experiences dealing with being understaffed, I have come up with six tips that have

helped me achieve these goals. I'm sharing them below, in the hope that they'll also be of some benefit to you, should you find yourself operating at reduced capacity.

TIP NO. 1: MAXIMIZE OPEN COMMUNICATION ON YOUR TEAM

When my office is short-staffed, I make a point to increase the communication between myself and my employees through weekly or biweekly meetings. During these meetings, small business items and questions from the staff are addressed, along with any frustrations or sources of stress. This is not the time to drastically change or add

new protocols, but ensuring regular check-ins with your staff allows any adjustments to be made to address the day-to-day challenges that may be encountered in this new team dynamic. The office's success is directly dependent on the team's well-being, so creating an open environment in which your staff feel safe to express their concerns and frustrations is integral. I encourage my staff to speak up if their workload becomes too much or their stress becomes too great.

TIP NO. 2: INVOLVE THE STAFF IN THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

Giving your team insight into the process of hiring the new staff member leads to two important benefits. First, it assures them you are working to bring a replacement in as quickly (and as diligently) as you can. This will provide encouragement that the increased workload experienced during the short-staffed period will not last forever and that you are hiring intentionally, rather than just trying to fill the gap, which can lead to further turnover down the road.

Secondly, keeping your staff updated on the process allows them to cultivate an investment in the new teammate's success. Whether

WHERE TO FIND A VA

The following companies can be excellent resources for finding a VA to help take on the additional work during a staffing shortage.

- Teem Virtual (team-virtual.com)
- Hello Rache (hellorache.com)
- Global Medical (globalmedicalva.com)
- My Mountain Mover (mymountainmover.com)
- Eye Help You (eyehelpyou.com)

you discuss potential candidates with a few trusted employees or opt for a group interview method (ie, selecting staff to meet and ask potential hires questions alongside upper management), their direct involvement in the process makes your staff feel connected to the decision and to the success of the office.

TIP NO. 3: DELEGATE AND ABSORB

When an employee leaves the practice, their duties must now be reallocated to remaining staff to protect the patient experience and ensure important tasks do not fall through the cracks. Create a list of those responsibilities and distribute them carefully to other staff, taking skillset and current workload into consideration. Delegating this list among all other staff ensures no one feels taken advantage of and that these additional items can still be accomplished within their normal work activities. It also provides the best chance that patients will not see an interruption in the care they are used to receiving at your office.

As a manager, it is imperative to absorb some of the tasks yourself. It is motivational for staff to see leadership step up in times of strain and work with them to accomplish the goals of the practice. If you're not willing to help out in this time of pressure, why should they be?

TIP NO. 4: ADJUST THE CLINIC SCHEDULE

Not all optometric practices can adjust their clinic schedule, but, when possible, try to look ahead and identify areas that may become backlogged without a full staff in place. Extending appointment times or inserting a small catch-up block can ensure your clinic flow is maintained, so patients do not feel the effects of your reduced team. Seeing slightly fewer patients in a day may seem daunting when considering your practice's bottom line, but I can assure you, poor patient experiences due to long wait times or feeling rushed when the doctor is behind will be significantly more harmful in the long run.

Other ways you can make adjustments in your office include cross-training other staff so they can jump in if a particular area gets behind and completing patient work-ups yourself when you're able to help move appointments along.

TIP NO. 5: USE A VIRTUAL ASSISTANT

In recent years, virtual assistants (VAs) have become an advantageous tool used by many practices and can be a gamechanger, particularly when a practice is short-staffed. Multiple companies can connect you with vetted VAs who are already pretrained in basic medical skills, such

as scribing, billing/coding, appointment confirmation, and insurance verification (see *Where to Find a VA*). Setup is typically simple, with the company sending you a set of VA candidates to review, based on your needs. You may then evaluate their resumes and credentials, interview them, and select your new VA, sometimes within a matter of days. By outsourcing tasks to a VA, you can avoid overloading in-house staff and often onboard them much faster than you can via traditional methods.

Note: If you choose to hire a VA, consult your information technology department to ensure your remote connections are secure and HIPAA compliant.

TIP NO. 6: STAFF FOR THE FUTURE

It can be difficult to think about overstaffing or growing your office when you are short-staffed. However, this is the best time to evaluate how you can prevent this problem in the future. If your budget allows, consider hiring more than one employee during this process. Doing so provides a cushion if you are faced with the possibility that one of the new hires does not work out or if another employee leaves. Slight overstaffing can also alleviate your team from becoming overwhelmed during busy times and allow the office to grow with fewer logistical roadblocks going forward.

WEATHER THE TOUGH TIMES

Although no office is immune to staff shortages, putting the advice in this article to use can help you navigate these trying times and allow for success, despite the challenges. ■

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