CHAPTER 17

Human Resources: Hiring and Training Office Staff

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People who produce good results feel good about themselves.
Kenneth Blanchard *One Minute Manager*

In successful human resource management, all basic functions of management must be considered. These functions are planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. Many classic business texts add a fifth consideration—staffing—to this list. These five basic functions are considered in this discussion of human resource management for an optometric practice.

The objective addressed in this chapter is the selection of an efficient, enthusiastic staff. There is no office in which the instruments used, procedures performed, or materials dispensed contribute to the success of the practice and goodwill of patients more than the staff. When in place and functioning properly, the staff of an optometric office adds services to patients, assists with marketing efforts inside and outside the office, increases efficiency and productivity of the practice, and elevates the personal aspects of eye care.

When the five functions of management are described, there is inevitably some overlapping and considerable interdependence. All of these functions must be addressed, however, to achieve the goal of implementing a management plan that will result in developing and maintaining an efficient, enthusiastic staff. In considering the goal of developing and maintaining such a staff, it might be asked, “Are efficiency and enthusiasm related?” The answer is clearly “yes.” By producing good results (being efficient), people acquire a feeling of achievement (enthusiasm). This enthusiasm permeates the person, the practice, and the care being rendered to patients.

All employees need to know and feel the following six things if they are to be enthusiastic:

- Know they are needed
- Know what is expected of them and how to meet those expectations (proper training)
- Know there is a possibility for growth
- Know they are compensated fairly
- Know they are appreciated (recognition)
- Believe they are involved in the delivery of care and the growth of the practice (ownership)

These six things should be kept in mind as a management plan is developed.

PLANNING

To acquire an office staff, planning is the first step. The planning process is used to determine the need for and qualifications of new staff members. See Chapter 16 for additional information on this process.

Need for Staff

Before hiring an employee, it is essential to determine the needs of the practice that the employee will fulfill. What responsibilities will this staff person have? In traditional personnel terms, what will be the workload of this employee? In this planning phase, it is necessary to determine how and why specific work functions are performed and to quantify their significance in terms of time and value to the practice. For an optometrist starting a practice with one employee, the primary responsibilities will probably be those of a receptionist. Even at this early stage of practice, however, a list of responsibilities should be developed. One optometric text on practice management lists 27 responsibilities for this job classification. The determination and listing of these responsibilities become part of the organizational aspect of the management plan.

When a new position is to be added to the staff, input should be obtained from current staff members (beyond the familiar cry of “we need more help”). Asking the staff to assess the responsibilities currently being performed by individual members—through the use of daily logs or time management sheets—permits quantification of the allocation of time and duties and helps to identify needs. This process also provides a role for employees in the planning process and serves as an occasion for employees to do a self-evaluation of their contribution to the delivery of care.

When a new position is created, the use of an appropriate title often helps the person fit into the staff. For example, if a second optometric technician is hired, with primary responsibilities in styling and dispensing, the appropriate title might be ophthalmic technician. For the first technician, if he or she has demonstrated leadership qualities, the title might be changed to senior technician.

In planning for the addition of a staff member, the economics of delivering care must be considered. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, there is no aspect of a practice that is more important to its success than the staff. It also can be the most expensive aspect of a practice if not planned wisely. From an economic standpoint, both original and additional staff members should increase the productivity of the practice. Increased productivity can be achieved by the delegation of responsibilities to staff members so that the practitioner's time is better used for the delivery of income-producing professional services. (This assumes that there is potential for the practitioner's time to be used more productively.)

Optometry students and new graduates often think they must work with a full range of paraoptometric personnel, but during the developmental phase of a practice the use of a large staff is not economically sound.

Findings obtained by the American Optometric Association (AOA) Caring for the Eyes of America survey (2008) reveal that staff costs have increased from 15.3% of total gross income in 1996 to 18.3% in 2006. Another guideline for staff costs also is based on practice income; it holds that a practice should have one full-time staff person for every $132,000 of gross income. A model for staff productivity has been proposed, using dollar productivity per hour per employee. *Key Metrics of Optometric Practice* reports a median of $79 gross revenue per staff per hour, with a range of $59 to $116. Of course, actual figures will vary considerably with the type of practice and the optometric product being delivered. For example, a practice using chairside assistants or performing a significant amount of in-office visual training that uses technicians would be labor-intensive and would have a higher percentage of gross income devoted to staff than would a primary care practice. Another example would be low-vision practices with labor-intensive staff and higher-end low-vision devices.

Qualifications of Applicants

During the planning phase, the qualifications of applicants should be carefully considered. These qualifications need to be commensurate with the specific staff responsibilities to be assumed. Although screening for these qualifications is clearly a part of staffing, the better the planning, the better the chance of finding someone who has these qualifications in the applicant pool. Each position will require a different prioritization of general abilities, in addition to specific knowledge or skills. General abilities needed might include dexterity, memory, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, ability to handle people, and telephone voice. Telephone voice would probably be the top priority if the position were for a receptionist with appointment responsibilities. If preparing reports were part of this same job, specific skills in typing or using a word processor would be critical. Minimum hiring standards should be part of planning. In busy offices that need a person to assume specific duties with minimum training, experience might be essential. A person with the right education and training usually will be an efficient and enthusiastic employee much sooner than someone trained on the job. The meeting of these standards will depend on the applicant pool, wage level, and competition for people with similar skills from other industries. People who are working as optometric technicians and who have formal academic training only account for 18% of the individuals filling these positions.

In a survey commissioned by Bayer Corporation, in cooperation with the National Science Foundation, the newest employees in America's workforce and their managers were asked to define the special skills needed to manage continuing change in the workplace. Both managers and employees agreed that the key skills were being able to solve unforeseen problems on the job (as opposed to referring unforeseen problems to others), adapting to changes in the work environment (as opposed to coping with a stable work environment), and doing their best work as a team (as opposed to doing their best work independent of others).

Intelligence tests have a long history in hiring. The strength of intelligence tests is the ability to predict workplace performance in cognitive abilities such as verbal ability, math ability, or reasoning skills. Intelligence tests are significantly weaker when job success depends on following a routine or repetitive activities. Intelligence tests also have a negative of disproportionately discriminating against people based on protected characteristics such as age, race, or gender. This makes using intelligence testing in hiring very risky.

There is a growing trend to use personality tests in hiring. It is very difficult for people to modify their own personality to match workplace requirements. There are many ways to view personality. One way separates people into task preferences or people preferences. People with a task preference prefer to do things rather than be with people. This does not mean they cannot interact successfully with people, it just means they function better when doing things rather than interacting with people. A person who prefers to do tasks rather than deal with people can modify his or her behavior for short periods of time if placed into a job requiring people interaction such as that of receptionist. Eventually, however, personal preferences will cause difficulties as a result of the mismatch between personality and job requirements. As a general rule, hire personality and train skills.

There are several excellent personality profiles that can be used to best place potential new hires within your practice. The most complicated test for both analysis and interpretation is the Myers-Briggs. This test uses four pairs of traits. People manifest all eight traits with a preference for one in each pair. The traits are extrovert/introvert, sensor/intuitive, thinker/feeler, and judger /perceiver. Preferred traits are present at birth; however, they are modified by the environment. Activities become awkward, threatening, and frustrating when less preferred traits are used.

Tests that use only four personality traits may be easier to implement in the typical practice. The Schwartz DISC test uses four personality groups: *D*irecting, *I*nfluencing, *S*upportive, and *C*ontemplative. The DISC approach is easily used within a practice.

Another excellent system is the one created by Florence Littauer. Her system has four personality traits: playful, powerful, perfect, and peaceful. Using this system, the detail-oriented perfect personality is best suited for bookkeeping and the playful personality who is not detail-oriented would make the worst bookkeeper.

The best practices approach to take to use personality testing in hiring is as follows:

- Evaluate the target job for personality requirements.
- Identify the personality test easiest to implement in your practice.
- Use the personality test results with structured interviews to select the best candidates.
- Monitor hiring patterns, employee performance, and job turnover to fine-tune the system.

