

PREMIUM PRACTICE

August 2010
Volume 1, No. 8

TODAY

You're Hired!

Employees' engagement, motivation, and retention are key to patients' satisfaction



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You're Hired!

Employees' engagement, motivation, and retention are key to patients' satisfaction.

BY ROCHELLE NATALONI, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Much of my research and writing involves the customer's experience, and how we can greatly enhance what takes place in the medical environment. Memorable experiences do not happen on their own. It takes a superb team of employees to design, stage, and continuously improve what happens when a customer walks in the door. This month, we have a superb cast of contributors, including our interview with author Daniel Pink, whose thinking on what makes employees tick is truly leading edge.

It is no coincidence that high-performing organizations across all industries are marked by extremely engaged and motivated employees. Those practices that strive to be viewed as "the best" by their patients understand this and recognize that taking care of employees puts the entire practice in a position to truly take care of its customers! —Shareef Mahdavi

Running a successful ophthalmic practice is as dependent on attracting and maintaining a satisfied and productive staff as it is on achieving optimal clinical outcomes. Surgical skill combined with top-notch technology is an unbeatable recipe for reliable, repeatable, reputation-building results. Even the best results, however, are not enough to generate the word-of-mouth buzz necessary to perpetuate prosperity. This "X factor" derives from the overall impression that patients gather from their first encounter with the front desk staff to the postoperative period and beyond. Patients' reactions to your practice are therefore just as much a reflection of the receptionist's demeanor and the ophthalmic technician's disposition as it is of your ability to skillfully dissolve a grade 4 nucleus or provide an astigmatic presbyope with 20/25 vision minus glasses.

STRATEGIES

Strategies to attract, motivate, and retain happy, hard-working employees abound. The most familiar of these is the

"carrot-and-stick" approach. In this scenario, employees who live up to and/or exceed their job description are rewarded with monetary compensation and promotions that reflect their level of efficacy and dedication. Those employees who do not perform are taken down a notch or let go. Although this default strategy works for some employees and practice owners, it decidedly does not work for all.

Author and motivational pundit Daniel H. Pink says traditional monetary reward and punishment are less effective than they once were, because society has evolved such that employees respond to more sophisticated stimuli. In his book *Drive—the Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Mr. Pink suggests that giving people autonomy over what they do and how they do it, as well as an opportunity to master it and a sense of purpose in doing it in the first place, will help engage, motivate, and retain satisfied employees.

Mr. Pink maintains that motivation that comes from within leads to better performance over the long haul, in part because people who are inherently motivated are more persistent. He says that these concepts transcend industries and generational differences as well as—but perhaps to a lesser extent—economic trends.

"There are examples of this new approach in just about every industry and profession, not just software engineers at Silicon Valley tech titans, but also hospital janitors in Pennsylvania and call center operators in Nevada," Mr. Pink said in an interview with *Premium Practice Today*. "Or take generations: on the surface, 'baby boomers' and 'millennials' may seem different, but what you see above the surface grows from common roots and from some basic intrinsic motivations."

Born between the late 1970s and early 1990s, the millennials are the most diverse generation in US history and the largest since the baby boomers. They are known as a civic-minded generation and were the primary target of the

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WANT TO RETAIN EMPLOYEES? START BY HIRING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Dillman Eye Care Associates (Danville, IL) has a noteworthy employee retention record. Seven of the 17 staff members have been with the practice for 20 years or more; only four have been there less than 5 years. Lori Keith, Dillman Eye Care Associates' practice administrator and a 24-year veteran of the Illinois practice, shares her recommendations for hiring and retaining loyal employees long term:

- Begin by hiring the right person.
- Let employees know when they are doing a good job/show your appreciation. This does not have to be in the form of a monetary reward; a pat on the back and a few complimentary words go a long way.
- Empower your staff. Let them know they are important and that they play a vital role in the success of the practice.
- Listen to what your staff has to say. Do you want to make changes in your optical department? Ask your opticians. Do you want to improve efficiency in patient work-up time or doctor chair time? Solicit suggestions from your ophthalmic technicians.
- Physicians and practice administrators should be approachable. Let your staff know they can come to you with questions, suggestions, and concerns.

online marketing strategy that was arguably responsible for getting the current President of the United States elected.

