

# Best Practices

A guide for improving the efficiency and quality of your practice

# 1

## The Art of Finding, Training, and Evaluating Qualified Personnel for Today's Medical Practice

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Probably the most important decision the physician or office manager will make is hiring the right individuals to represent the practice. Whether you're seeking a receptionist, biller, or office manager, assembling a well-trained, qualified staff can be a daunting task and takes careful consideration. The right individuals should not only possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience, but also have a positive attitude and work well with other employees and management. One encounter, face-to-face or on the phone, is all it takes for a patient or patient's family member to form an opinion. A great team that works well together can do wonders to improve your practice and its viability.

Where do you find enthusiastic, hardworking people who look forward to making the most of themselves and their positions? Where is that rare breed of person who is smart and motivated, someone who is loyal and views employment not as a job, but as a career? Do such people even exist? Of course they do. However, they are not easy to find.

This chapter tells you how to master the art of effectively hiring, training, and evaluating employees, as well as improve staff communication, motivate staff to maximize productivity, and, ideally, minimize employee turnover.

### CREATING AN EFFECTIVE JOB DESCRIPTION

The cornerstone of effective personnel management is a clearly defined job description. A well-written job description provides control and structure for each employee, defining the employee's responsibilities and establishing expectations. **Δ**

**NOTE**

A job description is not the same as a recruitment ad, which will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

#### Background Work

A well-written job description lays the foundation for improved performance management of employees. Writing a job description is a developmental process that involves shared managerial, individual, and team input. The goal is to provide a tool that clearly communicates position expectations and allows for continual employee growth and improvement. This improvement will enhance customer satisfaction and help achieve business success for the practice.

Before you begin developing this description, consider taking a few helpful preliminary steps:

- Contact other practices. Most offices will be willing to share copies of their job descriptions or lists of employee duties and responsibilities.
- Modify an existing job description.
- Ask employees to write their own job descriptions and then review them with those employees.

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This toolkit provides information about the law designed to help users deal with their own legal needs. The information in the toolkit, however, is not intended to provide users with specific legal advice (the application of law to an individual's specific circumstances). For a legal opinion concerning a specific situation, consult your personal attorney.

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## The Employee's Perspective

If you're writing a job description for an existing position, get the employee's help. Have the employee make a list of all the tasks performed. Don't be surprised if these tasks differ from the original job description. This is normal. Instruct the employee to write down all known responsibilities/duties and then track and add to the list tasks that are performed over at least a one-week period. Because some tasks are only performed on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis, you may want to have staff track duties over a one-month period.

## Organizational Charts

An organizational chart helps define authority boundaries and job relationships. An organizational chart very clearly shows "who reports to whom." Such charts do not have to be fancy to be effective. Several very inexpensive software packages (e.g., Microsoft Word) can help you create organizational charts and also have frameworks for creating job descriptions. Most can be customized for use in different employee settings.

## Putting Pen to Paper

In developing job descriptions, it is a good idea to make a comprehensive list of all tasks within the practice that are to be performed by anyone other than the physician. First, group tasks by function. For example, group together all tasks involved in registering a patient or all tasks involved in handling accounts payable. Then, categorize the tasks by position. Keep in mind how each task may impact job performance.

Once all tasks are listed and defined, categorize each task. After tasks are categorized, you will then want to prioritize each one. Beyond spelling out the particulars of specific tasks, you should also include descriptors for how much education, training, or credentialing is required or whether state licensure is essential.

## Job Description Basics

Every job description should define all tasks and responsibilities of the position and should follow these guidelines:

- Avoid generalizations.
- Be precise in descriptions.
- Include only pertinent information.
- Describe tools and equipment used in the job.
- Explain work relationships and authority boundaries.
- List all required skills (typing, ten key, Microsoft Word and Excel, etc.).
- If there is overlap of responsibilities or employees are required to fill in for those in other positions, this information should be included in each individual job description.

The salary or hourly rate range for the position should also be defined, with some wiggle room for the right candidate. While salary is an important consideration, keep in mind that people do not work for salary alone and good salaries do not automatically guarantee good employees. Compensation and benefit packages should be competitive to prevent frequent turnover. **Ω**

## TOOLS



A sample job description is available in the Appendix.

## HIRING THE RIGHT RECEPTIONIST

The receptionist will be the first person your patients and potential patients encounter. As the face and voice of your business, this is one of the most important members of your staff. A bad hiring decision for this position can have far-reaching consequences.

To understand whether you're hiring the right person for the job, you must first examine the receptionist's core competencies. Is the applicant articulate, accurate, capable, and confident? The answer for each of these should be yes. If you identify shortcomings in an existing employee, in some cases that person may benefit from additional training. However, you may find it necessary to part ways or move the employee to another position.

Next, perform an assessment of the required tasks for the position and ask yourself whether your receptionist or potential hire is capable of doing all these things. And last but not least, determine if a candidate's personality and interpersonal qualities will mesh with your style of practice.

In most solo and small group practices the receptionist is required to wear many hats. Failure to fulfill the following key responsibilities properly can affect other aspects of the practice.

- **Present a professional demeanor.** Remember, receptionists are the first point of contact for existing and potential patients, as well as for referring physicians. They represent your company. A cranky or unprofessional receptionist can quickly drive business away.
- **Understand your office and financial policies.** Receptionists must have the ability to explain office and financial policies to patients and answer any questions. This will prevent misunderstandings and dissatisfied patients later.
- **Understand the insurance contracts your practice holds with payors.** Clearly communicating the practice's health plan participation status at the time of scheduling and again at the time of service will help prevent confusion and complaints about the patient's out-of-pocket responsibility.
- **Understand the importance of patient confidentiality.** Keep in mind that patients in the waiting room can frequently hear conversations that take place behind the registration window. Even if the discussions are not about protected health information, if the patient has been waiting for a long time there may be an impression that the staff behind the counter is contributing to the delay.