Employers cannot ask questions to potential candidates about religion, national origin, age, height, weight, marital status, disability, or gender unless they represent qualifications essential to the operation of the business. A standard written interview form should be used by the employer to verify that no inquiries about prohibited matters occurred. Questions should be limited to topics directly relevant to job performance. Examples of questions you cannot ask would be the following:

- Do you have family responsibilities that could keep you from getting to the office?
- Do you have medical conditions that could interfere with your job performance?
- Are you disabled?

Courts have sometimes taken the position that psychological testing has no place in the business environment. On the other hand, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) promotes objectivity in the employee selection process. The presence of a nondiscriminatory assessment program greatly reduces the risk for bias and prejudice. The use of a properly implemented and utilized assessment program strengthens the employer's position that candidates are being treated fairly without regard to race, color, age, religion, sex, or national origin.

ORGANIZATION

Organization is the management function of relating people, tasks (or activities), and resources to each other so that the practice can accomplish its objectives. Plans are carried out through the organizing process. Table 17-1 is an example of one organization model for optometric personnel.

In most optometric offices, staff persons will be needed to perform the functions of receptionist, ophthalmic technician, frame stylist, word processor, and office manager (see Table 17-1). There are optometric practices in which all of these functions are performed by one or two staff members and also by the optometrist. In larger group optometric practices, one or more staff members may be designated to one particular function, and there might be added areas of responsibility. For instance, an ophthalmic assistant or optometric technician could perform pretesting procedures, another staff member might perform all the insurance billings, and so forth. The organizational chart needs to describe the specific areas of responsibility for each position. For example, in Table 17-1 the primary patient needs of the receptionist is to answer the phone, make and confirm appointments, prepare patient files, and manage related duties.

Personality traits also should be considered. In Table 17-1, the qualities that are required to perform the primary patient needs are listed. For example, for a receptionist to perform primary patient needs, he or she would need qualities associated with performing those tasks such as being friendly, pleasant, polite, consistent, and patient with people.

Another consideration is the secondary skills required for a position. In Table 17-1, secondary patient needs and management skills required by the receptionist, ophthalmic technician, and office manager are described. Under qualities, some of the personality traits required to perform those specific tasks are listed.

Whether it is a first or a subsequent employee that is being selected, a careful assessment should be made of the prospective employee's strengths and personality traits to determine the person's suitability for the position. It has often been said, "One can teach skills, but it is difficult to change a personality." Inappropriate matching of personality traits and staff positions will lead to stress, conflicts, high turnover rate, and a detrimental influence on the overall growth of the practice. Patients will be quick to notice changes and conflicts within the practice, and although they may return to the office for optometric care, their enthusiasm to refer other patients to the practice will diminish.

When choosing the positions to fill in an office, careful consideration should be given to the titles used. For example, a receptionist is one of the most crucial employees in any optometric office; it is estimated that a receptionist will communicate with the patient 4 times more often than the doctor. However, "receptionist" is often considered the position with the least status, and the job is commonly assigned small tasks that do not add significant value to the practice. The purpose or mission of a receptionist should be to provide a caring and competent atmosphere for patients, and too many added responsibilities can detract from this primary duty. In fact, a busy receptionist may be so hurried trying to process patients that this purpose is forgotten. For example, if the receptionist is also responsible for recall and processing insurance forms and can process about $30,000 per month, attempts to see more patients may result in increased accounts receivable, but also delays in processing insurance claims, and poor recall of patients. So the purpose of the job and the title must be considered together.

Rather than receptionist, a more appropriate title might be patient manager, appointment secretary, front-desk coordinator, or patient-relations coordinator. The title selected should be the one that best fits the responsibilities of the position and that adds value to the practice. These responsibilities may include those of hostess, time manager, accountant, finance manager, follow-up evaluator, and marketing manager. It is estimated that a good front-desk person normally earns up to 7 times that person's salary in increased production if trained properly.

TABLE 17-1

Organizational Model for Optometric Personnel

Receptionist	Ophthalmic Technician	Frame Stylist	Typist	Office Manager
PRIMARY PATIENT NEEDS				
Answer phone	Order prescription contact lenses	Select frames	Type	—
Make/confirm appointments	Verify prescription contact lenses			
Prepare patient files	Deliver prescription contact lenses			
Greet patients				
Record charges				
Bill patients				
Qualities				
Friendly	Able to verbally instruct	Fashion and color sensible	Organized	—
Pleasant	Mechanically inclined	Patient	Efficient	
Polite	Patient	Perceptive		
Consistent	Skilled in time management	Detail-oriented		
Patient		Sensitive		
Courteous				
SECONDARY PATIENT NEEDS				
Bill insurance	Repair and adjust prescriptions	—	—	—
Record insurance payment	Train patients in contact lens wear			
Recall patients				
File charts				
Restock office supplies				
Qualities				
Organized	Methodical	—	—	—
Efficient				
MANAGEMENT SKILLS				
Manage and control accounts receivable	Log and monitor prescriptions Restock contact lenses Restock contact lens solutions	—	—	Supervise Purchase frames Pay taxes and bills Reconcile bank accounts Resolve aging accounts receivable Maintain bookkeeping and accounting
Qualities				
Decisive	Resourceful	—	—	Organized
Direct	Creative			Respected
Relentless	Organized			Supportive of shared goals
Respectable vs. likable	Judicious			Administrative Good manager Stable Consistent

◄ CROSS-TRAINING ►

Through the years, three basic types of staff organizations have developed in the practice of optometry. They are referred to as type I, type II, and type III.

Type I Staff Organization

Type I is referred to as the "family" staff organization. It is composed of a solo practitioner and one full-time staff person, who performs most of the staff functions. The optometrist also helps in the dispensing and adjusting of glasses.

In addition, there can be a part-time staff person, and the spouse of the optometrist is usually part of the office staff. The full-time staff person has been in the practice for many years and is an excellent employee but is not necessarily a "team player." The outstanding characteristic of this practice for the staff member is the closeness, friendship, and loyalties between the employer and the employee. If there are personal problems or tragedies, the support systems function just like those of a family. The staff wages and benefits might be less than those in other offices. The overall office efficiency and organization are not the strengths of this type of practice. The gross income of this type of practice does not change significantly over the years. In the type I practice, there is a strong resistance to changes in staff organization and to the incorporation of changes in examination procedures. Because of the inflexibility of the type I practice, there is little acquisition and use of modern instrumentation or equipment.

Type II Staff Organization

The type II practice is referred to as the “saturated” practice. There usually is a solo practitioner and an associate optometrist, who works several days at the practice. The staff organization, staff salaries, and benefits are higher than those in the type I practice. There are often three full-time and permanent staff members (or the part-time equivalent of three full-time staff members), and staff functions are divided among the three staff members, each having a primary area of responsibility. The staff members are excellent “team players,” with one staff person extremely strong and perceived as the “leader.”

The outstanding characteristics of the type II office is the efficiency and harmony of the office. The office continues to grow and develop, and the instrumentation and equipment are usually updated. However, in general, the support systems, friendship, and closeness do not compare with those in the type I practice.

Type III Staff Organization

The type III practice, referred to as “the group,” represents only a minority of optometric practices. There are at least three or more partners. The staff organization, salaries, and benefits are at the highest level of optometric practices. However, because of the large volume of patients and the use of many staff members, there is limited time in which to cultivate the friendship, loyalties, and closeness found in the type I (and to a lesser degree in the type II) practice.

Matrix Organization

Another method of organization is the matrix system used by Williams Marketing. Matrix organization is a way to build a team approach to patient care. All staff members have specific, designated responsibilities, and every person’s name and particular responsibility is defined so that everyone in the organization, including new personnel, knows exactly where to go with specific questions. Responsibility for tasks is assigned according to the most logical individual, which means that the chief executive (doctor) can delegate tasks effectively, without fear of them getting “lost in the shuffle.” This allows the doctor to focus more on patient care. Matrix management requires communication rather than authority. Staff members must support and help one another rather than work separately. This creates a cohesive team approach because everyone contributes.

