

Your Front Desk is Critical

TAKE THESE STEPS TO HIRE THE RIGHT PERSON

Flo Murray managed a successful practice in Southern California before she opened a chiropractic insurance billing business. She is a consultant in insurance billing, staff issues, and managing paperwork.

Are you happy with your front-desk employee? If faced with replacing that person, how would you go about it? What would you look for, and how can you be sure you'll get it?

You're probably hoping you'll never have to answer these questions, especially if you've been lucky enough to have someone you like and who you think is giving you good service for the wage you pay. The reality is that you probably will be faced with replacing your front-desk person. Here are some tips on how to use forethought, enthusiasm and determination to get the best person for the job, and keep that person happy. You may be saying, "She's supposed to keep me happy, not the other way around!" Well, doctors, in the real world it's a two-way street. Happy employees stay longer and do a better job. You don't always have to pay the highest wage to keep employees happy. There are many other ways to do this, and I will be discussing these ways shortly.

So, you discover you need to replace your front-desk person. First, make a list of the job responsibilities: greeting patients and having them sign in; collecting money; answering the phone; scheduling appointments and showing them back to treatment rooms. Their responsibilities may also include: entering computer data; balancing money at the end of the day; doing therapy; doing the insurance billing; verifying insurance benefits; ordering supplies. There are a myriad of responsibilities in your office that either you or some other staff member handles. Making a list of all the responsibilities that your new hire is responsible for is the first step in helping to assure that you get a person who can handle the job. (And after hiring, give your new employee the list and use it as a daily checklist to use to ensure everything gets done.)

Of course, the size of your practice determines how many staff members you can afford. If you can only afford one staff member besides yourself, then obviously you are looking for a multi-skilled person. This person will be excited about chiropractic when talking to patients, but who also have the paperwork skills to keep the office running efficiently by collecting money at the front desk, billing patients, possibly even doing the insurance billing until such time as you can afford a second staff person or contract for an outside billing service. If you do a lot of therapy, your front-office person might also be needed to help you with this part of the practice. Finding someone who is capable (or trainable) in these three major areas (customer service, paperwork, and therapy) is possible. However, your one-on-one interview process, including the tests you give your applicants and reference checks, are going to play important roles in getting the right person.

Spend the extra money to advertise for exactly the person you want. Make sure the ad explains the required job skills, work hours and other criteria that are important to you. Set aside uninterrupted time to interview candidates, perhaps on a Saturday or half-day when you don't see patients. You will be more relaxed, have time to screen more people and be able to compare them better. If you have not had good success in the past when hiring people, have someone you trust sit in on the interviews so you get a second opinion. Have a preset list of questions that you ask all of the

applicants. Write down their answers. Have a simple set of tests that the applicants take prior to coming back to the interview room. If possible, have them timed when taking the test. (If no one is available to time them, have them write the start and finish times at the top of the paper). Simple tests can easily screen out applicants who cannot spell, add, subtract or who are simply too slow.

Testing therapy skills is something we rarely think of, but I know a doctor who developed a simple test where she performed a sequence of steps of setting up a patient on hot packs, using the required numbers of folded towels, cervical roll, etc. She showed the applicant the steps to perform and then left the room and had them do the setup themselves (not on a person, just on the table). You can bet there were some interesting results! During the interview, also make sure you go over the list of responsibilities the job requires and ask the interviewee if there is anything on the list that they are unable to do or unwilling to learn.

Before you make an offer, take the time to check references carefully. The people you are checking with are unlikely to say anything bad about a former employee because the laws restrict what information can be given out. So try to read between the lines of what they are actually "saying" about the employee and listen to their tone of voice. Just verifying former employment by asking for verification of dates worked and salary paid will give you some interesting information! If you are hiring someone who has not worked before or who has no real references, talk to teachers, a minister or the lady the person baby-sat for. If the candidate is under 18, talk to the parents. Make sure that the hours you need can be fulfilled by the applicant and that they have a reliable method of getting to work.

Offer the job to someone you are sure about. Wait and interview more people if you are not satisfied with the first round of candidates. Use a temp to fill in rather than hiring someone "mediocre" or who you "hope" will work out. Don't hire anyone you are not enthusiastic about! When you make the offer, make sure you go over all of the hours, pay, benefits, and job expectations with her before she starts, even if you think you discussed everything in the interview. Ask if there are any questions you can answer. Ask how long the candidate is planning on being with your office.

Take time to develop an employee manual, containing two sections. Section I discusses employee benefits and lets the employee know what benefits can be expected as far as holiday pay, vacation days, overtime, etc. These things are very normal, regulated and expected when a person works for a larger company. Smaller practices should have some of the same benefits in place that larger companies do, when it is affordable. Your full time employees should be paid for major holidays, rather than penalized just because the office is closed. This is one of the things that make employees happy. A few perks here and there go a long way toward keeping employees longer and making your workplace competitive.

Section II of the manual discusses rules and regulations. Part of this section contains the job-description task list we talked about earlier. Other subsections might relate to where to park, what time and who to call if she is ill and can't come to work; what clothing is acceptable for the office, whether uniforms are necessary; rules about not dating other employees or patients, the no-chewing-gum rule, or whatever else is important to you. After you've had your first few employees, it becomes pretty clear what is acceptable behavior in the office and what is not. Let your new employee keep a copy of the manual and sign a statement that it has been read and understood. It is a lot easier for employees to live up to your expectations if you let them know what those expectations are and have them in writing.

Now for keeping the new employee happy. You took the right first step if you set up expectations for your office and help meet those expectations by way of careful training. Learning things on-the-

fly, and on one's own, may be easy for more experienced workers, but it doesn't come naturally to everyone. A pat on the back when a job is well done goes a long way in keeping people satisfied. Don't begrudge them that time off work when it is needed for an emergency or scheduled vacation. And don't forget to schedule your own vacations. A grump is someone who never gets away from the office because they think they cannot afford it. You can't afford not to take a vacation every year. It's a healthy and necessary part of running a successful practice!

Flo Murray
Buena Park, CA 90622
(714) 826-3949

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