(continued...)

## RECRUITMENT, APPLICANT SCREENING, INTERVIEW, AND SELECTION

### Recruitment

Once a job description is created and employment needs are identified, the search for a qualified candidate is narrowed down and made easier. Less time will be spent looking since "qualified" has been defined. It is better to consider three people who could perform the job well than to struggle through 30 candidates who cannot perform.

### The Search

Now that all the preparatory work has been done, it is time to begin the search for qualified employees. Here are some suggested resources:

- Local newspaper
- Employment agencies
- Internet job listings (such as Monster, CareerBuilder, craigslist)
- Technical schools
- State and local medical societies
- Junior colleges
- Private contacts
- Patients
- Friends
- Hospitals
- Other providers

### Placing an Ad

Your objective should be to solicit an adequate number of applications and résumés of potential employees. Ideally, you will wind up with at least two, but preferably three, qualified candidates to choose from. When you have more than one qualified candidate, it is easier to compare and measure a candidate's strengths and weaknesses, which ultimately will help you select the right person for the job.

One of the best ways to let people know of the available position is through newspaper want ads. Certain points to cover in the ad:

- The position to be filled
- Requirements for the position (degree, licenses, certifications)
- Your requirements for the applicant (appearance, demeanor)
- Salary
- Skills required
- A response e-mail, phone number, or fax number

Other information you may want to include:

- Type of practice
- Number of physicians

- General location of office
- Title of position
- Full-/part-time requirements
- Responsibilities
- Experience necessary
- Special requirements
- Education
- Benefits of position

When writing your ad, try to use headlines and language that attract readers and explain what the practice is looking for. The ad should be written so that it elicits interest.

### Sample Job Posting

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#### **Medical Office Receptionist**

*North Side Pediatric Practice is seeking a full-time receptionist. An exciting and challenging position is available for the right person. Make appointments for the doctor, assist and direct patients. Some typing and filing. High school education required. Prior experience in a medical office a plus. Minimum typing speed 60 wpm. Must be comfortable working with sick children. Competitive salary based on experience. Excellent benefits with opportunity for advancement. Fast-paced environment. We would like you on our team! E-mail resume with salary history and references to reply@NSPP.com.*

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### Applicant Screening

Choosing the right candidate will take into account experience, salary expectation, skills, and perhaps most important, the proper “chemistry” required to work well with the team. The initial selection process, however, will be one of elimination. The more responses, the more selective the decision can be.

The first elimination is rejection of résumés that are sloppy, are incomplete, have spelling mistakes, or are improperly written. Next, screen for content, measuring the skills and experiences of each candidate. Look for experience factors that indicate a proven track record for similar tasks. Grade each respondent’s résumé, cover letter, work experience, and education and general characteristics with an “A,” “B,” or “C.” This will prevent your having to reread résumés unnecessarily.

Job turnover can be a red flag. Review the résumé for employment longevity and gaps in employment. Ideally you want an employee who is committed and wants to grow with your practice, not one who changes jobs every six to 12 months. There are valid reasons for gaps in employment, such as the decision to stay home to raise a family or care for a loved one. Don’t automatically discount a résumé that includes employment gaps, but it is very important to ask the potential employee about gaps.

If you feel you’ve only attracted one qualified candidate, you may want to consider expanding your advertising to other publications or reviewing the job description to ensure your ad was written in a way that generated enough interest from qualified candidates.

- **Determine why the patient needs to be seen.** Receptionists must triage the patient and determine the appropriate amount of time to schedule. Failure to accurately determine the amount of time required for the physician to accurately assess the patient can cause a backlog for the physician and for patients.

- **Ensure patient demographics are accurate.** Collection of accurate demographics plays an important role in patient care and appropriate reimbursement. Without accurate contact information, the physician may be unable to get in touch with the patient with news about test results and the like. Additionally, a failure to obtain accurate insurance information (e.g., a copy of the front and back of the patient’s insurance card) at the time of service can result in reimbursement difficulties and/or delays.

- **Verify benefits and collect co-pays/ deductibles.** It is best practice to verify eligibility, benefits, and co-pay/deductibles at the time of or immediately after scheduling of an appointment. This enables the practice to identify coverage issues and discuss them with the patient before the appointment. It is important for the receptionist to collect any money due at the time of service.

- **Know whether the procedure requires an authorization.** Depending on the nature of the patient’s condition, it can take up to five business days to obtain an authorization from a payor. So in scheduling the patient for a procedure, it is important that the receptionist allows enough time to obtain that authorization, to avoid having to reschedule or cancel appointments. Equally as important, failure to obtain an authorization can result in delayed or no payment.

- **Mesh with your practice personality and philosophy.** If you have a curmudgeon at the window, chances are by the time patients get to see you they’ll be equally sour. Tolerating temperamental behavior is not worth the risk of chasing patients away.

These real-world examples demonstrate why core competencies (articulate, accurate, capable, and confident) are so critical to the practice. They also highlight the importance of thorough training and of maintaining a sufficiently expanded knowledge base. To be truly effective, a receptionist must receive the appropriate training and have access to necessary resources.

## The Telephone Interview

Once you have successfully pared down the résumés to a workable number, schedule a telephone interview to find out more about each applicant. This step is particularly helpful in hiring a receptionist because it's an opportunity to evaluate how candidates comport themselves over the phone.

