



Are dental practice managers overwhelmed?

By Julie Parker



The role of practice manager in Australian dental practices is not one that can be easily nailed down. In some practices, the practice manager is also the full-time receptionist and has a handful of additional duties, such as team management and accounts payable. In other practices, the practice manager is a full-time role and their rostered duties do not spill over into other roles. This practice manager is responsible for team management, human resources, marketing, financial reporting, setting budgets, tracking key performance indicators and forecasting, payroll... the list goes on.

I recently conducted a survey of 53 dental practice managers. I wanted to get a feel for the type of person filling this role. I was interested in their level of training, the responsibilities they were charged with and how they experience the role.

Unsurprisingly, the role of practice manager is filled overwhelmingly with women, with 98% of respondents being female. This makes sense with dentistry only recently seeking men to fill auxiliary roles. Traditionally, dental practice managers are team members who have moved through the other roles in the practice, such as dental assistant, receptionist and patient or treatment coordinator. This is the case with 88% of the survey respondents who started off their careers in one of those roles.

The pay rates per hour were all within the range of \$32 - \$49 per hour. Six of the 53 respondents received bonuses in addition to their hourly rates.

Another result of the survey was the number of practice managers who seem to be finding their role overwhelming.

With the question of how well respondents felt they coped with the workloads and stresses of their roles, 35% indicated they were struggling.

I found this surprising feedback, so I did a little research. According to Lifeworks' latest Mental Health Index, one-in-four Australians are experiencing burnout at work. At 35 per cent, it could be said that dental practice managers are in need of greater support in their working environments than they are currently receiving. Indeed, in my recent podcast episode where I interviewed Carmel Brown and Belinda Fyffe of the human resources services company, The Proven Group, providing proper support and a mentally healthy working environment is actually now an enforceable legal responsibility of employers.

"Workplace health and safety legislation requires workplaces to be, as far as is reasonably practicable, physically and mentally safe and healthy for all employees. This means steps must be taken to ensure that the working environment does not harm mental health or worsen an existing condition."

Given the current challenges Australian dental practices are facing with low and seemingly dwindling numbers in the recruitment "pool", I find it concerning that over one-third of practice managers are finding their roles stressful most of the time. If the industry hopes to retain and attract dental team members to auxiliary positions, we need to create work environments in which our people are keen to remain.

There are several reasons that I have discovered through speaking with students of the Dental Business Mastery - Dental Practice Management Program that are contributing to increased stress for practice managers.

1. Higher than normal rates of absent staff due to COVID isolation means often it is the practice manager who steps in to fill the role. This can be stressful as it may not be their favourite type of work, they must put off the management work they had planned to do, they are often

still responsible for their usual duties while trying to fill the role of dental assistant or receptionist for the day and this all comes after the initial mad scramble of trying to get temp staff or other team members to help out.

2. Continual interruptions. This is a tricky one. Most people are more productive and efficient when they can concentrate and be focused. However, an important aspect of the role of the practice manager is to be there for team members, patients and practice owners when required. Team members are most often committed to the clinical area and do

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not have the affordability of time and opportunity to arrange proper meetings with the practice manager. However, I certainly see that interruptions often result in increased stress.

3. Lack of authority with the team is another reason for increased stress for some practice managers. Depending upon the length of time in the role and specific characteristics, building authority and respect with others can be difficult.

4. Lack of adequate training. My survey revealed that only 20% of the practice managers who took the survey had formal, external education and training for the role. Without proper resources, education and support, the role of practice manager can quickly become overwhelming and self-confidence can suffer.

I am sure there are more reasons that could be added to my list.

Recognising, as a practice owner, what your responsibility is in terms of providing a mentally safe working environment is one thing. However, like many things in life, it's a 50-50 deal. Employees also have a responsibility to develop effective coping skills, build resilience and do their part to contribute to a happy, caring and supportive environment for everyone.

Everyone wins when a dental practice prioritises the mental health of their team members:

- Productivity goes up;
- Team member happiness is boosted;
- Patients enjoy their visits;
- Team members are more engaged in their work;
- Absenteeism drops;
- Staff loyalty increases;
- Stronger relationships are forged;
- A caring and supportive team culture drives IMPROVED team behaviours;
- Levels of motivation are higher;
- Stress is substantially reduced;
- Personal well-being improves; and
- Financial turnover increases.

After assessing the results of the practice manager's survey, there does appear to be a need to take action. The degree of action for any particular practice depends upon the systems currently in place to foster a low-stress, high-happiness workplace. To assist dental practices with helpful actions they can take - and also helpful actions employees can take to decrease their stress and increase their happiness - Charles and I have designed practical resources for you. The cost of doing nothing is too high. The benefits of doing something can be even greater! Head over to the website to discover new and insightful ways that your practice can act right now to ensure a mentally healthy workplace.

About the author

Julie Parker Practice Success provides dental teams with coaching and training so they can work together and achieve successful outcomes for their dental practice. For more information, please contact Julie on 0407-657-729 or julie@julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au