



## Staff Retention

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We are currently in a period of very low unemployment. With an undersupply of employees, practices are finding that maintaining employee loyalty is more important than ever. The cost of being short staffed added to the cost of retraining can be staggering in dollar terms and the emotional cost of trying to run a busy practice without enough staff to deliver quality service can be unbearably stressful.

Staff retention, is a practice management 'challenge' that is best dealt with in terms of prevention before we have a problem rather than reaction once we know we have a problem.

One of the biggest mistakes dentists make is assuming that staff loyalty can simply be bought with more dollars. I believe that this is a **big mistake!**

While wages are a part of what keeps you at a job it isn't everything. Dentists live in a world of tangibles and they are reductionist in their thinking. It can be difficult for many dentists to really 'get' that non-monetary rewards are at least as important as the tangible monetary rewards when it comes to retention.

Time and again I have seen dentists hire staff, pay well above the going rate and still have recurring problems with retention. So what is missing? Assuming that your staff's wages are reasonable, what will keep valued staff at your practice?

In my opinion it comes down to two things. Work environment and personal appreciation.

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## Work environment

The work environment that you create tells a lot about you and will greatly affect your staff and patient retention. Signs of a practice with a good work environment:

- Aesthetically it needs to feel pleasant and not gloomy, dark or dated.
- A professional systematised, protocol driven practice will obviously make for a nicer environment to work than a stressful and chaotic practice. To create this make sure that:
  - Job descriptions are in place
  - You are up to date with the latest practice management techniques and courses.
- Up to date equipment, materials, computers and other technology.
- The staff members get along and feel like they are friends.
  - Make sure you celebrate birthdays, engagements, weddings, births of children etc.
  - Occasionally schedule a lunch in the practice where you buy lunch for your team, bring it to the office and everyone gets to catch up on each others lives.
- A practice where the staff members feel like a team that works together, supporting one another.
- A practice where staff members feel like their opinion is valued and taken seriously. Good ways to create this environment include:
  - Regular team meetings where everyone is encouraged to voice their views.
- More involvement in management. Yes more; not less. At this point we must be very clear that there is a distinction between leadership and management. The leader should never reduce their leadership and always aim to reduce their management.

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## Appreciation

All team members want to feel they are appreciated. While paying them their due wages conveys this message, it isn't enough! Staff need sincere demonstrations of respect and appreciation of their abilities and their contribution to the practice.

Suggested ways to do this

- Make a point of up-skilling your valued staff where possible. Let them know that this investment you are taking in their skills and knowledge you see as an investment in the practice. A staff member will be less likely to leave if they feel that they will gain valuable skills by staying.
  - Enroll them in a continuing education course. Software courses (either standard office software for front office and/or dental software), practice management courses (like Prime Practice, front office training, advanced telephone skills, dental office management), or other courses related to their area of interest (on sterilisation, OH&S, book keeping).
  - Create an environment where staff members are training each other in their areas of expertise.
- For on-the-spot recognition of a job well done or work done above and beyond their job description, you could give them:
  - Lotto/scratchies tickets or movie/theatre tickets
  - Gift sent to the employee's home related to their special interest or hobby.

If the whole team has worked well together and deserves recognition for something (for a good financial year, for smooth sailing during your time away, for a smooth transition into new technology, etc) make sure you let them know that you recognise their efforts. You could:

- Take the whole team to a non-dental event (morning tea, lunch, dinner, theatre, sporting event, movie, circus, a show)

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- Hire a masseuse one day to give employees shoulder and neck massages at lunch.
  - A round of coffee's could be hand-delivered by the dentist.
  - Take each team member out to lunch once every few months.

While this behaviour might not come naturally to many dentists, making this a habit will bring amazing rewards in team morale and staff retention.

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