### Sample Interview Script

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When conducting a telephone interview, take time to describe the position and consider asking the following questions:

*Hello! I'm \_\_\_\_\_ from Dr. \_\_\_\_\_'s office. We received your résumé in response to our ad. Do you have time now to talk for a few minutes or would it be possible to schedule some time later this week to briefly discuss your qualifications? (A few interchanges to describe the job and the practice, followed by some basic questions:)*

*What is it about this job that interests you?*

*What type of work are you doing now?*

*Why are you considering leaving?*

*What do you feel you would bring to this job?*

*Tell me about your training.*

*Tell me about your previous work experiences.*

*How do you feel about working with people who are ill?*

*When could you be available?*

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Rating \_\_\_\_\_

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### Interviewing Possible Candidates

Everyone you invite for a face-to-face interview should be asked to complete a job application, regardless of whether the person also brings in a résumé. The application lets you assess penmanship and gather information not typically included in a résumé. While all applicants will probably send résumés, these may differ from each other in structure or format and hence make comparisons difficult.

### Evaluating the Application

In evaluation of the application, certain criteria should be examined:

- Is the application complete?
- Is the application legible?
- Were directions followed correctly?

- Is the spelling correct?
- Does the candidate have the basic qualifications?
- Is there a good work history?
- Were acceptable references provided?
- Do the information and dates provided match the information on the résumé? **Ω**

### Preparing for the Interview

The purpose of the face-to-face interview is to evaluate factors not present on the application; to inform the applicant about the responsibilities of the position; and to clear up any questions concerning the applicant's qualifications. An in-person interview is an important opportunity to observe a candidate's composure, appearance, and temperament to determine whether that person can work well with the rest of the team. The method of interviewing must be appropriate and consistent in order to permit fair comparisons between applicants.

For conducting a personal interview, we recommend the following steps:

- Review the current job description and provide a copy to the candidate.
- Review application/résumé prior to interview.
- Familiarize yourself with the job details (pay, hours, benefits, etc.).
- Outline desirable traits to explore.
- Write up a standard list of questions to ask all candidates.
- Ask candidates to arrive 15 minutes early to fill out the job application.
- Conduct the interview in private without disruptions.
- Make the applicant feel comfortable.
- Reserve enough time to get to know the applicant.
- Make sure you have answered any questions from the candidate about the organization and position.
- Make notes during and immediately after the interview.
- Complete all interviews before making a final decision.

Remember that an employment interview should be a structured conversation with a specific goal. The goal is to determine if the candidate has the education, experience, interests, and temperament to fill the specific job available.

## Testing Candidates

Incompetence takes a costly toll on a practice. A problem employee can increase your stress, your workload, your legal liability, and your expenses. The best way to have the best staff is to hire the best people in the first place. One way to ensure you are hiring the right person for the right job is to test applicants' skills. Objective tests can provide valuable information about the degree of competence in a particular area.



## Fine-Tuning the Interview

To efficiently and wisely interview, develop a standardized list of questions in advance and follow a conversational structure that will provide the needed information. Only ask job-related questions.

Here are the two most common errors managers make in the hiring process:

1. Not taking or allowing enough time for the interview
2. Talking too much about themselves instead of using the interview to learn as much as possible about the candidate

Try not to use closed-ended questions. A closed-ended question requires only a yes or no answer. An open-ended question requires explanations and encourages the candidate to expand on the response. Examples of some effective open-ended questions:

- Tell me about yourself.
- What are your long- and short-term career goals?
- What did you like best about your last position and why?
- What did you like least and why?
- If you could design the perfect job, what would it look like?
- What are your strengths/weaknesses?
- What three words would your current supervisor use to describe you?  
Your coworkers?
- What do you think you can contribute to this practice? To the patients?
- What exactly did you do in your last job? Before that?
- What is it about this job that interests you?
- How has your educational training prepared you for this job?
- In school, what were the subjects you enjoyed and found easy to master?
- What circumstances have prompted you to change or consider changing jobs?
- At times we have all had to work with difficult individuals; tell me about the most difficult person with whom you've had to work.
- How did you like working for your last employer? May we call him/her for a reference?
- What other experiences have prepared you for this job?
- Are you willing to be bonded?

- What has contributed to your success in previous jobs?
- What circumstances have contributed to problems in past jobs?
- If you were in my position and involved in hiring, what qualities about yourself would you consider appealing?
- What additional information about yourself do you want me to know?
- Do you have any questions about the position or the company that I can answer?

Tell the applicant about the organization and the position for which he or she is being considered. Make appropriate comments regarding that person's background and experience. Explain that there are other candidates being interviewed and give some idea of when you will be notifying applicants of your decision.

### Keeping the Interview Legal

Improper interviewing techniques can expose physician practices, hiring managers, and their employees to potential lawsuits from individuals or investigation by government agencies. Most such violations are committed by mistake and out of ignorance. Unfortunately, ignorance of the law is no excuse. A variety of topics and issues must be dealt with delicately and in some cases avoided altogether. Because laws change and vary by state, you must obtain the appropriate information from your state's department of labor to make sure the questions you are asking and methods you employ are within the parameters of the law. An employer should never ask a potential employee questions related to any of the following:

- Race, creed, or color
- National origin
- Gender
- Age
- Sexual orientation
- Marital status
- Children
- Religion
- Residency or citizenship (this information will be required at the time of employment)
- Physical or mental condition or disabilities
- Foreign languages spoken at home
- Arrest record (you can ask for additional information relating to criminal convictions that the applicant lists

on the employment application, but the application must include a statement that a conviction will not necessarily disqualify an applicant for employment)

