

Dealing with the Great Resignation and a Tight Staffing Market



BY MARK TERRY

The Great Resignation and a tight staffing market has hit the podiatric medical field, with many practices reporting how difficult it is to keep and find staff. Although there are numerous factors cited for this, a March 2022 Pew Research Center survey identified low pay, no opportunities for advancement, and feeling disrespected at work as the top three reasons cited for people leaving their jobs—any jobs. Almost half of survey participants cited an important fourth reason, childcare issues. Childcare issues were a predominant problem during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when schools and daycare centers were closed.

Whatever the reason, podiatric physicians are struggling to find staff and keep them. This article will look first at what appropriate staffing ratios are considered to be for podiatric practices. Then it will look at ways of

keeping or finding staff, and how to manage your practice if you're running short of optimal staffing.

Optimal Staffing

The rule of thumb for staffing ratio is two-and-a-half staff for every doctor.

NJ), says, "This is not even considering any kind of billing office. You might be hiring a billing service outside your practice or have someone inside the practice who does it or you're doing it yourself. And many practices have ancillary services, laser ther-

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Theoretically, that might mean one front-desk person and one back-office staff with another person who can float back and forth. It's probably as good a place as any to start, even though there are a lot of "it depends" attached to that ratio.

Peter Wishnie, DPM (Piscataway,

apies, for example, that might shift around your optimal numbers."

It was also noted in an August 2020 *Podiatry Management* article by Jon A. Hultman, DPM, MBA, (Sacramento, CA), as practices grow in

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number of doctors, the staff numbers often triple; for example, if there are three doctors, there might be nine or more staff. “It often takes nine staff to accomplish what was once achieved by three.”

An optimal staffing ratio is going to depend on the physician and the type of practice and the number of patients you see.



Rem Jackson

Rem Jackson, president/CEO of Top Practices (Las Vegas), says, “The reason you have employees is to make you more effective and more profitable. There is no other reason. So, as a doctor, your goal should be to be working exclusively at the top of your license, meaning just doing what you and only you can do by law because of your training and your degree, certifications, and licensures. That should be the goal because everything else should be done by other

tice meeting and met with a group of 10 to 15 podiatrists, and “every single one was relating that they’re having these issues when it comes to employees. Not only retention but getting good employees. It’s not that the people aren’t out there, it’s that there’s just a lot of opportunity for

ing that is competing with everybody else. Jackson notes, “Most people don’t know how to use Indeed. One of our doctors has really streamlined the process and utilizes a lot of the functions that are in Indeed that people don’t use to communicate with potential employees.”

“The reason you have employees is to make you more effective and more profitable.”—Jackson

the employee at this point with various types of jobs and opportunities.”

Lockwood also notes, however, that simply increasing salary at this time doesn’t seem to be enough to get and retain good quality staff. That’s not just for physicians’ offices, but across the board in all industries.

Lockwood also notes that they also offer a 401(k), let employees start accruing paid time-off immediately, and offer a 36-hour work week. They also provide free shoes. But she cautions: The first time they increased the salary

One is simply time to respond in a super-tight job market. Jackson says, “If people apply, they respond very, very quickly and have a couple of key questions or short surveys they run. The interested people come right back



Dr. Lockwood

and work with you. Then you can set up a Zoom interview. If they pass the Zoom interview, they can come in for the rest of it. This is a way of breaking the process down to within a week to 10 days.”

[Indeed offers a number of Employer Tools, which can be found at: <https://www.indeed.com/hire/resources/howtohub/hiring-guide-using-employer-tools?>]

Jackson notes that Indeed also has matching services and consultation services. You can communicate with consultants at Indeed to help you with your search and even make recommendations for potential staffers. [<https://www.indeed.com/hire/ebook-mm-definitive-guide-recruit-talent?>]

Creative Job Postings

Another way to juice up your staff search is to take a close look at the job titles you’re asking for. Perhaps instead of Medical Assistant, you consider Medical Intake, Medical Receptionist, Medical Administrative Assistant, or other variations. Jackson says, “You’ll find a different group of people and that can be useful.”

Be Flexible in Interviewing

Another factor is to be flexible in

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people. That way you can be more effective and efficient and actually start having a life outside your practice.”

If You’re Having Problems Finding Staff

These days, Jackson says finding staff is a “universal problem. Every single practice is really struggling with it.” He also found that most practices were now paying at least 20% more to everybody in their practice.

Improve Salary and Benefits

Melissa Lockwood, DPM (Bloomington, IL) agrees, saying that they have done that with her own practice and are planning another pay raise soon to help keep staff. In fact, she recently attended a podiatry prac-

for their job posting, there were one or two team members that were below that increased baseline salary. “Not only did they know about it, but they were also very upset. They felt undervalued. The reality was it was a simple oversight. We intended to increase the pay for everyone, but we hadn’t proactively discussed it with the team.”

So, with the upcoming pay increase, they informed everybody. They’ve also attached a stipulation to that, which will be discussed in the segment on what to do if you’re understaffed.