Functions are divided into three management centers (front desk, clinic, or dispensary), which are run by managers (Figure 17-1). Although management centers are separated within the matrix, the matrix interlocks staff members outside particular management centers by designating directors for five business functions (marketing, sales, patient care, finance, and quality control) and applying these functions to all three management centers. Isolation of employees is consequently eliminated. Because each individual in the management centers is assigned responsibilities, someone is immediately accountable for all functions. Because everyone contributes, there is cohesion and a shared sense of value.

In small practices the same person may serve as the manager of certain management centers and the director of certain functions. For example, the dispensary manager also may be the designated director of marketing and quality control. The chief executive (doctor) also may be the clinic manager and patient care director. The key to a matrix system is to ensure that the responsibility for duties falling under each management center and business function is specifically assigned.

DEVELOPING AN OFFICE MANUAL FOR EMPLOYEES

After a thorough evaluation of the staff needs has been performed and the appropriate organization has been determined, it is mandatory that an office policy manual be written. If the office does not have a manual, the time should be taken to develop one. Even if a solo practice is started “cold,” it should have a manual. The employment policy manual should include several basic topics (Box 17-1).

The AOA (and individual authors) have published guidebooks that go through each step of manual development.

Chief Executive

	Marketing	Sales	Patient Care	Finance	Quality Control
Front Desk					
Clinic					
Dispensary					

FIGURE 17-1 Matrix organization. (Courtesy Williams Marketing, Lincoln, NE. Reprinted with permission.)

BOX 17-1

Topics to be Included in an Office Manual

Philosophy of care and of the office
Employee classification
Full-time, part-time, probationary
Equal opportunity statement
Policy of nondiscrimination
Duties and responsibilities of employees: staff functions
Employee conduct
  May include such issues as personal conduct, dress code, personal calls, personal visitors, punctuality, smoking, eating, drinking, chewing gum, grooming and attire
Working hours
Vacations, holidays, and leaves of absence
  May include such issues as paid vacations, holidays, sick leave or absence, emergency leave, leaves without pay
Payroll and employee benefits
Safety
Confidentiality
  May include provision that "violation of patient confidentiality" will be grounds for immediate dismissal
Performance and salary review
Patient complaints
Termination
  Voluntary, mutual, and involuntary
Jury duty
Bereavement leave

These sources should be consulted before attempting to draft a manual for a specific office. Eyecare Practice Tool Kit has an excellent template for an employment policy manual written by David Kirschen, OD, and Lawrence Thal, OD. The manual is on a CD and easy to adapt to any practice.

DESIGNATION OF THE PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATOR

One of the significant advantages of a group practice is that one of the partners can be responsible for the management of the staff. Often this position merits special compensation because of the time commitment, stress, and pressure. In some practices, this administrator might give a performance review and evaluation for each staff member every 6 months, or at least once a year. During this review the administrator discusses the job description with the employee and measures performance against expectation, develops with the employee a plan for improvement, and provides feedback on employee strengths and weaknesses.

The personnel administrator also listens to staff complaints about the practitioners and the office. These complaints are then transmitted to the practitioners, who meet weekly to discuss issues as they occur. There also should be a staff meeting at least once a month. If it is at noon, a catered lunch could be served since the staff members are giving up their lunch time for an office meeting. The chair of each meeting is rotated among the staff. The administrator also determines staff vacation time for the calendar year and monitors sick and bereavement leaves and similar periods of absence. (A better approach is to schedule a staff office meeting during regularly scheduled office times rather than during mealtimes. When food is introduced into a staff business meeting, attention is distracted from the meeting and placed on the food. Additionally, mealtimes should be a time for the staff to clear their heads and recharge their batteries. Taking mealtimes away from staff, even if you feed them, may not give staff an adequate break during working hours.)

Other models of an office hierarchy might have an office manager or personnel administrator who is not an optometrist. These administrators operate in a manner that is very similar to the process previously described, reporting frequently to the optometrist responsible for this part of the practice.

Many offices use front office coordinators or senior technicians as administrators to establish some vertical management. Whenever there is more than one employee, it is necessary to establish who is responsible to whom. Job classifications identify individual responsibilities, but there must be someone in the practice to see that these responsibilities are fulfilled on a dayto- day basis. The structure of any vertical management should be included in the practice manual or employee handbook.

JOB ANALYSIS

Once an organizational structure has been chosen, a job analysis must be performed to determine the specific responsibilities and tasks to be assigned to each staff member. Job analysis in some settings is no longer considered optional, rather being required in light of recent legal rulings that protect employee rights. These rulings indicate that a job analysis should provide the following:

- A thorough, clear, and well-written specific job description
- An indication of how often specific task behaviors should be evaluated
- An accurate evaluation of the job specifications, as provided by the US Employment Service and US Office of Personnel Management.

Legal considerations also affect the selection process when hiring new staff members.

Job analysis should include creation of position agreements.

A position agreement is different from a job description since it describes the overall requirements and management of the position. A position agreement should be signed by every staff member insuring that staff understands the essence of each job they control. The contents of the position agreement are as follows:

Position title

What will be measured to determine how well this job is being done?
Responsibility statement (I am responsible for …)
Position goals (I will make sure systems exist that ensure …)
Personal goals (While controlling this position I will …)

Position management

The following things need to be done daily:
The following things need to be done weekly:
The following things need to be done quarterly:
The following things need to be done yearly:

Technical management

To manage this position I need to have the following knowledge and skills . . .

General standards

Maintain professionalism at all times
Treat patients like family, "go the extra mile"
All patients needs must be met
Keep a positive attitude at all times
Maintain confidentiality always for patients and staff
Assist in maintaining a clean office
Always arrive on time
Always display a willingness to do more than expected
Uniforms will be worn at all times, kept pressed, neat and clean

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE SELECTION OF STAFF MEMBERS

Employer-employee relationships, even in small optometric practices, are affected by a variety of federal and state laws. Although some laws limit their application to employers having a minimum of 15 to 20 employees, others are more broadly applicable. Employment legislation therefore is applicable to most optometric practices. Because of their complexity, it is important to have competent legal counsel in dealing with these laws.

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) is the federal labor law that establishes minimum wage, overtime pay, recordkeeping, and child labor standards, affecting more than 140 million full- and part-time workers in the private sector and in federal, state, and local governments.

The Wage and Hour Division of the US Department of Labor administers and enforces FLSA with respect to private employment; state and local government employment; and federal employees of the Library of Congress, US Postal Service, Postal Rate Commission, and the Tennessee Valley Authority. The Labor Department's Office of Personnel Management is responsible for enforcement with regard to all other federal employees.

Special rules apply to state and local government employment involving fire protection and law enforcement activities, volunteer services, and compensatory time off in lieu of cash overtime pay.

As of July 24, 2009, covered nonexempt workers have been entitled to a minimum wage of not less than $7.25 an hour. Overtime pay at a rate of not less than one $1^{1/2}$ times the regular rate of pay is required for each hour worked over 40 hours per week. Wages required by FLSA are due on the regular payday for the pay period covered. Deductions made from wages for items, such as cash or merchandise shortages, employerrequired uniforms, and tools of the trade, are not legal to the extent that they reduce the wages of employees below the minimum rate required by FLSA or reduce the amount of overtime pay due under FLSA.

