Hiring Dental Staff

By Jill Nesbitt, Mission 77, LLC
www.dentalpracticecoaching.com

Part 1: Finding great candidates depends on your practice philosophy

So, you just received 2 weeks notice from a well-trained dental assistant or experienced dental secretary. Sorry to hear that. I know the work it takes to hire and train a new staff person. The good news is that you have the opportunity to add a positive, enthusiastic, intelligent person to your team that may help your whole practice move to the next level. This is the first of a series of 5 installments on Hiring Dental Staff. We're going to walk through the steps of an effective hiring process so you can be establish a clear system in your practice.

Before we jump into where to find great candidates, stop and think about your practice and the specific needs of this position. It is a real challenge to lose a top staff person - IF you don't have other well-trained staff. By constantly developing the skills of your staff, you are always 'promoting from within' and then when someone leaves, you have the opportunity to move everyone up. For example, let's take the assistant team - let's say you're in a 2 GP practice with 1 EFDA, 2 experienced assistants and one less experienced assistant. BEFORE anyone leaves, your goal is to have each of these assistants continuously developing their skills - that way they are used to learning new tasks and are comfortable with change. You should have a list of the procedures you perform and licenses they can achieve for the 2 experienced assistants to review - and they should be gaining these new skills on a regular basis. Hopefully, at least one of these assistants is taking classes to achieve her EFDA license. That way, if your EFDA leaves, you don’t hire a brand new EFDA who has no idea how things run - instead, you promote from within - even if there is a few month delay while your next assistant completes her education.

The practice philosophy ‘we promote from within’ does 2 major things for you. First, it establishes a culture of continual learning - because no one ever knows when the next opportunity will arise, but they have to be prepared in advance so they can take advantage when it occurs. Second, it virtually eliminates the stress and drama of hiring. When you hire based on attitude and career-growth, you are confident that you can teach the dental skills and you are relatively less affected by staff turnover. As with anything, there is a trade-off here. If you want to enjoy a practice where staff turnover doesn’t cause major problems - then instead you will be spending your time developing the careers of your staff.
(As an aside, if you’re interested in a comprehensive staff training system, I’m developing this into an online training program and we’re in pilot right now.)

The rest of my Hiring Dental Staff series will assume that you are developing the careers of your staff and that you also believe in promoting from within. So, no on to where to find great candidates. Here’s my list:

- Craigslist
- Local dental assistant schools
- Dental society sub list
- Dental vendors, such as Schein
- Networking
- Resumes you’ve saved

You can find a great new hire from any one of these sources. First of all, I love craigslist for hiring – it’s free to run the ad and you will get dozens of applicants. The quality of these applicants will vary – but you’re only hiring one! Plus, you know they are already savvy with computers and that’s a skill you can use. Next, dental assistant schools – call up the local ones and let them know you’re hiring. Ask them to send you resumes for graduates and anyone who is due to graduate very soon – you need them to be available for your full time hours. Next, contact your dental society – they usually maintain a sub list and you can contact these folks to let them know you’re hiring. Next, talk with your dental vendors and let your supply rep know you’re hiring a dental assistant – this rep visits dental offices every week and may very well know someone who is looking for a new opportunity.

Another idea is networking – ask your staff to spread the word and help you recruit. When we were hiring a hygienist not long ago, one of my existing hygienists offered to post on her hygiene school’s Facebook page that we had a position open! Finally, I recommend saving resumes throughout the year – most dental practices are approached occasionally by people looking for work. Take 5 minutes to talk with the person (I’ll tell you how to do this interview in my next article) and decide if they seem like a potential candidate for the future. If so, keep their resume in a folder – every time someone comes in that you like, just add their resume to the folder. Now, when it’s time to hire, these folks are your first contacts – costs you nothing to send an email to let all these people know that you saved their resume and would like to let them know that you’re now hiring if they’re interested – and if they’re not interested, do they know someone else that might be? People really appreciate this – and it can save you mountains of time from sorting through dozens of Craigslist resumes if you find a match in this first group!
**Part 2: The Telephone Interview**

So, now you have a stack of resumes and a list of names with phone numbers of people interested in your position – what’s next? The telephone interview.