Mr. Pink continued, "For instance, as boomers age, they steer their lives a bit more toward purpose. Because this is the largest generation in history, the effects could be gargantuan. Millennials, meanwhile, have always been somewhat purpose-driven, but they pursue it in a more free-wheeling way. They also often have more opportunities to act on their intrinsic motivations than their parents did."

Economic circumstances, says Mr. Pink, can change things up a bit. "If someone is struggling economically, then the quest for autonomy, mastery and purpose becomes secondary to survival; but once people pass a fairly low threshold, these deeper motivations come to the fore," he says.

WHAT ABOUT EYE CARE?

Darrell E. White, MD, a Cleveland cataract and refractive surgeon, successfully applies staffing principles similar to Mr. Pink's philosophies in his practice. Rather than use financial incentives to bring out the best in employees, Dr. White hires people who exhibit "psychological owner-

ship," which he says indicates that "they accept whole hog responsibility for patients' having a good experience when they come into the practice." This, said Dr. White, is his primary criterion for employment.

"We're a relatively luxury offering in the smallest luxury space in the United States, and we opened Skyvision Centers just in time for the biggest economic [crisis] since 1929," Dr. White said. "No one has received a raise—cost of living or otherwise—in the 5 years that we have been open. Part of what has made that easier [for employees to accept] is that I took a 20% pay cut and my two optometric partners took cuts as well. So we have been able to say to everyone, 'We have all made financial sacrifices,' and because the positive vibe among the staff members is so strong, it has been accepted." Dr. White says there is an equally positive feeling between staff and patients and the beneficial effects on the practice because of this are apparent. "By giving employees the responsibility of ensuring that patients have an excellent experience, we are making them responsible for the ultimate outcome. This fosters psychological ownership that has worked really well in our practice," he notes.

Dr. White describes the practice of medicine as the ultimate customer service business. "We've developed a rapid patient-first, customer-centered business model," says Dr. White. "When we started our practice, we did not benchmark any medical practices. Instead, prior to opening, we benchmarked the business processes of the Ritz Carlton Hotel, Canyon Ranch, and Toyota. When you think about a medical practice, it's really basically about moving [a product] through space, like a factory. We happen to be moving patients through space. We are applying different processes to them at different places along the way, not unlike building a car or a refrigerator. The processes that we are applying just happen to be services."

WORLD-CLASS CUSTOMER SERVICE

The two principles that guide Skyvision, according to Dr. White, are efficient, well-thought-out protocols designed to maximize patients' outcomes (under the surface where the patient cannot see them) and best-practice consumer service parameters copied from businesses known for their world-class customer service. The practice comprises three ophthalmologists, two optometrists, and 10 staff employees, and it serves between 80 and 100 patients a day.

"Most medical practices rely on hierarchical, top-down business models, whereas we employ a strategy called *pond theory* whereby most management occurs between and among staffers," says Dr. White. Responsibilities accrue by acclimation, and the pond theory allows for

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TIPS FROM SECRETS OF THE BEST-RUN PRACTICES' AUTHOR

Practice management specialist and author of *Secrets of the Best Run Practices*, Judy Capko, shares her thoughts on what works and what does not when the goal is peopling a practice with productive, dedicated, long-term employees. Her philosophy is a mix of the traditional employee-appreciation philosophy and the modern employee-engagement model. Here are her top three tips:

- (1) Set and maintain a culture that values employees, treats them fairly, without bias, and understands that it is the physician/owner's responsibility to respect employees and give them a rich work environment.
- (2) Establish effective and timely communication—everything from instant feedback to formal meetings and performance review.
- (3) Employ a foundation that sets boundaries and expectations for employees and holds them accountable to a specific standard while providing an opportunity to grow and expand their skills and contribution to the practice. In this way, the dynamic represents a mutual investment. Everyone is working for the greater good of the practice team of which they are proud to be a part.

Ms. Capko maintains that, if you have a happy staff and treat them right, you will not have a problem attracting recruits when there is a job opening. "Above all, leaders must be passionate about what they believe or no one else will be. A good leader never blames others when things go wrong, but gives others the credit when the team accomplishes its mission," she said.

staff members to choose who will take primary responsibility when duties overlap. He continues, "The benefits are, first, that it is extremely easy to manage this way because detail management is largely pushed right to the point of service between the staff members and the patients, and, second, by its very nature you are telling staff, 'You are good enough that you don't need someone micromanaging your minute-to-minute operation, and you are good enough to handle stuff that is thrown at you throughout the day.' That positive affirmation spreads across the surface of the pond."