Even though FLSA does set basic minimum wage and overtime pay standards and regulates the employment of minors, there are a number of employment practices that FLSA does not regulate. For example, FLSA does not require the following:

- Vacation, holiday, severance, or sick pay
- Meal or rest periods
- Premium pay for weekend or holiday work
- Pay raises or fringe benefits
- A discharge notice, reason for discharge, or immediate payment of final wages to terminated employees

Also, FLSA does not limit the number of hours in a day or days in a week an employee can be required or scheduled to work, if the employee is at least 16 years old. These matters are for agreement between the employer and the employees, or their authorized representatives. Under certain conditions, employers can pay a training wage of at least 85% of the minimum wage for up to 90 days to employees younger than 20 years of age. In addition to these issues, there are other conditions and exemptions in FLSA that should be considered.

The FLSA child labor provisions are designed to protect the educational opportunities of minors and prohibit their employment under conditions or in jobs that are detrimental to their health or well-being. These provisions include restrictions on hours of work for minors younger than 16 years of age.

The FLSA requires employers to keep records on wages, hours, and other items, as specified in Department of Labor recordkeeping regulations. Most of the information is of the kind generally maintained by employers in ordinary business practice and in compliance with other laws and regulations. The records do not have to be kept in any particular form, and time clocks need not be used.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and related amendments and executive orders prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, marital status, physical disabilities, military discharge, and arrest record. This legislation applies—and many state laws apply—to all employment practices, including hiring, firing, promotion, compensation, and other conditions of employment. A separate act, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and related amendments require employers to treat applicants and employees equally, regardless of age. Sexual harassment in the workplace also has become a highly sensitive issue in recent years, requiring employers to maintain a proper work environment.

SELECTION PROCESS

One of the most frustrating aspects of private practice is personnel turnover. The finding, keeping, and training of personnel are part of an ongoing project and problem for most offices. Outstanding employees might leave to move out of state, get married, to have a child, or take other employment. Whatever the reason, the replacement of an employee should be regarded as an opportunity. A new face can bring a fresh attitude and ideas. Too often, practitioners keep employees who are chronically late, sloppy in their work, and snippy with patients, out of fear that they will not be able to find an adequate replacement. There are five basic steps that should be adhered to in the selection process: finding sources of competent applicants, screening applicants, setting up interviews, asking relevant questions during interviews, and checking applicant references.

Step 1: Sources of Applicants

There are several resources that can be used to search for employees, including employment agencies, optometric technician schools, friends, newspaper advertisements, optical companies, retail sales representatives, current patients, local churches, college placement services, Websites, and employeeleasing agencies (which will frequently prescreen candidates in response to specific needs).

Employment Agencies

Employees obtained from an agency come with a price. It is customary to pay the agency a fee of 1% for every $1,000 of the employee's first-year salary. (This offsets the agency's costs for the advertising and screening of applicants.) If the practice is a small office, an agency may offer a discount. There usually is a 30-day trial period during which money is refunded if the employer or the employee is dissatisfied. If there is a problem within the first 90 days, the employment agency usually will guarantee to provide a replacement.

Optometric Technician Schools

Technicians who graduate from these schools have good background knowledge and some clinical training but are limited in number. A recent AOA survey reported that only 18% of employed optometric technicians had received formal training.

Friends

Using friends as a source of employees has to be managed wisely. Hiring friends to work in an office can be a delicate situation. It can be difficult to introduce a business attitude into a relationship that has been built on an equal basis.

Patients

Satisfied patients make wonderful, enthusiastic staffers. They talk from personal experience about an office's good service and can be a great asset in promoting the office. Before a patient is hired, however, it should be determined that the patient possesses the required skills or is trainable. Patients can also be a good source for referral of acquaintances looking for employment or a career change who they feel would be a good fit for the practice.

Newspaper Advertisements

There are several ways in which a newspaper advertisement can be used to attract applicants. One technique is to list a post office box number or fax number and request that applicants submit resumes; another is to list a private telephone number for applicants to contact for information on submitting their resumes. This technique can decrease the number of applicants because many employees applying for general office work or ophthalmic work do not have resumes. An alternative technique would be to ask for a letter of application rather than a resume. The key to attracting applicants is writing an advertisement that makes the position or office sound exciting. People read into advertisements what they want, and generally what they want is excitement, fun, and a challenge.

Optical Companies

Super-opticals and chain locations usually are open 6 to 7 days a week, 12 hours a day. Many talented and experienced employees are not interested in working such an extensive work week. These individuals might even be willing to accept a decrease in salary for the more convenient hours of a private practice.

Sales Representatives in the Ophthalmic Industry

Sales representatives from the ophthalmic industry are in a different office every day. They hear firsthand from employees if they are unhappy or are interested in moving for one reason or another. They can be very helpful in spreading the news that the practice is in the market for a new assistant.

Cosmetic or Jewelry Sales Representatives

Retail sales people in clothing, cosmetics, and jewelry have the personality and sales ability that adapts easily to the ophthalmic area. Many times, when hiring an experienced frame stylist, one also hires the stylist's old habits such as prejudging a patient's spending ability. Someone who knows how to provide a fresh attitude can bring a fresh approach as well.

Employee-Leasing Agencies

Employee leasing agencies interview, hire, and pay employees, saving the hassle that comes with frequent personnel turnover, the cost of benefits, and inconvenience of paying employment taxes. A fee must be paid to the agency, however, for the services and personnel obtained from the agency.

Websites

The Internet has changed the way information is obtained and exchanged. Many professional associations, optical companies, and employee agencies list employment opportunities on their Websites.

Step 2: Screening Applicants

Screening applicants over the telephone is a crucial step in the hiring process. The interviewer should have a legal-size pad of paper by the phone to note the applicant's name and the interviewer's first impressions. The sound and tone of the applicant's voice are important impressions. Is the voice harsh, the rate of speech too quick, or the tone of conversation false?

The "telephone personality" of the applicant also should be assessed. Close attention should be paid to the ease of conversation, the use of grammar, and any accent or dialect that is difficult to understand. During the telephone screening process, it is essential to stay in control of the conversation. The applicant's name and phone number should be obtained for future reference. (If the caller is not willing to provide this information, the conversation should be politely concluded.)

The caller usually will ask for a job description and the salary being offered. To stay in control, the interviewer should immediately ask the caller, "What are you doing presently?"

This question will provide information about the caller's employment situation such as whether the caller is unemployed and for how long. If the caller is working, the interviewer can find out where the caller is employed, what the caller's skills are, and the salary range expected.

Step 3: First Interview

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. The Walt Disney Company takes a proactive position on arranging the setting and experience of the job applicant to set the tone for what is to come. Disney calls it "casting the first impression." Carefully consider what message you want all applicants to have, even the applicants who do not get a job. Following Disney's lead, make sure the following things occur:

- Applicants should be greeted and treated with respect.
- A staff member should be assigned to tell the story of the practice to the applicants. (The story of the practice is the story you create and want repeated in the community about your practice. Take time to carefully craft the story. Make sure staff members memorize and are able to tell the story with feeling and meaning. You may use several staff members to tell the complete story.)
- Make sure everything the applicant sees, hears, touches, smells, and feels in the office is done with quality (e.g., forms that are faded and hard to read because they are copies of copies send a negative message to your applicant).

The first interview should be handled by a senior employee. The office administrator should have applicants fill out an employment application. After all applications have been collected, the administrator can narrow the applicant field so that the practitioner only has to interview the best two or three prospects. Filling out an employment application provides not only pertinent facts about the applicants but also allows the applicant's handwriting and spelling skills to be analyzed.

One of the goals of a first interview is to size up the personal appearance of the interviewee. The cleanliness and neatness of the applicant's clothes and hair should be noted. A professional image is desired, and the person should be evaluated on that basis. The demeanor of the person also should be considered. The handshake can provide an indication of the person's personality, as can eye contact and the person's posture. Although the professional image of a person is composed of many factors, from a legal and an ethical standpoint the person's race, religion, sex, and age should not be considered. The candidate can volunteer any of this information, but the topic should not be discussed at length.