- Credit rating
- Home ownership
- Education (based on responses provided on an application, you can ask confirming questions about academic degrees or schools attended, but you should never ask the date someone received a degree or diploma, as that can lead to charges of age discrimination. Such information can be confirmed through a background screening)
- Social security number (this will be required at the time of employment)
- Receipt of unemployment benefits
- Physical condition (unless related to requirements for performing job duties)
- Any question related to pregnancy or applicant's medical history or condition
- Questions regarding workers' compensation claims
- Mode of transportation 🌀 Ω

### Next Steps

If further interested in a candidate, follow these guidelines:


- Set up a second interview. Candidates tend to be more relaxed the second time and you can get more information and confirm your earlier assessments or impressions.
- Provide more information about the position and the practice.
- Conduct a brief tour of your facility.
- Introduce the applicant to other staff members.
- Encourage questions about the job and practice.
- Thank the applicant for his or her time.
- Make final notes on the initial interview form.
- Consider having someone else interview the candidate, for another opinion.
- Ask the applicant whether you can contact current and/or former employers for a reference.
- Ask the candidate for a list of other references you can contact.
- Allow enough time to reach your decision.

## Checking References

It is important to check references on candidates being considered for hire.

Performing a reference check allows you to confirm employment history and may also provide information on the strengths and weaknesses of a candidate. Additionally, speaking with a direct supervisor can help you determine how the candidate performed on a day-to-day basis. In general, reference checking can be helpful if you have doubts about the candidate and can alert you to dishonesty or other serious problems.

While there are certainly benefits to checking references, be sure to avoid some of the pitfalls:

- Employers may be sued for defamation of character if found giving inaccurate or false information. For this reason, many employers will now only verify basic information, such as title held and dates of employment.
- References are often opinions and sometimes nothing more than gossip.
- A favorable reply could mean the applicant is a good candidate or it could mean the previous employer is just happy not to have to pay for unemployment benefits.
- Information given in a reference tends to be general and not particularly helpful.
- There is no guarantee the person on the telephone is truly the person being called.
- You could end up screening out an excellent candidate because of personality conflicts or disagreements with the previous employer. 

## Other Considerations

Added factors to remember in using references to evaluate candidates:

- Nobody ever provides a reference list of employers likely to give a bad report.
- Most large organizations have a personnel department that provides only a confirmation of employment because of the potential for lawsuits.
- Many candidates leave an organization because the management has problems—which have no bearing on an individual’s qualifications or ability to do an excellent job for you.
- Many applicants are hired because of good references but, in the end, are unable to perform to standard or work well with the team. References should be used only as an additional tool in the larger context of deciding on a particular hire.
- Many businesses and practices are screening applicants by testing the candidate’s skills instead of relying on subjective evaluations and job history alone.
- If possible, speak only to the direct supervisor who observed the person in action, not to a coworker. The supervisor can tell you how a person performed on a day-to-day basis. Get signed permission to check references. Unfortunately, as stated above, many employers require that all references be handled through their human resources department.

## ON CALL

For a comprehensive discussion on pre-employment inquiries, please reference CMA ON CALL Document #0233, “Pre-Employment Inquiries.”

## TOOLS

A sample interview report form is available in the Appendix.

## TOOLS

“Personal Reference Check” and “Past Employer Reference Check” forms are available in the Appendix.

## Providing References for Past Employees

Wrongful dismissal and libel suits are costly, both in dollars and in emotional pain. If not careful, your medical office could find itself caught in a wrongful dismissal suit or contending with myriad investigative agencies because of an unhappy former employee. It is best to take control of your reference-providing process now and avoid future problems. Of course, you should consult with your attorney on this and all other matters that require legal advice.

It is critical that you designate one individual, whether it is the office manager or a physician or some other employee, to be the point person to field all reference requests. Be sure everyone in your office, including any physician who might be approached for a reference, contacts the designated point person about all references. The worst-case scenario for a wrongful dismissal case is when the office manager has moved an employee through appropriate disciplinary stages and dismisses that employee, and then someone else within the organization provides a written or verbal reference.

What information should your practice disclose about a previous employee? In addition to consulting with your personal attorney about what to say, another important safeguard against lawsuits is to avoid issuing written letters of reference. Once such a letter is in the hands of a departing employee, it could be used against you.

Your practice can avoid these types of problems by providing only the date of employment and the title of the worker's position at the time of departure. If someone requests salary information, you can direct the inquirer to W-2 forms and pay stubs, which should be in the possession of the employee. The former employee should also be able to provide a prospective employer with copies of any performance reviews you provided during that person's employment. It is wise to refuse to provide such information over the phone to a potential employer. Instead, demand a written information release form signed by the employee. Some firms will ask whether or not an employee is "eligible for rehire." By asking this question, they're essentially asking if the former employee left on good terms. Staff who leave in good standing (because of resignation, layoff or, in some cases, discharge) would be considered "eligible for rehire." A former employee's "rehire status" is sensitive information and you could wind up paying attorneys to defend you in a libel suit if you answer that question with a "no." Remember, for a former employer, there is no obligation to answer this question.

It is unfortunate that you are restricted by potential liability from praising good employees who have moved through your organization. If you have been providing all employees with copies of their performance reviews, however, your opinion

has been recorded in a formal context available to all such employees and potential future employers.

## The Commitment Interview

Once a match is found, act on it quickly. If there is procrastination, the best candidate will take another position with someone else. Set a "commitment interview" with the candidate you've selected, to review personnel and office policies and provide a general idea of the working environment. This meeting should also confirm salary and starting date. Straightforward communication at the outset of employment will reduce misunderstandings and conflict later. The candidate should agree to the salary provisions and read and understand the written office policies and fringe benefits. The candidate should be given the opportunity to ask any questions. It is also a good idea to put your offer in writing for the potential employee to read, sign, and return to you.