Using a telephone interview as your first step in the interviewing process has several benefits:
- You gain a picture of the candidate
- You determine the candidate’s level of enthusiasm and telephone etiquette
- You quickly weed out candidates that are not the right fit
- You save a mountain of time
- You control the volume of candidates in each stage of the process

To make these calls, use a fixed set of interview questions. When we ask every candidate the same questions, we can compare their answers. The magic is not in the questions themselves, it’s in the conversation – how do you feel this person matches up with the position you have available?

Here are some qualities we look for when hiring:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helper</th>
<th>Bright</th>
<th>Money not main concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>Energetic</td>
<td>Sense of mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic</td>
<td>Wants a career</td>
<td>Listens well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimistic</td>
<td>Team player</td>
<td>Values health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good sense of humor</td>
<td>Needs to work</td>
<td>High self-esteem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When you talk with a candidate, use a fresh page of interview questions and put their name at the top. Here are the 5 questions we generally ask:

1. I’d like to begin by giving you an opportunity to tell me a bit about yourself. What would you like me to know about you?
2. Tell me a little about what prompted you to respond to our ad.
3. Tell me about your past work experiences and why you are interested in dentistry.
4. You would be expected to be part of a team. Tell me what experiences and skills you have which would help you fit in with us.
5. What goals do you have for yourself for the next 5 years?

Try to keep these calls to 10-15 minutes. As the candidate is talking you are noting her comments on the page and you are deciding whether to invite her in for the next interview or not. If you’re still not sure by the end of the call, ask “Is there anything else you’d like to add?” Occasionally, candidates will ask “How much is the pay?” and our standard response is “The pay varies with your experience. I can tell you that our pay is competitive in our area and that we go into detail on pay, benefits and bonuses with the candidate we offer the position to.”
If you like this candidate, ask “Now that I know a little about you, what questions can I answer for you about us?” This is just common courtesy, plus you may be impressed to find that some of your candidates have already researched your website, liked your Facebook page and are well informed about your practice – this makes you even more excited to meet them in person. Finally, invite them to come in for the onsite interview, I usually call it the ½ hour interview, so they know it’s just a short visit. Ask them to bring a copy of their resume and you’re done!

Now, if you decide that this candidate is not a fit, you want to let this person down with as much dignity as possible. Think how you would feel if you were on the other end of the phone. “Susie, I’ve had 2-3 candidates with experience as a dental assistant and I just have to give them preference. I’ve really enjoyed talking with you and I hope you find just the job you’re looking for.” This is far more honest and straightforward than telling someone that we’ll call you if we’re interested – and letting them wait and wonder.

Don't string your 1/2 hour interviews out. Try to complete the hiring process within 10 days of the ad appearing online. You may need to set aside 1/2 day or at least a 2 hour interval to do these interviews. By the end of the hiring process, it's nice to have 2-3 candidates to choose from, since this is just the first step, expect to make 20-30 calls and invite about 6-8 in for ½ hour interviews. Next time we'll review how to run on onsite ½ hour interview.
Part 3: Onsite ½ hour interview

Today, we will discuss how to do an onsite ½ hour interview.

When your candidate arrives, give them your patient brochure or some information about your practice. It’s best if you create a one page profile of your practice to answer the standard questions: what are the hours? What is the job description and career advancement opportunity? Give this profile page to your candidate to read – that also gives you a few minutes to wrap up with your patients and get to your interview.

When you meet your candidate, introduce yourself (and your role if you’re a staff member) and shake hands. Invite your candidate to come to a private room and start out by letting her know that you’ll plan to spend 30 minutes together where you will ask a handful of questions, she can ask some questions and we’ll see if this position looks like a fit for her. This starts the meeting off in a positive manner.