To determine the questions that can be asked of a job applicant, the state employment department, the local Chamber of Commerce, professional organizations (such as the AOA), or the EEOC can be consulted. (The EEOC has a Website at www. eeoc.gov that contains helpful information.) The same general questions should be asked of each applicant, and applicants should be managed similarly during the interview. Documentation should be as thorough as time permits. If several individuals will be interviewed annotations regarding their use of grammar, demeanor, attitude, professionalism, appearance, dress, and visible tattoos or pierces, can be helpful in later discussions of applicants with other managers or owners. If an applicant is rejected, the decision should be based on objective standards only and documented accordingly. Personal comments about applicants should be avoided.

Earlier in the chapter we identified questions you cannot ask during an interview. The interviewer should have prepared questions to ask. At the conclusion of questioning, the interviewer should ask whether the interviewee has any questions.

Step 4: Questioning the Applicant

A number of questions are regularly asked during job interviews (Box 17-2). Often, the most important question to ask a prospective employee is, "What do you like to do best?" This question is asked to establish whether the interviewee's expectations and needs match the job description.

No matter what position a person is hired for, an employee will always gravitate toward the skills he or she enjoys most. A person can be hired as a receptionist, with duties of appointment making, collections, and recall, but if the person enjoys performing computer work, he or she will find ways to work at the computer, avoiding important job responsibilities. Thus it is best to determine beforehand whether the prospective employee's interests and the responsibilities of the position are well matched. Some doctors use psychological testing to learn more about applicants. There are commercially available tests that can be purchased for job applicants used to assess intelligence, aptitude, personality, interpersonal skills, and interests. For example, Schoer Medical Marketing Solutions sells tests to determine applicants' strengths, weaknesses, and attitudes. This company also offers a human resource guide that includes a new employee interview form, interview outline, technician interview form, applicant reference form, employment agreement form, employee review form, and an

BOX 17-2

Fifteen of the Most Frequently Asked Interview Questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why are you interested in working for this company?
- Why do you want to leave your current job or why did you leave your former one?
- Why have you chosen this particular field?
- Why should we hire you?
- What are your long-range goals?
- What is your greatest strength?
- What is your greatest weakness?
- What is your current salary?
- What is important to you in a job?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- Which feature of this job interests you least?
- How do others describe you?
- What are your plans for continued study?
- Tell me about your schooling.

exit interview form. Neil Skills Ability tests are another helpful tool. The Service Ability Inventory and the Applicant Potential Test are examples of two tests that can give you insight into the applicant's ability to perform well on the job. The Service Ability Inventory gives scenarios with potential responses. The results of this test gives insight into the applicant's attitude toward handling patient issues that will occur in an office. The Applicant Potential Test is a series of questions probing the applicant's ability to think logically and handle numbers effectively. The results of this test give insight into the applicants ability to function in an office in practical everyday ways. These tests and others like them are available online.

Step 5: Checking References by Phone

After reviewing the applications and the results of the interviews and selecting the two best candidates, the references for these candidates should be evaluated over the telephone. If the applicant works (or worked) for a large employer, someone in authority should be questioned to verify the applicant's work history and establish that the person is right for the job (Figure 17-2).

There are a number of questions that can be asked. The first question, however, should be, "Is the employee punctual?" This question provides an indication of the responsibility and dependability of the person. The last question should be, "Would you rehire this employee?" This question allows for a "no" response while protecting the employer from possible legal entanglements.

Hiring Enthusiastic Top Performers

If staff members are enthusiastic, it is a way of saying, "I care." According to Gross, author of *Positively Outrageous Service*, there are four key characteristics to look for: "can do," "will do," "feel good," and "fit." "Can do" refers to a person with the knowledge and ability needed to complete the required task. Employees obviously should have the ability to achieve, but lack of ability is rarely the cause of job failure. The problem more often is that "can do" is overemphasized, at the expense of other important traits such as "will do," "feel good," and "fit."

If an employee can do the job but for some reason will not do it, all the training and experience in the world are of no value. Typically, it is inferred that the person is unmotivated. But that may not be completely accurate; the person just may not be motivated to do that particular job. Thus it is best to choose employees who can motivate themselves, want to achieve at a high level, and will do so without being prompted. Staff members who are energetic and willing to do the "something extra" that goes beyond expectations exhibit the "will do" trait found in top-performing employees.

The third trait to look for when building a staff is "feel good." If conversation with the applicant results in a strong, positive intuitive message, that same message will likely be communicated to patients. People who can make a favorable impression in a short period are usually welcome additions to an office staff.

Almost three of four individuals hired are chosen largely on the issue of "fit." Businesses are not essentially different from professional sports teams. It makes good sense that every new member of the team should be evaluated in terms of the potential to add to performance. Sony Corporation uses a series of five interviews to screen job applicants. The company looks for high achievers who earned an A or B grade average in school and who have a record of service in school or civic organizations. What is most interesting about the interview process is that Sony is less concerned with the content of the answers than with the conversational style and manner of the applicant. A new employee can be trained in the technical aspects of the business a lot easier than the employee can be trained to "feel good" and "fit." Some optometric offices have all employees interact with a prospective employee before the position is offered. Every employee must feel comfortable with the new prospect before he or she is added to the team.

Suggested Reference Checklist

1. Applicant's name ________________________________
   Date of reference check ___________________________
2. Reference contacted ____________________________
3. Employment dates _______________ to ____________
4. Salary history __________________________________
5. Type of responsibilities __________________________
6. Attendance/punctuality __________________________
7. Special skills __________________________________
8. Reason for leaving ______________________________
9. Notice given ___________________________________
10. Severance pay given ____________________________
11. Unemployment compensation ____________________
12. Is the applicant qualified for rehire? _______________
13. Other comments ________________________________
    ____
    ____

FIGURE 17-2 Reference checklist for job applicants. (Courtesy American Optometric Association, St. Louis. Reprinted with permission.)

OFFERING EMPLOYMENT

Once it has been decided that an applicant appears to suit the practice's needs, no time should be wasted in offering the position. Good employees are hard to find and can have other job offers to consider. During the interview, some of the benefits of working for the practice might have been discussed. During the job offer, it is necessary to negotiate the actual terms of the agreement and to reach an agreement that fits the needs of both the practice and the new employee. The areas of concern in achieving this goal are preparing for the negotiation, items open to negotiation, a written agreement stating expectations, and what was agreed to by the parties.

Preparing for the Negotiation

Many job offers today are made over the telephone. The applicant is called, the job is offered, and a starting salary is specified. This approach can be adequate if no further negotiation of the employment terms is required. In most situations, however, there are many points open to negotiation, and this can necessitate a face-to-face meeting.

As in any negotiation situation, it is best to negotiate from a position of power, which is most readily achieved if the applicant comes to the office for the employment offer. In some situations, sitting behind a large desk might be preferred to demonstrate a position of control. At other times, it can be better to be seated without anything between the two parties or to be seated next to one another. One of the considerations for choosing the setting is the employer's personal management style.

The terms of negotiation are based on how badly the practice wants or needs the potential employee. Employers should keep in mind that employees can be responsible for as much as two-thirds of the gross income of a practice and that they can make or break a practice. Thus it might be necessary to make numerous concessions for the right applicant. On the other hand, there are reasonable limits to any negotiation. Before the negotiation, the employer should determine and write down these bargaining limits. In so doing, specific limits should be decided for each of the following negotiable points:

- Responsibilities
- Hours
- Days
- Salary
- Education benefits
- Medical insurance
- Sick pay
- Vacation pay
- Personal time off
- Purchase of optical supplies
- Purchase of the practitioner's services
- Paid holidays
- Retirement plan
- Bonuses

Usually, salary is the key item of interest to the new employee, particularly if the employee is young. If the employee has a family, medical insurance coverage might be more important. An older, single employee might be interested in retirement benefits. Employees older than 65 could be concerned with keeping their income low because of Social Security benefits; they might prefer other forms of compensation, such as fringe benefits or personal time off. The employer should attempt to find out what compensation the prospective employee has decided is most important. Salary data for many occupations are now posted conveniently on the Internet. Salary survey sites deliver data organized by job title, industry, level of experience, company size, city, and even zip code. The information is based on hundreds of compensation surveys performed by industry and trade groups nationwide. These data could have the power to change salary negotiations in optometry forever, particularly when the salaries of receptionists, optometric assistants, optometric technicians, dispensing opticians, laboratory opticians, office managers, and optometrists become widely listed. Current Internet resources include www.salary.com, www.careerjournal.com, and www.jobstar.org. Other helpful Websites include government sites provided by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the California Employment Development Department, and the US Census Bureau.