## Contingency

Keep the paperwork on your second-choice candidate for a period of time. If for some reason the first applicant does not work out, you may need to fall back on your second choice.

## TRAINING AND STAFF MOTIVATION

Training new employees is absolutely essential, no matter how much experience they bring with them to the practice. Every practice does things differently, and if you want a new employee to succeed in your practice, you must provide training. Part of that training includes the following:

- Ensure that the new employee clearly understands the responsibilities of the job based on the written job description.
- Review the office policies and procedures manual with the new hire, and get the employee's signature confirming he or she has received and read the manual. Place the original of this signed document in the employee's personnel file.
- Ensure that all necessary paperwork is completed in a time frame within the scope of the law.
- Set a predetermined introductory time frame, such as 90 days, and evaluate the employee at the end of that period. Allow for interim evaluations before the end of the introductory period to resolve any problems that arise. Questions can be addressed and clarification provided along the way.
- Ensure that the new employee is at the minimum performance standard level at the end of the introductory period.
- Ensure that every step or aspect of training for each task is covered. If a task is long or difficult, break it into subunits for training purposes.

- Be patient. Not everyone learns at the same rate. Some employees are slower to learn certain aspects of a job, but if properly trained will become star performers.
- Encourage employees to take notes they can refer to later when questions or points of confusion arise.
- Set completion dates for each portion of the training, and monitor progress.
- Document all training and evaluations and keep this information in the employee's personnel file.

### **Methods of Training**

There are several methods of training employees. Here is a brief list of training methods used by most medical practices:

- On-the-job training is conducted periodically by the office manager or, in some cases, by staff members. If staff members are conducting the training, it is imperative that they are qualified and can be relied upon to explain how things are done. Employees are set up for failure if an inexperienced, poor-performing staff member is put in charge of their training.
- Formal training is conducted classroom style, either by qualified trainers who are part of the organization or by outside experts.
- Group seminars to cross-train and enhance existing personnel are conducted either by formal trainers who are part of the organization or by outside experts.
- Employees enroll in traditional college, university, trade school, or correspondence courses.

### **Cross Training**

Cross-training—educating individuals in multiple job functions or duties—is a valuable tool for a practice. Frequent turnover, the demand for qualified and committed workers, and the need to cover for sickness, vacations, and leaves of absence make it essential for a well-run and profitable office.

### **Staff Motivation**

Finding good employees is difficult enough; once you do, it is important to keep them. Salaries clearly matter; still, while money can be a dis-satisfier, it is rarely the key motivator for a good employee. One of the toughest roles in managing employees is to keep them happy and dedicated. Praise, acknowledgment of a job well done, and public appreciation will generally keep a good employee from looking for another job.

Some basic ways to demonstrate appreciation:

- Recognize exceptional performance at the time it occurs rather than weeks or months later.
- Praise employees periodically and immediately, not just at the annual review.
- Encourage employees to become confident in their actions and abilities.
- Say hello and good-bye to employees when entering and leaving the office.
- Give credit where credit is due; recognition inspires more loyalty and good work.
- Ask how your employee's vacation went or how the sick family member is doing. The personal touch is usually appreciated.

### **POLICIES AND PROCEDURES MANUAL**

Any practice, no matter how many employees, should have a policies and procedures manual. A number of companies and attorneys offer guidance to physicians and medical groups putting together such manuals. The cost of obtaining such assistance should be viewed as money well spent if your practice does not have a manual or there is any question the existing manual is complete and up-to-date.

- Show excitement about the work; enthusiasm is contagious.
- Don't punish employees for understandably being less invested in the practice's success than an owner/manager would be.
- Keep employees informed about what is happening with the practice; don't expect them to perform in a vacuum.
- Fairness and consistency in style are fundamental in cultivating respect.
- Employees will make mistakes. Use those mistakes as growth and learning tools and indicators of areas where there is room for improvement.
- Treat employees the same way you wish to be treated and employees will take pride in the practice.
- Support employees when they are enforcing office policy. Otherwise they may feel their responsibility to do so is being undermined.
- Redesign jobs when necessary to keep employees from getting bored and losing interest. No one likes to perform the exact same tasks daily over long periods of time.
- Lead by example.
- Show a willingness to change when necessary.
- Consider an employee profit-sharing plan so workers will be encouraged to behave like owners. Amounts might be based on achieving certain goals during a quarter, such as improving the bottom line by \$10,000.
- Bonuses are also valuable as motivators. A bonus need not be big to communicate appreciation of an employee's contribution or a job well done. Ensure that goals are attainable and clearly communicated.
- Care about your staff.
- Do not behave as though you perceive people as a means to an end.
- Go out of your way to help others.
- Take responsibility for the learners on your staff.
- Build independence.
- Exhibit personal diligence.
- Be tactful with learners and fellow staff members.
- Be willing to learn from others.
- Demonstrate confidence.
- Allow freedom of expression.
- Delegate, delegate, delegate.
- Encourage ingenuity.
- Praise and encourage every improvement.
- Let the other person save face.
- Let the other person do most of the talking.
- Let the other person think most of the ideas are theirs.
- Try to see the other person's point of view.
- Provide others with a challenge.

## EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

Performance standards are the expectations for staff performance of duties and conduct in the medical practice. These standards should be outlined so every staff member knows what is expected in everyday operations and in case of unexpected events.

