

Defining Your Ideal Employee: A Guide for Dentists

by Adam McWethy



Turnover is inevitable. When it happens, you can choose to embrace the negative thinking only about running short-staffed and the time and energy spent in the hiring process, or you can view it as an opportunity for growth and improvement in your practice. This article will guide you through a framework to make the most of this moment by using key questions to analyze the role and get to the heart of what you need, inspiring you to envision a better future for your practice.

Take a Moment to Reflect

Seize the opportunity when an employee departs to reflect on their job performance. This moment can serve as a catalyst for reevaluating the role and identifying a candidate who better aligns with the practice's needs. The exit interview with the departing employee can be a rich source of information to help you understand what you are looking for in the new hire.

Take the time to find out:

- What did they like about their job, and why?
- What did they find challenging, and why?
- What was working well in the office from their perspective?
- What could be improved in the office?

While you may need to take some of the employee's feedback with a grain of salt (I always put more stock into high performers' answers), it serves as a valuable starting point for considering the key attributes you desire in a new hire. Furthermore, it presents an opportunity to reevaluate your processes and explore ways to streamline or enhance them. When you ask these questions, be sure to follow up with prompts like "Tell me more," "Can you elaborate further?" This encourages deeper insights and helps you gather more comprehensive information.

Assess Your Practice's Needs Now vs. In the Future

Whenever someone departs, it's important to evaluate the practice not just from where it is today but where it can be in the future. Oftentimes, we have incrementally grown, and when someone key to the practice departs, it gives you the opportunity to envision an ideal future. If you could wave a magic wand, what would the practice look like, and what would the team that supports it look like? Determine if the role you're hiring for can be adapted into your future plans and whether you should accelerate your future plans by using this opportunity to hire key people.

Since you are already thinking about the roles in your practice, this is an opportunity to look at your practice and envision its future. The needs of a four-operator, one-doctor office differ significantly from a ten-operator practice with two associates and plans for expansion. As your practice grows, you might have to consider new roles, such as a lead assistant, to help manage your growing headcount. You may also realize the need to invest in extra people ahead of growth to help drive your expansion plans. For example, creating a position like a new patient concierge ensures you maximize each new patient opportunity by creating a unique experience that drives loyalty. When you identify a new role you might need in the future, define their responsibilities so you have a clear picture of where you are headed. It is important to keep an eye on the future because it can affect the hiring you are doing now. You may choose, for example, to invest in someone who you could see stepping up into the new roles you are planning on creating.

If you could wave a magic wand, what would the practice look like, and what would the team that supports it look like?

Define Job Requirements

Armed with one eye on the future and one anchored in the past, it is time to define the job requirements clearly. For instance, if you're hiring a dental assistant, start by outlining the fundamental tasks they'll need to perform regularly. In a smaller practice, they are more likely to be a jack of all trades; this could range from making temporaries to ordering materials. In a larger practice, they might specialize in a key area (on top of their chairside responsibilities), such as having one person responsible for doing all the ordering. What they do can affect your hiring plan, as you may need to prioritize certain traits or experiences over others during the interviewing process.

The key here is to list all the fundamental tasks the person would do and then think about how crucial each fundamental task is to keep the practice running. This will help you to weigh certain experiences over others in the hiring process.

Then, look at the list you created and go through the tasks to determine what you might be willing to train and what you need the assistant to know coming in. For example, suppose you are a practice that embraces a fully digital workflow. In that case, you may want to have an assistant who has experience using IOS technology, while you may decide that you can train on your particular system but cannot bring someone on who is not tech-savvy. Understanding this will help you better plan how to onboard the candidate.



Identify Key Competencies

Once you have the job requirements, consider the competencies needed for success in your practice. This is the human factor we talk about. These are the skills and abilities that make an ideal employee, generally the personal attributes or soft skills you need the person to possess. It's essential to beef up this section to emphasize its importance.

For example:

- **Emotional Intelligence:** Can they recognize and manage emotions, especially under stress? Are they able to clearly see the patient's demeanor and connect with them at the highest level? Additionally, can they keep their own emotions in check, recognizing they are there for the practice? In other words, do they have the street smarts around patient interaction and colleague interaction?
- **Dependability:** Are they reliable and punctual, ensuring consistent and quality patient care? For example, if you're running late and it's lunchtime, do they look at their watch and head out for lunch, or do they understand the importance of finishing the patient's care and go with the flow? You can ask questions to determine their level of dependability.
- **Adaptable:** Are they flexible and adaptable to changing situations and patient needs? For instance, if they are a front desk person with chairside capabilities and you desperately need help at chairside, will they come over and assist? You can frame questions to uncover their adaptability in various scenarios.

These competencies are particularly important because they are some of the hardest things to teach. For example, teaching someone how to set up a room for a crown prep is easier than teaching emotional intelligence to handle patient escalations. It can be easy to have this list get out of control as the ideal employee would have many wonderful attributes, but you need to get the list down to the top four or five as it is impossible to interview for a laundry list of traits.

Consider Special Requirements

Finally, list any special requirements important to your practice. For example, a practitioner I know only hires team members who live within 30 minutes of the practice. His experience has shown that while people might initially be willing to drive an hour, they often leave for closer jobs after a few months. Additionally, this practitioner incentivizes employees to ensure that they drive referrals, making sure they feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for the practice. Finding team members who live nearby naturally brought in additional patients, as their social groups were generally within a reasonable distance of the practice. They are rewarded for being ambassadors in the community, bringing in new patients and ensuring they are welcomed warmly. Finding team members close to the practice who can contribute to this dynamic is crucial.

The key to all of this is to understand there are trade-offs. The more requirements you put in place, the harder it will be to find a perfect candidate who will meet all the criteria. However, if you can identify the key attributes, you can find someone who meets all your non-negotiables. Then it will be up to you to train the skills they don't have.

SUMMARY: Defining Your Ideal Employee: A Guide for Dentists

Turnover is inevitable in any dental practice, but it can be viewed as an opportunity for growth and improvement rather than just a challenge. This article guides you through a framework to make the most of turnover moments by reflecting on job performance, assessing current and future practice needs, and defining clear job requirements and key competencies.

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SUMMARY *(continued)*

Key points covered include:

- **Reflecting on Departures:** Use exit interviews to gain insights into the role and identify areas for improvement.
- **Assessing Practice Needs:** Evaluate the current state of your practice and envision its future to ensure your hiring aligns with long-term goals.
- **Defining Job Requirements:** Clearly outline the fundamental tasks and responsibilities of the role, considering what can be trained versus what must be inherent.
- **Identifying Key Competencies:** Focus on essential soft skills and personal attributes like emotional intelligence, dependability, and adaptability.
- **Considering Special Requirements:** Recognize any unique needs specific to your practice, such as geographical proximity and the ability to drive referrals.

By taking these steps, you can ensure that your hiring process aligns with your practice's goals and values, ultimately building a capable, cohesive team that provides exceptional patient care.

These tools will not only help you attract suitable candidates but also provide a framework for ongoing performance management and feedback.

With a clear understanding of your ideal employee and the key competencies needed for success in your practice, the next step is to translate this knowledge into actionable tools for your hiring process. The upcoming article will focus on creating comprehensive job descriptions and scorecards. These tools will not only help you attract suitable candidates but also provide a framework for ongoing performance management and feedback.

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