



PRIME PRACTICE
the dental management specialists

Recruiting an Employee Dentist – Gut instinct or preparation and protocols?

By Simon Palmer

Most dentists depend on their gut feeling about a prospective employee, rather than utilise any structure in the screening and interviewing process.

While gut instinct may serve us well much of the time, the stakes are high when the prospective employee is a dentist. Mistakes in this employment process may have much larger ramifications than when employing other dental staff. This increases the need for a solid process of screening and interviewing.

Step 1: First contact

The first contact between a practice owner and a potential employee dentist (ED) will usually be by way of an application letter and CV/resume responding to a recruitment ad. Once this first contact is made the practice should respond quickly as a matter of courtesy. Even if you do not feel the candidate meets your needs on paper, it is often worthwhile to at least follow up with a phone call. It is often difficult to truly assess a candidate's potential by simply reviewing their resumé. Don't be too quick to rule anyone out. Some people are simply better in person than on paper.

If you do decide that there is potential after reviewing a candidate's resumé and having a quick discussion with him/her on the phone, the next step is to set up an interview. Preferably, this interview should take place at your practice since it will give the candidate some idea of your practice environment and you can assess the candidate's initial reaction to this environment.

Step 2: Pre-interview

The key to this initial interview will be not only to assess whether the candidate will "fit in" with you and your practice, but also to determine if your goals and objectives are compatible. Before the candidates arrive for an interview put together a list of your objectives and goals for the position (if you haven't already done so). What would be a "nice to have" in a candidate and what would be a "must have". Unless you have a clear vision of the candidate you would like (including his/her experience, philosophy, and goals), it will be difficult to assess the "fit" during the interview stage. Without a clear vision of the role you are trying to fill, you may bring aboard the wrong type of candidate and the employment could fail. The majority of failed dentist employments occur because of a lack of planning on the part of the owner and a failure on both sides to properly communicate expectations and goals in advance.

Some suggested criteria that you should identify in advance include:

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- Clinical: are there procedures that you definitely do and definitely don't want the successful candidate doing (e.g. implants, molar endo, ortho, amalgams, etc)? Is there a minimum number of years of experience required?
 - Hours: is one of your criteria the ability to work extended or unusual hours? Is there a minimum number of hours that the successful candidate will be expected to be in the practice? Or do they only need to be there when there is a patient.
 - Career: Do you wish to find an employee with a career ambition to be a practice owner (and eventually buy in to your practice) or one who will be a career employee?
 - Timeline: when does the candidate need to be able to start?
 - Continuing Education (CE) commitment: is it important that the candidate is committed to regular CE? Just clinical CE or practice management as well? What kind of commitment is ideal?
 - Production: are there production goals that you have in mind for this employee?
 - Management – do you foresee this dentist taking on some of the leadership and management role in the practice?

Once you have identified your practice's objectives and goals, you should then structure questions based on these that will help you uncover the best candidate. Writing them down ensures that you remember to ask all the candidates the same questions and are thereby able to compare their answers.

Step 3: The first interview

The purpose of this first interview is to use the questions you have prepared to identify possible candidates and eliminate those that are obviously incompatible with you or your practice. It is important to expect the interview to be a "two-way street". It is just as important for you to find out about the ED as it is for the ED to find out about you (and your practice).

Don't be too disheartened if the candidate is eager to discuss remuneration. They may just need to know if this position is going to allow them to meet their financial obligations and responsibilities. Candidates will be used to employers giving them vague answers to remuneration questions like "we are very busy here, so on that percentage you'll be earning plenty". You will have an edge over other practices if you are able to be clear and illuminate what they can expect for the first few months.

- A base or minimum salary for the first couple of months may let the candidate know that there will definitely be some money that they can count on coming in. If an employer goes down this path though it should be with the clear communicated understanding between the two parties that this is a minimum and that if he/she is still earning the minimum after a couple of months you should both be disappointed.

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- If you have previously had another ED working there, you may want tell the candidate approximately what was earned.

At this interview you should definitely bring up anything unusual or particular to the position on offer or your practice. For example:

- If the position involves working some late nights or Saturdays
- If your ideal candidate is one that would like to buy in in the next few years
- If you have a strong objection to certain procedures, etc.

It is better to let these be known as part of the position from the outset and find out any objections from the beginning rather than further down the track.

Step 4: Reference check

Once a candidate has made it through the first round of interviews it is very important to ask for and obtain and check at least two references. If the potential ED has prior work experience, the previous employer should be contacted with prior permission from the candidate. If the candidate does not want you to contact his/her previous employer, you should find out why and determine if those reasons are valid. Usually, the candidate will consent but he/she may wish to add an explanation as to why things did not work out.

Keep in mind that one person's assessment of another will always be relative to themselves. A comment that a candidate is "not as organized as they could be" might be true in the mind of a highly organized person but not as true for the general population.

Step 5: The second/final interview

The purpose of the second interview is to get into more detail with the various candidates and eliminate all but one of them.

More detail

The second interview is a great opportunity to readdress the main criteria you are seeking in an ED. Make sure there are no misunderstandings.

Meet the staff

During the follow-up interview the ED candidate should be introduced to the team. Where possible, after the candidate has left key team members should be given the opportunity to have input into the process. Without the support of the team, no relationship will last too long. You can tell a lot about a candidate and their compatibility with the practice by the way they interact with your team.

Case work

As part of the follow-up interview, if you are having trouble narrowing down the candidates you should consider having them present some of their case work (if they have prior practice experience). This will help you not only assess the

candidate's clinical capabilities but also help you assess intangible factors such as enthusiasm for dentistry, attention to detail, and areas of emphasis.

Step 6: Hiring

Once you and a candidate have found compatible goals and are mutually interested in forming a relationship, you should begin an exchange of more specific information and put in place an employee agreement.

Agreement

For some reason written agreements are often avoided by dentists entering into a working relationship thinking that it displays a lack of trust. Don't be misled into thinking that just because you get along and have had detailed discussions you do not need a written agreement. Without having your understanding, responsibilities and obligations to each other committed to writing, you are setting yourself up for a potential disagreement or dispute down the road. It is always better to discuss points of potential contention up front than to wait until a dispute occurs.

Consider including a job description in the agreement. I know it may seem obvious what a dentist job description is but you would be amazed at the potential points of contention that can occur from a vague working relationship. Where the candidate is being brought aboard for a buy-in opportunity, it is also a good idea to have a letter of intent that outlines the basic understanding between you and the ED (including timelines) – even if simply to show good faith on your part.

The trial period

The only real proof that you have found the right candidate is when you have hired and had the candidate work in your practice for a few months. With this in mind you may wish to consider a trial period in your agreement.

A trial period of three to six months allows each party to become accustomed to the other on a daily basis and allows the relationship the opportunity to succeed. Be patient. Remember that some people will take a while getting comfortable in a place of work before they "bloom".

The trial period should have a set end date (in the agreement) no more than three to six months away at which time you schedule a meeting to re-assess the relationship.

There is no magic formula, set of questions or steps that will guarantee a successful outcome during recruitment. The only way to minimize your risk and maximize your chances of success is to do some preparation. Have clear goals and clear protocols for selection and learn from previous employee relationships that haven't been as successful as you would have liked.

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