Skyvision has not lost an employee—that it did not want to lose—in more than 5 years. "Our ability to retain technical staff, [who] are the most difficult employees too find, has been extraordinary. The only people that we have lost

have been those whom we let go because they did not meet our criteria," says Dr. White. He adds, "The only place that we have had difficulty has been at the front desk, and part of that is the nature of the job. The front desk becomes the interface between patients and insurance carriers, and because of this there is a high burnout rate."

A common theme among those interviewed for this article is summed up in Dr. White's hiring philosophy: "We hire for personality and intelligence rather than skills. We can teach skills. We want people who are kind and happy; we can train the rest of it."

Cristina Boggiano is a professional eye care staffing placement specialist. She says ophthalmic technicians are the toughest to attract and retain, because they are in high demand and can be easily lured by another practice willing to offer more money. "Providing opportunities for continuing education is one way to attract and retain technicians, and another is to make sure that they are being utilized—but not overutilized—because if they feel overwhelmed by high demand, there are always other practices eager to draw them away," she advises.

Like Dr. White, Ms. Boggiano mentions that retaining front desk personnel can be a daunting challenge, but she suggests that a winning strategy is to carefully consider personality and disposition when matching employees with high-stress patient-facing positions.

"You really have to do your homework in terms of evaluating what the person's strengths are and if they would be appropriate for that kind of role," she explains. "Where a lot of practices fall short is in that selection process, especially now because there are so many candidates for available positions. It's all about making the right decisions and then clearly outlining your expectations for that position." For instance, she says, Dillman Eye Care Associates (DECA) in Danville, Illinois, "has virtually no turnover" and is a shining example of a practice that makes careful hiring decisions. DECA engages employees in a way that elicits organizational loyalty that translates into positive customer service.

DO YOU VALIDATE?

Ophthalmologist David Dillman, MD, says his practice's employee-retention record is probably due to a combination of little things but that the key is validation. "As the leader of our team, I try to constantly remind myself of the incredible power of validation and pursue actions that instill it in an ongoing fashion," explains Dr. Dillman. "I have discovered over the years that validation spontaneously gives birth to an equally wonderful twin, a sense

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GALLUP SURVEY: MEASURING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The Gallup Organization created the following survey to identify and measure elements of worker engagement. The questions in the “Q12” are based on factors that are mostly tied to the bottom line such as growth, productivity, and customers’ loyalty. Survey results typically illustrate a strong correlation between high scores and superior job performance. Having staff members respond (anonymously) to this survey might bring some interesting information to the fore and help move the practice in a positive direction.

- Do you know what is expected of you at work?
- Do you have the materials and equipment you need to do your work right?
- At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?
- In the last 7 days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?
- Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?
- Is there someone at work who encourages your development?
- At work, do your opinions seem to count?
- Does the mission/purpose of your company make you feel your job is important?
- Are your fellow employees committed to doing quality work?
- Do you have a best friend at work?
- In the last 6 months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?
- In the last year, have you had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

Source: The Gallup Organization, Princeton, NJ. Gallup and Q12 are registered trademarks of The Gallup Organization.

of ownership. This ownership is not about owning stock in the company, but rather a sense of having ownership in the vision and purpose of the company, an ownership in the ‘products’ produced by the company. It would be naïve on my part to opine that validation and ownership are the only two essential elements towards producing longevity and loyalty, but they are an extremely strong foundation upon which to build.”

DECA Office Administrator Lori Keith, who has been with the practice for 24 years, says its successful employee-retention record is a reflection of the type of people who are hired in combination with the group’s managerial style and work environment. Like Dr. White, Ms. Keith says DECA’s philosophy has always been to hire people based on their personality and attitude as well as their willingness to learn. “We have found that, by hiring someone with the right qualities, this person can be trained successfully for the job they are hired to do,” explains Ms. Keith.

Ms. Keith acknowledges that the turnover of front office and ophthalmic technician personnel can be high in some practices. “This is not an issue for us for several reasons,” she says. “First, we realize how very important the front office staff are. They are our front line. They are the first faces that patients see when they walk into our

practice and the first voice they hear when they call our office, so we understand how important these folks are. Our front office staff know they are valuable and that they are appreciated and important to the success of the practice. They are empowered to make decisions. If a patient approaches our front desk or calls us with a problem or issue, they will never hear ‘I need to ask my manager about this’ or ‘I don’t have the authority to do this.’ While there are exceptions to this, in the vast majority of cases, our front office staff can handle any situation.”