### Praise Will Create Champions

People at work need many things, but among the most crucial is encouragement and recognition. In all cases seek reasons and opportunities to compliment your employees. To motivate, employers must build confidence. With confidence, employees have the pride in themselves needed to take knowledge they obtain and turn it into performance. As an employer you can successfully motivate others by adhering to these guidelines:

- Communicate standards, and be consistent.
- Be aware of your own biases and prejudices.
- Let people know where they stand.
- Give praise when it is appropriate.
- Keep your staff informed of changes that may affect them.

### Developing a Fair and Consistent Performance Appraisal System

Managers should be trained to use the appraisal system. Subjective measurements must be applied as uniformly as possible to avoid charges of disparate treatment, especially in promotion. A well-defined job description and clearly communicated job standards and expectations help establish a baseline of fairness for each employee. Follow specified, written procedures for conducting appraisals and, to the greatest extent possible, use objective rather than subjective measurements. It also helps to be factual and specific about shortcomings and to cite specific instances of behavior in all cases. Give the employee specific time frames to correct faulty behavior and consider retraining the employee, if necessary. **Ω**

## Establishing Performance Standards

To effectively evaluate an employee's performance, you must first establish performance standards. Job performance standards should outline the quality of the work to be performed; conduct standards must establish rules of behavior and a scope of infractions. Also important are appearance standards to define the office dress code and etiquette standards for employee interaction and behavior. Additionally, it is critical to establish patient relations standards that spell out the employee's role in patient contact and explain what is expected in conduct and demeanor.

### Practice Goals

All performance standards should reflect expectations that employees uphold and promote the practice goals of the office as a whole. These goals should be stated at the beginning of the personnel manual, possibly in the format of a mission statement. Some examples:

- To provide the best possible medical care to our patients
- To treat every patient with dignity, respect, understanding, kindness, and courtesy
- To serve our community
- To maintain a fully functional practice where staff and physicians work together in a spirit of cooperation
- To create an efficient pace without hurry or confusion
- To employ highly qualified and motivated personnel

### Evaluation Factors

In an employee evaluation, a manager will want to evaluate both quality and quantity of work. Determine which job functions are essential for successful completion of tasks and assess whether the employee performs these well. It is also important to assess whether employees are dependable and whether they take initiative in their work. Ability to work well with others and decision-making skills are also critical factors. If the employees being evaluated are in a management role, you will also want to assess supervisory abilities.

Of course, it is always important to gauge whether an employee has achieved the goals previously established. However, employees feel a sense of ownership and are more likely to achieve their goals when they have had the opportunity to provide input. So, when establishing goals for the next evaluation period, it's smart to do it in collaboration with the employee.

### Sample Performance Standard

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|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>Name:</b>           | <i>Mary Doe</i>   |
| <b>Position:</b>       | <i>Accounts Receivable/Insurance Processing</i>   |
| <b>Responsibility:</b> | <i>Minimum Standards</i>  |
| <b>Insurance:</b>      | <i>80 percent of claims to carrier in 3 days, 80 percent paid in 45 days</i>                                    |
| <b>Collections:</b>    | <i>85 percent of office visits under \$100 at time of service. Maintain 80 percent collections in 120 days.</i> |

## THE POWER OF FEEDBACK

Feedback provided about a person's (or team's) performance or behavior is essential for reinforcing or changing the performance or behavior. By openly and constructively giving and receiving feedback we can create motivation and energy in others. Employees receive an answer to the question "How am I doing?" which usually removes stress and increases job satisfaction. Feedback provides direction and helps employees stay or get back on course. It can also confirm whether employees are performing as required and when they are attaining goals. By providing positive feedback, you also strengthen relationships and promote high self-esteem.

## COMMON EVALUATION MISTAKES

To avoid common performance evaluation mistakes, managers should always follow set procedures. These include making sure that the review accurately measures the skills required for the job and covers the entire time period. The review should also expressly address conflicts and problems.

## TOOLS



A sample "Staff Performance Appraisal" form is included in the Appendix.

**Attitude:** *Courteous with patients 100 percent of time.  
Cordial to coworkers and pleasant attitude.*

**Appearance:** *Within standards for administrative  
staff members*

**Additional Information:**

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### Preparing for and Conducting the Review

Several steps can help a manager properly prepare for a review. First, it is important to ask the employee to complete a self-evaluation. The self-assessment should follow the same format the manager will use. Compare the self-assessment to the manager's assessment prior to the review meeting to identify similarities and differences. Any similarities or differences should be openly discussed during the review session.

A good manager will also examine the current job description to be sure the job is clearly defined before sitting down with the employee. Does the employee meet the minimum standards or go well beyond the established standards? This is also an excellent opportunity to review and/or update the job description, as the job may have evolved since the description was written. It is unfair to hold an employee accountable for duties not listed in the description.

During the evaluation, it is important to communicate effectively. Evaluations should allow for a two-way dialogue. You should be prepared to give feedback on actual measurable performance throughout the documented review. A performance review should not give rise to debates. If a problem area is defined, discuss the problem with the employee, outline the solution, provide for training if necessary, and set a specific goal and time frame for improvement. Although two-way communication should be encouraged, arguing should not.

When discussing areas for improvement, try to first use praise, then outline the problem, and then offer solutions—an approach known as the “sandwich” technique. (The critical feedback is sandwiched between positive comments.) That makes talk of improvement easier for the employee to accept. Always keep personal feelings out of the conversation and speak solely about observable behavior. Goals should be measurable and set with specific time periods for achievement.

### Common Rating Errors

Mistakes happen during evaluations. Here are common but avoidable errors:

- It is hard to rate employees if you don't know them well. Make a point of getting to know your employees.