First, ask to see a copy of her resume. Read through her resume to look for a logical path of jobs and find out why she left each position and why she accepted the next one. If something doesn’t make sense in her explanation, ask follow up questions. Does accepting your position seem like a reasonable fit with her background and skills? By reviewing her resume, you can find out if she is a job hopper or if she has negative things to say about all her past employers – both warning signs.

Your next job at this interview is to make a decision about the appearance and professionalism of your candidate. While you were asking questions about her resume, how was her speech? Political correctness aside, this is your practice and you get to set the appearance guidelines for staff. If you decide that this person doesn’t match the professionalism you expect from your staff, then you can speed up the interview by asking a few questions and then letting the candidate leave.

Now it’s time to ask a handful of questions. We ask:
1. What prompted you to call us regarding this position?
2. How would your present employer/co-workers describe you?
3. What’s the most important thing you’ve accomplished at work this year?
4. What did you learn from your last job?
5. What do you see as the next step in your career development?
6. Have you ever read a book that had a deep and lasting effect on you? Tell me about it.
7. What have you done in work situations to improve teamwork?
8. Tell me something you have recently done for yourself.
9. Have you ever committed to a class or project that required one evening/week of your time? What was it? When?
10. To build your career at HealthPark, it will take 2-3 hours/week of your own time to complete our training. It will take 3 years of this time commitment to move into level 5, how do you feel about that?

Since our practice uses an organized dental staff training levels approach, questions 6, 9 and 10 are specific to our group. These may not apply for an office that doesn’t require significant reading and training, doesn’t expect staff to use personal time to develop their career or doesn’t offer career advancement opportunities.

During the question/answer part of this onsite interview, I recommend taking notes. You’re listening for intelligent, positive answers and stories that tell you this person has some real skills that would fit into your practice. If you’re unimpressed with the answers, you can put an x through each question you feel that the candidate answered poorly – that may help you decide if you want to invite her back or not. You also want to evaluate how enthusiastic your candidate is about her work experiences. If she is energized by talking about what she has accomplished and learned in the past, then you can reasonably expect the same in your practice. Watch how often your candidate smiles – if you’re interviewing for a secretary, it’s nice to hire someone who smiles easily and often since they will set the tone for your patients as they enter and exit the practice.

Watch your time during this interview. Hold yourself to 30 minutes even when you really like the candidate. When it’s time to wrap it up and you like the candidate, it’s easy. Hand them the application questions (in my office we have about 5 pages of questions they are expected to fill out & bring back with them – we do this on purpose to see if they are motivated to work on their own time and to see what kind of effort they put into homework that will be expected once they are hired) and let them know that they have completed the first 2 steps of the interview process for the practice (telephone and onsite) and now you would like to invite them to come in for the final step which is an observation. They now get to spend ½ day observing the practice – meeting the dentists and staff, seeing the work up close and getting a feel for the culture of the group. Again, the focus is to find if this position is a fit for them.

If you have decided not to invite this candidate back, then it’s time to look her in the eye and say “I sure appreciate your coming in for our interview today. After talking together and reviewing your resume, I realize that I have other candidates that have more experience than you do and I have to give them preference. So, I can’t invite you to come back for a final interview. I wish you...
the best of luck with your job search.” Then shake their hand, stand up and walk them to the door. This is tough to do at first, but I promise it gets easier. Plus you are being so good to your candidates by being up front and letting them know they are not getting the job that many of them will thank you for being honest.

Step 4 in the hiring process is the observation day. If you’ve handled the onsite interviews well, then you should have no more than 3-4 candidates coming in to observe. The telephone interview and the onsite interviews usually happen in the same week. So although this seems like a lot of work, it drastically improves your hiring process and it can go quickly. Here’s to hiring successfully in 2012!
Part 4: Observation

Today, we're moving to Part 4: Observation. If one dentist or staff person liked the candidate well enough after the onsite interview, now it's time to see what the entire team thinks. Invite the candidate to spend up to 1/2 day observing in your practice. Ask the candidate to bring her interview questions that you gave her at the onsite interview when she arrives for the observation.