Employees are referred to as associates at DECA, and (almost) all practice information is open and available for discussion, which fosters a shared sense of ownership. “Salary information is not shared, however, virtually every other piece of financial information is available to any associate,” Ms. Keith says. “Associates are made to feel a part of the family and that there are no secrets. They know what the profits are and what the costs of running the business are. Associates are also encouraged to offer suggestions on how we can improve. Physicians and practice administrators should listen to their staff because they usually have great ideas. The bottom line is, if you treat your associates right, they will want the practice to be successful—not for the physician/owner—but for themselves.”

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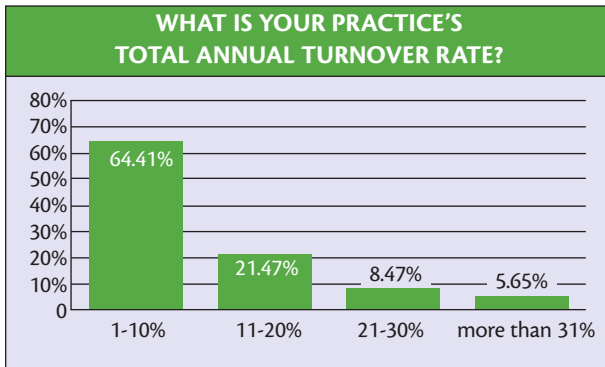


Figure 1. In a 2006 poll of medical practices, up to 10% of those surveyed had close to 65% annual employee turnover. (Source: MGMA's Perspectives on the Career Paths of Medical Practice Administrators research, 2006.)

DECA's managerial style is one of positive reinforcement. "The work environment is friendly, professional, and family oriented," maintains Ms. Keith. "We genuinely care about one another and enjoy working with each other. Patients can sense a staff that is happy versus one in which there is turmoil." Ms. Keith believes that having happy, satisfied employees directly ties into patients' satisfaction and the practice's bottom line and reputation. "A happy staff makes for happy patients, which leads to positive word-of-mouth referrals, which improves the bottom line," she adds. "We routinely send patient satisfaction surveys to our patients to evaluate our front office staff, ophthalmic techs, opticians, and our doctors, and 98.5% of our surveys come back with positive comments."

CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR ENGAGEMENT!

Jennifer Livingston Huber heads a Philadelphia-based company, called Shift My Biz, that helps companies iron out problems when processes are not going as smoothly as they should. Sometimes, she stages a focus group to help identify the problem and develop potential solutions; other times information is gathered via surveys. The common thread is that the troubled company's employees are always involved. Whether the dilemma is inadequate sales or festering disgruntlement, inviting employees' input is always the right answer, says Ms. Livingston Huber.

"Asking employees what they think can be done to make things better is crucial," she explains. "Just the act of inviting employees' input, taking it seriously, and formulating some action around the findings—even if it is

seemingly insignificant—can go a long way," she says. "What I often hear from employees is that, even if management can't make the change that they ask for, they like to know that they're heard and that their concerns are appreciated," she says. This, she says, fosters the employee's desire to be fully involved in, and enthusiastic about, his or her work and to be eager to act in a way that furthers the company's or practice's success. This dynamic is often referred to as *employee engagement*. "Wherever you have highly engaged employees, you're likely to have good business results," says Ms. Livingston Huber. "Lots of companies have done research and have instruments to measure employee engagement, and the bottom line is that it high employee engagement almost universally correlates with high financial components in business."

Employee engagement and motivation tend to go hand in hand; the more motivated the employee is, the easier it is to engage him or her in the pursuit of a successful practice. "There are plenty of things that you can do to make a medical practice or any organization a good place to work, but you've got to bring in the right people in the first place," says Ms. Livingston Huber. "Motivation tends to come from within, and it's a lot easier to hire someone who is motivated and positive to begin with and to put them in your environment than to hire someone who isn't and try to shift that from the outside, which is essentially almost impossible."

Time will tell if intrinsic motivation and engagement turn out to be as important to the retention of employees and a practice's success as today's pundits profess (Figure 1). Meanwhile, all the signs suggest that word-of-mouth referrals stem from satisfied customers, that customers' satisfaction derives from remarkable customer service, and that remarkable customer service is an offshoot of motivated employees. That simple chain reaction starts with bringing in the right people. ■

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