- Don't succumb to the “halo” effect—giving a high overall rating because of one task performed well. Each area of the person's performance should be evaluated separately.
- Don't be so lenient that you overrate performance. It is misleading and unfair to employees and keeps them from being able to view themselves realistically.
- Don't go to the other, severe extreme and rate the employee too low. “Power trips” are inappropriate and never well received. Don't assume an employee cannot achieve a “10” status.
- Don't rate people based on who their friends are, what social groups they circulate in, their religion, or a manager's own personal dislike. Everyone has prejudice and biases, but keep it out of the review. Employees should be rated unemotionally on observable, measurable behavior.
- Do not overemphasize isolated matters. People have a tendency to dwell on the negative, but the evaluation should be based on the total person. Maintain records of both the good and the less-than-good behavior over time to keep the big picture in view.

### Employee Performance

Everyone needs praise, including your staff. Expressed appreciation of work is the number one criteria for job satisfaction, ranking far above money. Praise should be more than casual, although frequent reinforcement is a positive force. With a structure for positive feedback, there's a built-in channel for meaningful two-way communication.

Of course, there is always room for improvement. No one is perfect. Performance reviews can be a vital tool for positive reinforcement, correcting deficiencies, examining problems, saying thank you, and providing stimulation and motivation for better performance.

### Follow a Process

Managers who follow a standard process when discussing employee performance present a more organized, structured, and clear review. The following steps help ensure a smooth discussion:

- Put the employee at ease
- Open two-way dialogue
- General overview
- Review of tasks
- Praise and/or counsel
- The problems, with specific examples
- The solutions, with specific examples

- Retraining
- Cross-training
- Resources
- Employee input
- Areas handled well
- Goals

### **Counseling**

Most employees want to do a good job; however, there may come a time in which you will need to discipline employees for not doing their job effectively.

Counseling and/or disciplining an employee is usually something a manager prefers to avoid, but it is essential to use progressive disciplinary procedures to resolve problems that arise. Failure to correct an employee's performance or work habit problems can have far-reaching negative effects. The other employees will see inaction as unfair, especially if they end up picking up the slack, or they may lapse into similar misbehavior. In either instance, morale and performance suffers.

Discipline should not be approached as negative or as punishment. Having a well-disciplined team means working together with precision and skill. Discipline is a means to an end—hopefully not termination, but an end to the problem. During a disciplinary discussion, you should emphasize problem solving, not punishment.

In preparing for such a discussion, be sure to do your homework by reviewing any previous discussions and all available documentation on the subject, examining company policy guidelines, and gathering any other relevant information. By obtaining all the necessary information and being prepared, you will be able to focus on the facts rather than the employee, which is what you want to correct—the behavior, not the person. Any manager-employee counseling must be conducted in private to prevent embarrassment or violation of privacy laws.

Three key tactics to use in any discussion of a performance or work habit problem with employees:

- Maintain or enhance self-esteem.
- Listen and respond with empathy.
- Ask for their help in solving the problem(s).

If you adhere to those principles, the employee should not feel threatened or become emotional during the discussion and should feel motivated to change the unproductive behavior.

### **Grievance Procedures**

Fair employee treatment must include a structured grievance system for resolving problems and dealing with employee complaints. The system need not be elaborate; in some medical practices a simple suggestion box will suffice. But the most effective system has a formal written component. Ω



A sample grievance form is available in the Appendix.

## TIPS ON PROPER DOCUMENTATION

*Only job-related information should be documented.*

Do not document any off-duty activity or any personal situations that do not interfere with the employee effectively fulfilling job responsibilities.

*Documentation must be consistent and impartial.*

Be sure to be fair. If you are going to write up someone for being late, then you need to do that for everyone else who shows up late as well.

*Be specific.*

Do not write generalities. Provide documentation that gives specific dates, times, and incidents for the employee's infraction or misconduct. Do not just state, for example, "You are late all the time."

*Documentation must be substantiated.*

All information written down must be true. Accusations, false testimony, or rumors should not be recorded in writing.

*Documentation should be timely.*

Make a record of an incident of misconduct as soon as possible. Documenting it later on or terminating the employee long after the incident will be of little value in defending your management actions.

When developing a grievance system for your practice, clearly communicate the steps of the formal filing process and guidelines for airing grievances, as well as steps on how to appeal a decision.

## Misconduct

Misconduct is defined as a violation of policy or published rules. Common examples include theft, insubordination, use of drugs or alcohol, or excessive absenteeism.

Refer to your policies and procedures manual when addressing a misconduct incident with an employee. Disciplinary action for misconduct commonly takes the form of oral warnings, written warnings, suspensions without pay, and ultimately, if necessary, discharge.

If the warning is oral, record the date of the warning and a brief description of the infraction in the employee's personnel record. For example:

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*June 25, 2006*

*Maryann was warned about her absenteeism today as she was out again yesterday.*

*Maryann has missed a total of x hours in the year.*

*(Signature)*

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The disciplinary process should be described in the office policies and procedures manual and the guidelines followed exactly for every case of poor performance or misconduct.

Other corrective action tips:

- Investigate the incident.
- Verify facts, check records, get statements from "witnesses."
- Speak with the employee in private.
- Specify the nature of the misconduct and why it is undesirable or inappropriate.
- Specify what corrective action must be taken.
- Specify what happens if the misconduct continues (for instance, suspension or termination).

The most important step in dealing with disciplinary problems is to document incidents, making sure the documentation is factually accurate and complete. **Ω**

## The Importance of Progressive Disciplinary Action

The California Supreme Court has made it clear in recent years that an employer has the right to terminate an employee without cause provided the employee, at the time of hire, is put on sufficient notice that the employment being offered is "at will." However, there are exceptions to the "at will" doctrine that prohibit termination for any reasons involving retaliation or discrimination against a protected group.