When making the employment offer, it is often advantageous to have a written document that can be used to record the negotiations.

Responsibilities

A responsibilities survey can be used to discuss the expectations of both sides (Figure 17-3). This survey is intended to allow the prospective employee to evaluate on a 1 to 5 scale (1 being the most desirable and 5 the least) potential or prospective work assignments. Use of such a survey can give the employer additional insight into the type of person who is being hired. Later on, if conflicts arise over work responsibilities, the survey can be used to document proof of what was discussed.

There will be a wide range of responses from the survey. Some potential employees will mark nothing less than a "2"; they might want to give the impression that they are willing to work in all areas. Other applicants might mark several areas with a "5." This response can indicate that the potential employee is inflexible and might not wish to change or perhaps he or she had some poor prior experiences; on the other hand, this response can indicate that the potential employee is straightforward and willing to communicate honestly.

The survey must be carefully reviewed by the employer. Does the completed survey of responsibilities fit the practice's needs? Do the likes and dislikes complement other employees? If not, can the practice settle for less than perfect? At what cost? The completed survey can affect the salary amount to be offered the prospective employee.

Probation Period

Since benefits do not begin until the probation period has passed, some potential employees might wish to have a shorter probation period. An offer of a lower initial salary in return for a shorter probation period might be acceptable to the potential employee.

Hours

The potential employee might prefer not to work past 5 pm. If that is the case, a lower salary could be acceptable. On the other hand, if the practice requires late hours, the potential employee might feel that additional compensation is deserved. Is the practice willing to pay more? How much? How will this affect other benefits?

Days

The days of employment require a negotiation strategy similar to the one used for hours. Is the applicant willing to work on Saturdays? How will the potential employee's attitude affect the salary offer?

Areas of Responsibility

Place 1 next to what you definitely wish to do and have done before.
Place 2 next to what you would like to try but have never done before.
Place 3 next to what you would do if asked.
Place 4 next to what you don't think you'd like to do but never tried.
Place 5 next to what you definitely don't want to do at this time.

Areas of Responsibility:

__ Answering the telephone
__ Making appointments
__ Greeting patients
__ Distributing office information
__ Performing hostess duties
__ Seating patients in pretesting room
__ Answering patient inquiries into services
__ Obtaining patient case histories
__ Administering preliminary testing
__ Informing about office services and doctor's qualifications
__ Showing videotapes
__ Seating patients in exam room
__ Instructing about contact lens handling
__ Selecting frames
__ Discussing options on lenses and additional pairs
__ Writing up orders
__ Checking orders
__ Dispensing
__ Instructing about proper maintenance and adaptation for contact lenses
__ Explaining fee breakdown
__ Designing payment schedules
__ Writing up receipts and day sheet entries
__ Maintaining accounts receivable
__ Handling bank deposits
__ Maintaining inventory
__ Restocking supplies
__ Maintaining instruments
__ Maintaining facilities
__ Typing
__ Ordering office supplies
__ Assembling patient information packets
__ Maintaining public relations
__ Performing lab technician duties
__ Performing visual therapist duties
__ Performing low vision therapist duties

FIGURE 17-3 Employee responsibilities survey.

Salary

Salary is the one item that will most likely have been discussed when the potential employee first applied for the job. At that time a specific figure or perhaps a salary range would have been described. The employer must consider whether negotiations on other matters have altered the assessment of salary. Can a higher salary be traded for fewer fringe benefits? For example, the employer might be willing to pay a higher salary if the prospective employee agrees to work particular hours or on particular days or is willing to accept a limited number of personal leave or vacation days. The presentation of the offer is important. The employer should make the potential employee feel that the practice is willing to bend to suit the employee's needs. The employer also should stress the positive. The negotiation must stay, however, within the reasonable limits set.

The employer must constantly ask himself or herself, "How far am I willing to go to hire this person?" It should be remembered that if too much is paid, others in the office might be resentful and that there is an important need to keep everything in equilibrium.

One way of offsetting a prospective employee's disappointment at the salary offered is to provide a bonus program. Such a program will give the confident employee a boost. The bonus system allows the employee to be paid more after the employee has demonstrated improvement in skills and thereby improvement in worth to the practice. A bonus system is often tied to the probation period. For example, an employee hired to work in the dispensary might be given the following offer: "I can pay you $8 per hour for the first month while we are training you how to do frame selection and adjustments. When you have demonstrated your proficiency at this skill, we will raise your salary to $9 per hour and begin training you in pretesting and lab work. Once you've mastered the pretesting skills, your salary will be $9.50 an hour, and then $10 an hour at the time you can complete the lab work independently."

The employee might be willing to settle for dispensing at $8 an hour and have no interest in laboratory work or pretesting. At other times, the new employee will spend extra time and effort learning the added skills to obtain a higher salary. In either case, the pay will be what was expected for the responsibilities performed.

Employee development probably should not be open to negotiation. No matter who is hired, some time needs to be spent in integrating new employees into the office. An initial training period, continuing education, office meetings, and office retreats offer opportunities to increase the efficiency of the employee.

After all the negotiable points have been agreed on, they should be written down, and the new employee should be given a copy of the agreement. If everything has been presented properly, the practice now has someone who knows what responsibilities are expected, knows what can be expected as payment in return, and is eager to become a part of the team.

An employee file must be initiated, which at this stage should include job application, resume, interview notes, and any pertinent documents or agreements.

DETERMINING COMPENSATION

To develop and maintain an efficient, enthusiastic staff the practice must offer salaries equal to or slightly more than the current pay scale in the area for persons with similar skills and responsibilities. The pay scale in the area can be determined by checking with other optometrists, health care providers, and businesses nearby. Positions with more responsibility or those that require special training will require a higher pay scale.

Salaries should be evaluated at least once each year. If an employee is exceeding the responsibilities assigned and is an asset to practice growth, that initiative should be rewarded. Most optometrists pay on an hourly basis rather than providing a weekly salary. There will be occasions when staff members have to remain after normal hours to fulfill responsibilities to patients. Staff members should be compensated for this time, and an hourly rate is more equitable than providing equivalent time off or adjusting the weekly or monthly pay of a salaried person. Many offices schedule full-time employees fewer than 40 hours a week to allow for this fluctuation in daily hours, thereby avoiding the payment of time and a half for overtime.

Fringe benefits usually are based on the practice location and size. Some offices pay bonuses, health insurance premiums, contributions to pension plans, and similar benefits. Other employers might not find it necessary to offer these types of benefits to keep satisfactory employees. An employer can offer many forms of benefits, although federal laws do not require them to be provided. If an employer decides to offer benefits, the same benefits must be offered to other employees that fall into the same employment category.

Fringe benefits are often as important to employees as salary. Important benefits include various pension plans; medical, dental, and vision insurance; vacation, sick, and holiday pay; educational and travel allowances; maternal leave; uniforms; paid parking; child care; and various periodic incentive bonuses. These benefits should be planned and budgeted for and included in the employee handbook.

INTRODUCING NEW STAFF TO PATIENTS

Staff turnover can create a negative impression in almost any practice. Patients may wonder why a staff member they have come to know and like has left voluntarily for another job. When turnover occurs repeatedly, patients may believe that the practice is not a pleasant place to work or does not provide adequate wages for employees. When there is turnover, it is important to present the changes positively to patients. Rather than allow patients to encounter the new staff member by chance, a careful introduction should be orchestrated so that a favorable impression is conveyed. One way of doing this is to have the staff member write a letter of introduction to patients. The new employee should stress his or her enthusiasm and qualifications and explain how being part of the practice will benefit patients, or the practitioner can provide the information, stressing the items that are most positive to the practice.