The interview questions include:

- Questions (with space to write in answers) that allow the candidate to share examples and stories about themselves.
- Request for at least 2 professional references
- Description of responsibilities and compensation for most recent jobs held
- Signature to allow reference checks, agree to drug testing, background check, credit check and legal statement regarding no guarantee of employment (this varies by state)

Gather this packet when your candidate arrives and then sit down with her to review your hiring binder. Your hiring binder includes:

- List of sample questions the candidate can ask our staff and dentists
- Overview of the practice to help the candidate understand who you are and what your practice is like
- Career path description - Again, since we use a staff training levels system, we can hire for attitude and intelligence and train the necessary skills for dental assistants and secretaries so this shows a candidate what they will be learning and how that translates into higher pay
- Benefits information – A page on your health insurance plan, bonuses offered, retirement plan, etc. Even if you don't offer traditional benefits, this is still a great section - I'm sure you offer free/discounted dental services, perhaps a 4-day workweek, a flexible spending plan?
- List of who's who (staff name & position)
- Evaluation pages the candidate will give to staff and dentists they talk with

So, here's how to start the Observation. Your staff person welcomes the candidate to the practice, gathers her interview questions and sits down with the hiring binder. The staff person explains that the candidate is welcome to stay until 11:30am (let's pretend they arrived at 8:30am) in order to observe the practice. Clarify that the candidate should evaluate both the job responsibilities and the people that work here so they can decide if working in this practice is a
fit for them. Set the expectation that by the end of this morning, they should know if they want to work here or not.

Next, give the candidate the binder - point out the topics, but don't waste time by reading through everything together. Instruct the candidate to read through the binder during their morning and next, you're going to take her on a tour of the office. Show the candidate the evaluation pages and explain that she will write her name and the staff person's name at the top and give this evaluation page to each staff person she talks to. It's nice to print a label with the candidate's name and position they're applying for and give this to the candidate to wear (that way all the staff knows that this person is interviewing). As the staff person walks our candidate around she should introduce the candidate, "Candidate, this is Sarah who is Dr. Smith's EFDA. Sarah, this is us Candidate, who is applying for our dental assistant position." When the tour is complete, then the candidate is on her own. She is to walk around and talk with the staff and read her binder. I also recommend to instruct your candidate to find the office manager (or dentist) when they are ready to leave.

By leaving our candidate to "fend for herself" we are learning several things:

- Does she take the initiative to meet people or does she sit in a corner by herself?
- Does she read through the binder or not?
- Does she want to leave after just an hour or does she seem energized and telling you she wishes she could stay longer when it's 11:30am?
- Does she give out the evaluation pages as instructed?

You can learn more about a candidate based on their actions than their words. However, another major benefit of the observation day is that a candidate will say different things to different people. Your existing staff will also ask slightly different questions and therefore, find out different information. Definitely coach the staff before you have a candidate coming in for an observation - remind them on what they can/can't ask (no personal info for most state laws) focus them on asking for examples and stories of their past work experience and ask them to use the interview questions and the evaluation page when talking with the candidate.

At the end of the observation, the office manager or dentist should meet individually with the candidate. Now is the time to discuss pay/benefits/bonuses and ask directly, if I offered you this position, would you accept it? This helps you find out if there are other offers on the table. Finally, let your candidate know when you plan to make your hiring decision and that you will be in touch.
You can tell that we put a significant effort into hiring. We have one more step to go - Part 5: Voting. A 5 Step process for hiring is no small thing but even then not a guarantee you'll hire the perfect person. It does establish a system for your hiring and after a few rounds, your staff will know exactly what to do and they will run the hiring process.
Part 5: Voting

It's time to hire! We've survived reading through resumes, telephone interviews, onsite interviews and even a few observations. We've laughed at the girls that showed up to the interviews in tank tops and flip flops and we've enjoyed getting to know some of the candidates that might seem like a great fit for the practice. Now, it's time to make our hiring decision.