Contracts, including "at will" employment contracts, are likely to be viewed by courts as imposing a duty of good faith and fair dealing upon the employer. For that reason, it is commonly recommended that office policies and procedures manuals specify that employee job performance be formally assessed at certain intervals, possibly

## **Ω** TOOLS



A sample corrective action plan form is available in the Appendix.

as infrequently as once a year for established employees but typically more frequently for new employees.

Equally important is making sure the evaluations are conducted, documented in writing, and kept in the employee's personnel file. The personnel file should include written documentation of any instances in which the employee has 1) violated any of the practice's policies and procedures or 2) failed to adequately perform job duties. Such documentation represents what is commonly referred to as progressive disciplinary action, in which employers let employees know certain behavior will not be tolerated, and that an employee's failure to remedy the situation may lead the employer to take further action, "up to and possibly including termination."

It is essential that employers meet with employees and document misconduct or poor job performance that warrants progressive disciplinary action. Specifically, you must provide written evidence (in the personnel file) that the poor conduct or job performance has been brought to the employee's attention and the employee has been warned that further action "up to and including termination" may result if the situation is not immediately resolved. With this documentation and an appropriate policies and procedures manual as outlined above, an employer is in a markedly better position to successfully defend itself against a wrongful termination action.

### **Progressive Disciplinary Action Is Not Always Appropriate**

The employment termination protocols suggested above assume the presence of and adherence to a policies and procedures manual. While it is strongly recommended that all practices implement and follow such a manual, it should also be noted that circumstances may arise that make it appropriate and advisable to terminate an employee immediately, without any "progressive disciplinary action," and regardless of whether the practice has a policies and procedures manual. Examples of these circumstances include situations where an employee has engaged in violent behavior or is caught stealing. Such conduct requires a commonsense judgment call as to whether the particular facts—and they should be facts, not speculation—warrant immediate termination. In such circumstances it is important to consult your personal attorney.

### **Is Termination Appropriate?**

A number of issues should be considered before you terminate an employee. Apart from legal matters, more practical considerations may include whether there is any realistic prospect the employee might be rehabilitated through additional training or whether there might be another position in the practice to which the employee might be better suited.

## **The Actual Termination Process**

Terminating employment of a member of the office staff is a task that creates considerable uneasiness in many physicians and practice administrators. Such uneasiness is not altogether unwarranted in today's climate of wrongful termination lawsuits.

As emphasized throughout this chapter, one of the most important keys to a smooth and legally defensible employment termination is the presence of, and adherence to, an appropriate policies and procedures manual. Assuming you have such a manual, here are some general suggestions on how to advise an employee that his or her employment is being terminated. These are merely guidelines; consultation with an experienced employment law attorney is strongly suggested if there is any question as to the employer's right to terminate the employee or if the employee may be a member of a legally protected class based on considerations such as age, disability, gender, or race.

### **Preparing for the Termination**

#### *Privacy*

Conduct the discussion in private, for example in the manager's office.

#### *Witnesses*

It is often advisable to conduct employment termination meetings in the presence of more than one person from the employer's side. In a medical practice, that might mean the practice administrator and a physician meeting jointly with the employee. Having a witness can help protect the practice against any subsequent allegations by the employee of misconduct occurring or promises made during the meeting.

#### *Timing*

Plan the timing of actual termination for when you are mentally prepared. You may decide to meet with the employee at the beginning or near the end of the day and schedule the session for payday or the last day of the workweek.

#### *What to Say to the Employee*

There is no easy way to tell someone he or she is being fired. Most experts agree the actual termination meeting should be kept fairly brief and that employees should be given a short overview of the reason they are being let go. Once again, if the basis for termination is poor job performance or violations of a company policy, the employee should, in most cases, have previously been apprised of the problem. Do not get into an argument with the employee over the merits of the decision to terminate, and try to use words that are compassionate yet firm. Once termination has been decided, do not allow the employee to change your mind. Speak of the termination in the past tense. "It has been done. You have

already been terminated.” If an employee reacts in a violent or threatening manner or if there is any question of potential for workplace violence, the police should be alerted immediately.

#### *Items to Be Delivered to the Employee*

Under California law, during a meeting when an employee is informed of termination, the employee must be given a final paycheck, including payment for any accrued unused vacation time. If the business employs 20 or more employees (full or part time), you must make a point of notifying a departing employee of his or her rights regarding continuation of health insurance under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA).

#### *Items to Be Retrieved From the Employee*

At the termination meeting, be sure to collect all items previously entrusted to the employee that are used or owned by the practice, such as office keys, laptop computers, files, records, or the like. Also make sure you have barred the employee’s access to the practice’s electronic systems and changed or deleted any relevant building entry codes. Delaying such access denial can lead to serious problems that could easily have been prevented. ⚙️



### **ON CALL**

For more information on specific employment issues, please reference CMA ON CALL Document #0217, “Overview of Select Physician Practice Employment Issues.”

#### **Employee Termination Checklist**

- Resignation letter
- Copies of disciplinary reports
- Office keys, if applicable
- Locks changed, if applicable
- Security notified
- Computer access deleted
- Pager collected, if applicable
- Parking card collected
- Other office property collected
- Long-distance phone cards/access
- Forwarding address and phone number
- COBRA information provided
- Retirement plan payout information provided
- Final paycheck issued
- Personnel file examined for completeness
- Personal belongings collected
- Employee escorted from property
- Exit interview performed ■