Improve Your Indeed Skills

One of the top job-listing sites that podiatric practices (and most everyone else) uses is Indeed. But in most cases, they’re throwing up a standard job post-

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terms of how and when you interview. Zoom and other video applications have become commonplace during the pandemic. But a lot of times, interviews are still being conducted during office hours, which can be challenging to accommodate for people who are working a job already. Consider conducting interviews in the evenings or on Saturdays.

A Key Question to Ask Yourself

Jackson recommends that podiatric physicians should ask themselves this very important question: “Would you want to work at your practice?”

Hopefully the answer is yes. Then you have to ask: Why? What’s the

front desk person. That being said, I have staff cross-trained, and it doesn’t really affect our overall production on a day-to-day basis because I’m big enough to have enough staff.”

Lockwood is taking the cross-training process one step further, as mentioned above. Her practice is planning on another round of pay increases for everyone, but they have made it dependent upon cross-training in 11 specific areas. It was a list that she and her staff came up with, with it originally being 10 but growing to 11 in the process. The 11 items are vital activities everyone should be trained in. And as they learn them, they need to demonstrate to her that they can do it. It includes things like how to

full-staffed, podiatrists often want to finish all documentation while the patient is still in the office, but that’s something that can be delayed if there isn’t enough staff. Workflow may need to change, and it may need to change on a daily basis depending on the patient load.

3) Hire Scribes. Lockwood, Wishnie, and Jackson also recommended advertising for or hiring medical scribes. Jackson goes so far as to suggest medical scribes may be interested in other roles in the practice. “Medical scribes have all the skillsets. They know the coding and are often interested in getting broader work in medical practices.”

Lockwood notes that with so

much emphasis on work-from-home arrangements, transcription is one area in a medical practice that works well in that situation. Wishnie agrees, saying, “You can hire a company that



Dr. Wishnie

has scribes, and they can do this online. If you find someone that’s really good, you can set them up at home and they can scribe for you there.”

4) Hire Students. Everyone suggested looking to hire college students, particularly if you find ones who are planning on going on to medical school, PA school, dentistry, podiatry school, etc. Wishnie says they probably won’t be able to work full-time, but many can handle about 30 hours a week and still go to school. “They’re smart, willing to learn, and they show up on time. Sometimes you just have to do things a little bit differently.”

Lockwood thinks this requires a certain shift in mindset, because doctors and practice owners have always had issues with losing staff, and in the case of students, they’re almost always going to be moving on, and most likely in a relatively short period of time. “But the reality is that most of the time, employees are only with you two or three years, so why not take advantage of somebody who’s

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story? “Really double down on that. What is the story of why it’s great to work here? Get into the language of that and use it in your job ads.”

For example: If you feel you’re in an environment where you feel unappreciated, you might want to consider our podiatric practice because we’ve solved it! We have a friendly, cooperative work environment. If you’re the right candidate, then this is the place for you!”

If You’re Running Short-Staffed

Of course, as is clear, many practices are running on less-than-optimal staffing. So what do you do?

1) Cross-train. Both Wishnie and Lockwood emphasized that cross-training staff was vital to handling the current job market (although they noted as well that it was also a good idea in general for dealing with vacations and unexpected illnesses).

Wishnie said, “You need to truly, especially right now, cross-train everyone. Hire people who want to learn all aspects of the medical field and cross-train them. I am short-handed to the point where I have to use another

schedule an appointment appropriately, how to print or email a receipt to a patient, how to autoclave instruments, how to dispense a brace or similar product to a patient.

Lockwood says, “The one unintended consequence is that they have to show me they can do it. So all this week, everyone has been very, very excited to show me all the things they can do, and I sign off on it.”

2) Triage and Prioritize. Lockwood notes that as the person who is ultimately responsible for your practice and how it runs, “you should never be the rate-limiting step. And what I mean by that is you should always have a pulse on what’s happening in that schedule. And that’s where I think a lot of doctors get frustrated and really stuck in the weeds because they just sit around and wait for the team member to come to them.”

In her opinion, at the morning team meeting if you’re short-staffed, as the physician, you need to look at the daily schedule and describe a game plan, what you would like to see happen, what activities need to be prioritized. For example, when

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highly motivated who you know wants to become what you are?”

Lockwood’s practice takes externs from a nursing college, and they work for a month or two. “Once you get a process in place in your practice, putting someone new in isn’t as much of

commitment. Ask, “ ‘Can you commit to one year?’ Nobody wants a revolving door, but these people are super smart, super sharp, really motivated and they get up to speed fast. They’re often fantastic while they’re there.”

Communicate

The current job environment can

so they understand that any delays or problems are related to the staffing shortage.

Lockwood says, “I think when it comes to working short, you have to communicate with the team what your intentions are and what steps you’re taking to try to rectify the situation. Nobody likes being uninformed. Let them know where you are in the process. They’ll work hard if they believe there’s an end in sight.” **PM**

Jackson suggests if you do hire people headed to PA, medical school, or podiatry school, try to get a time commitment. Ask, “ Can you commit to one year?”

a struggle as you would think. That’s the thing, though, people don’t want to have to train people and go through the process over and over again, but it requires a shift in thinking.”

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be tough for employers. And if it’s tough for podiatric medical practices, it’s likely to be tough for patients as well. To effectively work through what will likely be a (relatively) temporary period, communicating with your existing staff on needs and expectations is vital. And communicate with patients



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