Another excellent approach is to write an article in the practice newsletter. The focus of the article would be how much of an asset the new person will be to the practice and the new and interesting things he or she will be doing. The new staff member also can be featured in the reception area, on a bulletin board, or a movie-style display that patients can read. (A headline can be placed above the employee's 8 × 10 inch black-and-white photograph that reads, "Now Playing in Our Office ….") A newspaper advertisement also can be used to announce the addition of the new staff member.

The employee should be coached for the introduction to patients. Before the new employee meets even a single patient, he or she should memorize a list of facts about the practitioner and the practice. For example, at the very least, the new staff member should know the following:

- Each doctor's name, pronounced and spelled correctly
- How long each doctor has been in the practice and where he or she received professional training (plus one good thing about each doctor)
- Awards, honors, memberships, licenses, or special positions held by each doctor
- The practice's address and phone number (plus the Website and e-mail addresses, if applicable)
- A lay explanation of what optometry is and a short statement of the practice philosophy
- Directions to the office, including parking and public transportation information
- The hours the office is open
- Names and titles of all employees and an explanation of each person's role
- The correct way to answer the phone
- Answers to patients' most frequently asked questions: the services offered, fees, appointment availability, and so on.

Other staff members can assist in the learning process by providing answers to these questions. If necessary, flashcards can be prepared to make learning easier for the new employee. Finally, the day will come when the new employee is introduced to his or her first patient. This is a moment that should not be allowed to go unnoticed. A photograph should be taken and an enlargement should be presented to the new employee with a degree of ceremony at the next staff meeting. Just like the "first dollar bill earned" that some businesses frame and hang, the photograph will celebrate the beginning of employment and serve to remind the employee over the years of how much he or she has grown professionally as a staff member.

TRAINING THE NEWLY HIRED STAFF

Mistakes are made by everyone in hiring. Many optometrists would list employee management as the single largest headache faced by the private independent practitioner. Determining reasonable terms, negotiating terms with the employee, and putting the terms in writing will facilitate the integration of the new employee into the team. Time and attention to such a process can save many hours in the future, prevent disagreement, and result in a smooth running office. Whoever you hire will require training to reflect your office brand. Human resource experts say, “Hire for attitude and fire for abilities.” The point is that you want to hire someone trainable. A good training program for new and established staff is paramount in having a well-run practice.

TRAINING OF STAFF

Training of staff is an ongoing process. Technology improves, economic conditions change, and commitments need to be redefined. An efficient practice continues to evolve policies that are appropriate for the times and to reconfirm policies that work well. To remain efficient, time must be set aside for continued employee development. An AOA survey of practicing optometrists showed that the average amount of time devoted to training per month was 2.8 hours. The same survey revealed that the minimal amount of training these optometrists thought should be provided was 6.1 hours per month. This result indicates that optometrists believe staff members do not receive as much training as is desirable. The amount of time needed by the employees of a particular practice, however, will depend on the goals set for the practice and the abilities of both employer and employees to achieve those goals.

Goals and Objectives of Training

The AOA survey also showed that practitioners believed the objectives of training should be in the following areas:

- 71%: communication with patients
- 61%: technical skills
- 54%: ophthalmic dispensing
- 53%, general knowledge
- 43%: office policies

In a partnership or group practice, one way of identifying the areas to include in training is to survey the optometrists involved (and if available, the office manager). Using a checklist can be helpful (Figure 17-4). If patient surveys or suggestions have been used, they should be checked for the areas that patients rated as less than excellent. These areas should be considered for training topics. Another source of topics can be gleaned from looking over the evaluations of each employee. Areas of weakness within the practice can be identified and prioritized, and objectives for training can be created to remedy problems. An example of such a training program is found in Box 17-3.

Training Techniques

There are several options available to the practitioner when choosing a way to train the staff in appropriate behavior. Opportune moments, performance reviews, lunch meetings, staff meetings, retreats, and continuing education seminars all provide opportunities for the training of employees. The choice of technique depends on the objectives and goals of the training.

Opportune Moments

During the course of working with an employee, positive or negative behavior can be observed. Practitioners should look for positive behavior and reinforce it whenever possible. The reinforcement and accompanying dialogue can be used to train the correct behavior. For example, a practitioner notices that the receptionist has appeared indifferent to telephone callers who ask for the price of contact lenses. However, in response to one of these calls, the receptionist gives an excellent explanation of the choices and services the office provides; this is followed by the scheduling of an appointment. The practitioner should reinforce this behavior by telling the receptionist that his or her management of the caller was exceptional. The reason for approval should be explained. In this case, the receptionist initially avoided the issue of cost by describing the advantages of using the office, educated the patient about the complexities involved in fitting contact lenses, and explained the range of fees in such a way that the patient was confident enough to set an appointment. This moment results in making the employee feel good, reinforces positive behavior, and improves patient satisfaction.

At other times it can be difficult to catch the employee doing the right thing. When the practitioner is feeling patient and the employee is in the right mood, a poor performance should be discussed in a nonthreatening way. The practitioner should do this privately and as soon as possible after the poor performance. For example, a practitioner hears the receptionist answer a patient’s inquiry about the price of contact lenses by saying, “Contacts are $400 a pair. Interested? Goodbye.” This moment can be used by the practitioner to review office procedures and policies about answering such questions. It is hoped that in the near future, the receptionist will be overheard answering such inquiries more appropriately.

Opportune moments can provide informal settings for learning. A study by the US Department of Labor shows that 70% of workplace learning is informal. Chatting on the job, discussions during lunch, and exchanges at breaks offer good environments for stress-free learning. Some offices place pads and pencils in employee break rooms and encourage unofficial gathering of staff.

Showing a new hire how to do a job is not adequate. Proficiency testing is necessary. Proficiency testing enables the

Staff assessment checklist

Although your primary responsibility is providing vision care for your patients, you are also an employer. Here is a checklist of staff activities. Go through it quickly,indicating your actual assessment of your staff members. Put an X in the third column if you'd like to see improvement in certain areas.

	Yes	No	Wish Would improve
1. I like being in charge of my office.			
2. I like my staff members to wear uniforms.			
3. I like my staff members to make all my appointments.			
4. My receptionist has a pleasant telephone voice.			
5. My receptionist is courteous.			
6. My receptionist is patient.			
7. My receptionist knows when an emergency occurs and knows when to interrupt me.			
8. My staff members keep my files in order.			
9. My staff members keep my billings up-to-date.			
10. My staff members are well groomed and project a neat, clean appearance.			
11. My staff members know my office policies and follow them.			
12. My staff members are on time for work.			
13. My staff members respect and keep patient information confidential.			
14. My staff members get along well with patients.			
15. My staff members get along well with each other with a minimum of friction.			
16. My staff members get along well with me.			
17. My staff members know how to generate appointments for me.			
18. My staff members, on their own, know how to generate income in my office.			
19. My staff members are competent in all areas of my practice.			

FIGURE 17-4 Staff assessment checklist. (From American Optometric Association: *Practice enhancement program II, professional enhancement module, managing your practice plan, precourse workbook*. St. Louis, 1986. Reprinted with permission.)

practice managers to understand which staff members need additional training to achieve a level of proficiency acceptable to be used with patient care. Over time, skills can decrease. Random proficiency testing of staff on key skills is an excellent way to maintain high performance levels. Any staff member who fails proficiency testing can be reassigned training to achieve the appropriate proficiency level. An excellent explanation of the stages in empowering a new hire is explained in the AOA Leadership Institute's "Continuum of Empowerment" in Appendix A of this chapter.

