

# STAFFING YOUR OFFICE DURING A RECOVERING ECONOMY

AS THE OWNER OF A SMALL BUSINESS, *DentalStaffers.com*, I too have felt the ups and downs of the economy. We are experiencing the weakest employment climate in years. With continuing high unemployment, shrinking paychecks, shriveling nest eggs and mortgage foreclosures, the economy is slow to recover.

It is a challenge for dental practices to know how to survive during a recovering economy. First, it is important to stay positive, because negativity will affect productivity in your practice. Second, determine the minimum staff with which your practice will function effectively, and then trim the number of employees to achieve this objective. Most practices remain loyal to their core staff, keeping them while reducing hours or cutting the non-essential employees. Many painful decisions may have to be made to ensure the survival of your practice. However, before implementing a staff reduction, think about the risk of losing loyal patients. Layoffs should be a last resort when all other options have been exhausted. When patients see a practice losing productivity, they can lose confidence and some may jump ship.

Hiring during a slow recovering recession may seem counterintuitive, but recessions create an employers' market. Dentists, with the help of their office managers, should take advantage of unique opportunities during such a crisis to upgrade their practice. Because job security is more important than salaries, and because jobs themselves are scarce, dentists can add employees with top-level skills and experience without having to pay top-dollar salaries. In other words, a recovering recession gives the dentist a chance to improve the professional level of expertise in the practice at bargain-basement cost. That's the hidden beauty of a slow recovery that most dentists are not aware of. Practices should be reorganizing by adding talent and removing the dead weight. It's an opportune time to acquire skilled clinical employees without putting the practice any more in the red. Let go of marginal performers and replace them with top performers. Reduce redundancies and inefficiencies. The key to improving your practice during a recovering recession is to stay resilient, so that when economic times perk up, your practice is better than it was before the recovery began. This will improve competitiveness and drive growth during the prosperous times to come.

When interviewing, use the initial interview to determine if the applicant has made the short list. Narrow your choice to the best three applicants. The second interview should be used as a working interview. Utilize this working interview in three ways: see how capable the applicants are, evaluate how well

they interact with others in your practice, and use the working interview to provide coverage in your office until the position is filled.

If you are considering permanent staff cuts, remember that some employees would rather

volunteer for a reduction of hours instead of losing their jobs altogether. If staff cuts are inevitable, use temporary staffing to maintain productivity. In the past, temporary staffing was used to cover maternity and surgical leaves, vacations, and sick/personal time. Now, it is no longer just used for short-term coverage. As dental practices try to manage their business fluctuations, they are utilizing temporary staffing agencies to fill their staffing needs.

With temporary staffing, practices can operate on a more flexible basis. This coincides nicely with America's changing workforce, where more and more people are looking for flexibility in their employment. Flexibility gives employees time for their families and the chance to pursue hobbies and other interests.

Practices that embrace work force flexibility and engage staffing firms i.e., *DentalStaffers.com* cite three main reasons:

1. To fill in for an absent employee or to fill an interim vacancy.
2. To provide extra support during busy times or seasons.
3. To staff special short-term projects.

More importantly, temporary help requires no paid benefits. The temp only receives compensation for the hours for which they work. Because benefits are costly, utilizing a flexible temporary workforce allows you to maintain workflow and productivity without incurring high overhead. If you are providing benefits to your staff, explore other medical health coverage plans that cost less. You can also call your own provider and ask for a higher co-pay to help bring your premiums down.

Take charge of your current financial situation - empower your practice. Hold brainstorming sessions with your staff; their commitment may surprise you, and it gives them an opportunity to feel useful and involved. During these sessions, discover ways to reduce expenditures and make the practice more efficient. For example, if you have a large copy machine with lots of bells and whistles that are rarely used, consider a smaller one that can still do the essential jobs well. Reduce overtime, as it often serves to lower morale. Instead, supplement your staff with temporary help which will keep your permanent employees free of burnout.

To keep your payroll current, make a gentle but firm effort to collect unpaid bills. Patients with long-term unpaid balances will be less willing to pay their debts if they are having financial difficulties imposed by the economy. Always maintain grace under pressure. Be proactive with your patients, since satisfied patients will tell others about your wonderful practice. Word of mouth advertising is the best kind.

Updating your business development plans during a down economy is also crucial. Put on your thinking caps for alternative marketing strategies. Meet more people to improve networking. Get the name of your practice out there. Pool your knowledge and when opportunities arise, make sure you and your staff are receptive. Put in the effort to be competitive, and stay organized. You and your practice should be prepared for change.

Remember, the recovering economy offers unique business opportunities for those wise enough to take advantage of them. As all economic downturns are followed by times of prosperity, make sure your dental practice is on course for the good times ahead. <<



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