

Hiring and Retention-How Do We Create the Magic?

Staff hiring and retention are two of the major lynchpins of a successful office, but they're also frequently the two most neglected. Let's first look at hiring, and then we'll tackle retention. Instead of a good solid interview process with lots of well thought out questions, way too many doctors use the "is she breathing?" method. As long as they meet with a reasonably presentable, reasonable articulate human being; she's hired. They then settle back, sigh "that's over with," and wait for the magic to start. The magic they're hoping for will make a marginal candidate into an exemplary employee. Rarely, if ever, does this happen. The more common scenario is that after wasting 3 months of time and energy on training, the doctor is looking to replace this staff member and start the process all over again. Let's look at some of the important points of good hiring.

- Create an excellent employment ad and place it strategically. Advertising is so expensive in our current economy that many offices have gone to on-line employment advertising with great success. Employees have changed how they search for jobs and employers need to follow their lead.....and where better to find a computer literate employee than on line? It's also very important to use key words that speak to our specific requirements. Prior to placing the ad, we need to brainstorm what qualities we want in this new employee. What are the core values or skills that we need? Be sure to get words that reflect these into the ad.
- Once you've gathered resumes from your ad, review them carefully. Typos tell you a lot about the person's attention to detail. Many different jobs in a fairly short period of time should be a cause for concern. Have a form prepared with preliminary questions when you make that first phone call. This not only gets your thoughts in order, but it also creates a level playing field as you always ask the same questions of every candidate. Be sure to include a couple of open ended questions designed to elicit conversation to get a better feel for the job seeker's verbal skills.
- Having narrowed the resumes down to the best possibilities, it's time to set up face to face interviews. These first interviews can be done by just the office manager who then brings the top 2 or 3 candidates back in to meet the doctor - or the doctor can join in on these interviews to expedite the process.

Either way, plan them well. Allow at least 45 minutes, preferably an hour, per interview and have a series of much more detailed and skill-oriented questions prepared. This interview should really make the applicant think and stretch!

- Once you've decided on the top candidates, bring them in individually for working interviews and have the entire staff (without doctor) take the candidate out to lunch. Meet with your staff after lunch or at the end of the day and see if they think you've found a good fit. Rethink your decision if your current staff is not comfortable; they frequently get the "hair down" employee at lunch that you were not privy to at the interview.
- Finally, if you decide this is the right person to join your team, make a clear offer including salary, benefits, hours and any and all other pertinent information.

There is no doubt that the hiring process we just reviewed is time consuming and detailed. There is also no doubt that every doctor would like to find excellent employees who stay and grow with the practice. Having said that, let's look at what it takes to retain that great employee that we worked so hard to find. Staff retention is a complex issue that's often addressed with very simplistic solutions. Raises in salary and large bonuses are wonderful "quick fixes" but they are not long term solutions. Doctors are always surprised when valuable staff members move on despite having been given a sizeable raise at their last review and an impressive Christmas bonus. What they fail to see is how little else they have done to convince that staff member that they value them as a part of the office team. Let's take a look at some of the issues that affect retention:

- Every one of us has a strong innate need to feel valued and respected. When management in the office (be it doctor, office manager or both) does not treat staff members with respect, there is no incentive for staff members to stay. Money really doesn't buy happiness and it doesn't buy loyalty either! As the team leader (and head of the office "family") it's up to the doctor to set the tone of the office. A doctor who is moody, difficult to please, negative or critical, invites a staff with those same traits.

- While there are definitely times when staff members need to be coached or made aware of errors, it's how the coaching is presented that's of prime importance. A doctor who privately and patiently explains how a mistake needs to be corrected creates an ally in the office; a loyal staff member who will speak highly of him or her to outsiders. A doctor who treats staff like serfs who have displeased the feudal lord creates someone who will gossip about the office and move on as soon as possible. Almost everyone would see the first scenario as preferable, but a good leader actually puts it into practice.
- Another often overlooked area is the simple, but effective, "thank you". I'm not talking about the obligatory "thank you" that so many doctors say at the end of the day and with so little feeling that the staff no longer even hears the words. I'm talking about catching employees doing something really well and stopping and giving them praise for a job well done and really sincere thanks for being part of the team. "Please" and "thank you" might have been the magic words when we were growing up, but praise and thank you are the magic words for staff retention.
- Finally, consistency and communication are the two words every doctor needs to keep in mind. It's not only important to have a good strong plan and set of systems in the office; it's also vital that these systems are clearly communicated to all staff members and consistently used by the doctor as the office standard. In an office where consistency and communication are lacking, everyone's trying to get the job done, but they're never quite sure what the job is supposed to be. There are few more frustrating ways to spend your day than trying to guess what the doctor wants today and hoping you've guessed right. Doctors who are clear in their expectations, and don't change those expectations daily have happy productive employees who aren't looking around for their next job.

The magic needed to find and retain good people isn't really magic at all; it's actually the product of hard work and foresight on the part of a good manager.

The doctor who utilizes good hiring and retention practices has great employees working with him who are happy to be there and have no desire to look elsewhere. This is definitely the “magical” infrastructure of all really successful offices.