Before the final decision is made, call references. Call at least 2 previous workplaces and speak with your candidate's supervisor. (Hint from an embezzlement investigator: never use the phone numbers provided by the candidates, always look up the phone number yourself to avoid being scammed.) Be sure your release has been signed by your candidate before you call. Ask a few questions, such as:

- What did the candidate do for you? What was her position?
- How long was she employed by you?
- When did she stop working for you? And why?
- What were her work strengths? How did she get along with staff?
- Was she punctual? Was absenteeism a problem?
- Would you rehire her?

Write down who you talk to and their position as well as their answers to your questions. It's usually very easy to tell the difference between a positive and negative reference. A positive reference will spend a few minutes with you and answer your questions.

A negative reference sounds like this: “Hi, this is Jill with HealthPark Dentistry, I’m calling to do a reference check for Susie Q.” The dentist replies, “Oh.” “So, may I ask you a few questions? For example, can you tell me what Susie's position was and how long she worked for you?” The dentist replies, “The only thing I can tell you is that Susie was a dental assistant and she worked for me from January 2011 to June 2011. I can't tell you anything else.”

Most employers want to avoid any chance of employment lawsuit, so instead of giving a negative reference, they just don’t say anything at all. I do the same thing. It’s code among employers for “this is a negative reference - don’t hire this person”.

In addition to calling references, it’s free to run a couple online searches – check your local courts website to see if your candidate has any criminal history and a general google search often pulls up a Linked In or Facebook profile that you
review as well. Some offices pay for credit checks and/or background checks and swear the $15 fee is worth it.

Once you have your references, gather all the candidates questions, the staff reviews and put a packet together on each candidate. Now you’re ready to hire. Here’s the unique approach that we use: the dentist doesn’t hire the candidates alone, instead the staff votes. Now, this may sound bizarre but here’s our logic:

The staff are going to spend the most time with this person. The staff will be responsible for their training. Since staff get to choose who they want to hire, they are more motivated to help this person succeed. Plus, it’s an easier start for the new hire once they begin because the entire staff made the decision together.

Here’s how to run the voting:

1. One person runs the discussion – show a picture of each candidate and briefly review their work history and share a couple staff reviews. Invite comments from your team, ask “What did you all think of this person?” You will be amazed at what your team finds out during the observation days so encourage them to share the good and the bad.
2. Once all the candidates are discussed, everyone gets one vote. “Raise your hand if you want to hire Susie Q for our dental assistant position.” Then just count and majority rules. I encourage everyone to vote, even if they didn’t meet the candidate on her observation day - they can read the application and listen to the discussion. I don’t force all staff to vote.
3. If you have a few good candidates, then put them in order – who would you offer the position to first? If they turn it down, who will you offer the position to next? This saves you from going through another round of interviews if the first candidate only works for you a few weeks!

Call your top choice candidate to offer her the position and arrange her start date. Next, call the other candidates and talk with them on the phone to let them know they didn’t get the job. Yes, this is a tough phone call to make. Do it anyway. It’s not fair to leave someone hanging wondering if they got the job or not. Here’s what to say, “Hi Susie, This is Jill from HealthPark Dentistry. I’m calling to let you know that we did our staff voting for the dental assistant today and the team selected another candidate. I wanted to let you know how much we enjoyed meeting you and wanted to wish you the best of luck with your job search.” If this was a second choice person, you can add a comment about how the team really liked them and ask if it would be acceptable to save their application for future opportunities?
After your phone calls to the losing candidates are made, there is just one more step. Get a card – blank or thank you are appropriate - and ask the staff to sign a card that thanks the losing candidates for coming in. We send flowers to candidates that live right in our town as well.

That's all there is to the hiring process. Piece of cake, huh? Maybe not, but this 5 step hiring process helps us to select the best candidate at the time, involves the entire staff and gives us a standardized system that we can run smoothly every time.