BOX 17-3

Design Objectives for a Sample Training Program

The staff will demonstrate patient-centered care by doing the following:

- Calling patients by name when greeting them
- Smiling when talking on the phone
- Offering choices of activities to patients waiting in the reception area
- Pinpointing patient needs when taking a history
- Educating patients about treatment options the practitioner may recommend
- Reinforcing the practitioner's recommendations with demon strations that focus on a particular benefit to the patient's welfare
- Conducting reminder-of-appointment phone calls on Sunday from the employee's home for Monday patients
- Stopping by a patient's home to provide a service

These objectives are directed toward the overall goal of assisting the staff members in becoming patient centered in their services.

Training services and materials are available from most of the major vendors. Optical laboratories may offer in-house training or training in the laboratory. Ask each laboratory representative who comes into your office for a list of the training resources available from their company. Use the training resources that would be helpful to your staff.

Lunch Meetings

Some offices have a difficult time finding a few hours to set aside for training. Since most people eat lunch at some time, lunch meetings can be held to satisfy a limited objective. There are many distractions that can occur during a lunch meeting, however, and the stress of a lunch meeting can cause fatigue in the afternoon and affect employee performance or morale. For these reasons, it is best to choose lighthearted, less important activities and objectives during a lunch meeting. An example of an appropriate topic would be a brief presentation on what it means to be "patient centered." This could be followed by a brainstorming session and the identification of staff behaviors that indicate services are patient centered (see Box 17-3).

Staff Meetings

Regular staff meetings can provide the time necessary to mold a cohesive team that is consistent in providing services. Enough time must be set aside for planned objectives. Whatever time is allocated, there must be a plan with objectives and outcomes in mind. The meeting should not be left open without defined goals because the effort to reach objectives can pay large dividends in the long run.

Examples of activities for staff meetings include the following:

- Role-playing sessions
- Question and answer sessions
- Surveys
- Pretesting procedures
- Discussion workshops
- Problem-solving panels
- Demonstrations
- Lectures

The activities chosen can depend on the management style in use. Too often, when using a lecture format, it is assumed that everything said will "sink in." Although lectures can be effective on some occasions, there are times when the information will not result in any behavior changes. Generally, employees will learn best by getting involved and participating in an activity.

There are two adages to keep in mind when training staff members. One is, "No one ever fell asleep while talking." The other is, "The best way to learn is to teach." These sayings reinforce an important point—the most successful sessions can be those in which the optometrist says the least.

The usual staff session begins with a review of the previous meeting and a summary of the success of previous changes (Box 17-4). Then a staff member is asked to provide a brief presentation. The member might be chosen because he or she understands the topic best or because of an ability to demonstrate it most skillfully. The practitioner assists or provides resources to the staff member so that an adequate presentation can be given.

Before the presentation, a pretest can be given to staff members to determine their level of knowledge and to focus their thoughts. The order of questions can be designed to lead the group through levels of increasing awareness. Questions are designed to incite discussion and not necessarily to elicit right or wrong answers.

The practitioner then serves as the facilitator to lead the group through each question. Employees save their pretests and are allowed to jot additional notes as they go along. It is stressed that the pretest is to be used by the individual staff member and will not be seen by anyone else. If done properly, the practitioner will have very little to say other than to focus staff involvement on the questions and the ultimate goals and objectives of the meeting.

Awareness is of little value without action. Goal sheets for the meeting are prepared by the practitioner. Typical goals include behavioral changes and measurements (Figure 17-5). These changes are then discussed at the beginning of the next meeting.

BOX 17-4

A Typical Agenda for a Staff Meeting

1. Report of results from interventions recommended at last meeting (each individual staff member)
2. What is meant by patient-centered care (senior staff member)
3. Pretest activity
4. Discussion of pretest questions (practitioner, facilitator)
5. Recommendations for change
6. Assignment of responsibilities
7. Topics for next meeting

SAMPLE GOAL SHEET

Today's Date ______________________

Specific goal:

– Specific benefits of reaching goal:

Target date:

Where am I today with regard to the goal?

Obstacles to achievement:

Checkpoint dates:

– Intermediate Goal Number 1

– Intermediate Goal Number 2

– Intermediate Goal Number 3

– Intermediate Goal Number 4

Plans for surmounting obstacles:

Specific actions to take to form new habits:

Date Goal Was Met: ______________________

FIGURE 17-5 Sample goal sheet.

Retreats

When great change is desired and more time is needed to discuss objectives than the time afforded in a staff meeting, it can be valuable to close the office for a day and hold meetings away from the office. This type of intervention is especially effective when dealing with sensitive issues or defensive staff. Part of the day can be designed as a reward to lighten the concerns of attendees. Retreats can vary from an all-expenses-paid trip to a vacation spot to a day at a local meeting facility. A sample retreat agenda is provided in Box 17-5. An information packet, typically including articles and background information on the chosen topic, is distributed to staff members a week or so before the retreat.

One of the advantages of setting aside an entire day is that the progress toward the objectives can be measured, and if problems arise, tempers flare, or someone becomes upset, time can be taken to relax or refocus the group. A nice advantage of having free time is that there is the opportunity to take each employee aside and discuss issues privately in a nonthreatening environment. Staff members also can take the opportunity to informally discuss pertinent issues with each other. As a facilitator, the practitioner's main responsibility is to keep everyone focused on the issues and to steer them toward desired outcomes.

BOX 17-5

A Sample Retreat Agenda

VALENTINE'S DAY RETREAT

9:00 AM	Meet at office. Overview of day's activities.
9:15	Pretest: "What the Experts Say About Providing Services to Patients."
9:30	Champagne breakfast at Mimi's Cafe.
10:00	Brainstorm activity, "The First 5–10 Minutes of the Patient Visit."
10:30	Brainstorm activity: "Follow-Up Your Patients."
11:00	Tour of Dr. Stanley's office.
12:00 PM	Role-playing activity: "How to Say Goodbye to the Patient."
1:00	Lunch at Knotts Berry Farm followed by free time at the amusement park.
4:00	Prioritizing; setting goals and objectives.
5:00	Agenda for next meeting. Adjourn.

Training can be time consuming and sometimes frustrating, but the rewards can be tremendous when a program is properly carried out. Studies show that patient load can be increased by 35% for each properly trained optometric technician. Unfortunately, studies also show that nearly half of all employees hired for a given job turn out to have been poor choices. The average length of employment is only 3.6 years. In corporate practices, employee turnover is 25% to 50% a year.

For these reasons, taking the time to develop the staff into a cohesive, happy team that reflects a competent, cohesive, and happy practice will be worth the time and effort invested.

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APPENDIX A

"Continuum of Empowerment"

- ***Continuum #1: "No go"***

There are times that you cannot empower a person (or group of people) immediately. This portion of the continuum involves those times when you need complete control over a particular task getting done and though you may delegate the task, you do so with complete and continual supervision.

EXAMPLE: You have just hired a new assistant. In the beginning, you may not want him/her to do anything of great importance without your guidance and supervision.

- ***Continuum #2: "Let know, then go"***

Then there are times that certain person(s) can complete a task without your supervision after you give them specific instructions.

EXAMPLE: After your new assistant has learned some of the more routine tasks in your office, you are able to let him/her know what you'd like done and then they are empowered to do it on their own.

- ***Continuum #3: "Go, then let know"***

There are also times that you trust certain person(s) to complete a task on their own initiative. In this part of the continuum, your only requirement is that once the task/action is complete, you be told.

EXAMPLE: Eventually, your assistant may begin to create his/her own list of tasks to complete without your instruction or initiation. At this point on the continuum of empowerment, you feel comfortable with simply being told that something has been done.

- ***Continuum #4: "Go"***

At this final point of the continuum, you fully empower others to complete tasks on their own and you do not require communication that the task is complete because you trust that it has been done well.

EXAMPLE: Over time, your assistant becomes fully aware of all office procedures…and you trust that those important tasks will be complete. Ultimately at this point, you may decide to promote your assistant to "office manager" so that he or she may empower others in the same manner you have.

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