

AAOE-Talk: “What Can Ophthalmology Practices Do About the Tech Shortage?”

What strategies are ophthalmology practices using to tackle technician shortages? Members of the American Academy of Ophthalmic Executives (AAOE) have been using AAOE-Talk to share tips. Here are some highlights.

Recruit Gap-Year Students

Some practices are seeking out graduates who are taking a break between completing their undergraduate degree and starting grad school.

You may have to overcome initial misgivings. “I used to be a tech full-time, so the thought of having to train new staff every summer wasn’t ideal,” said Stephanie M. McKeone, assistant office manager and surgery coordinator at Blue Ridge Eye Ophthalmology in Charlottesville, Virginia. “But it has worked out much better than I thought it would.”

How do you recruit gap-year candidates? “Consider posting tech positions on college job boards,” said Julia Lee,

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JD, the practice administrator at Lee Vision Associates in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. “Make it clear that training will be provided.”

A 12-month solution. “They catch on quick, and they usually stay for a year before they move on to med or grad school,” said Ms. McKeone. You may not have them long term, agreed Ms. Lee, “but they are very eager to learn, and it helps you meet your immediate hiring needs.”

Teach Staff to Be Technicians

“Recruit medical assistants and train them. They make great technicians,” said Sondra Hoffman, COE, CPC, CMPE, LHRM.

Your next tech may already be on staff. “Do you have any superstars on your front desk or call center who would excel on the clinical side? If so, promote and train them,” said Ms. Hoffman, who is president of Hoffman Consulting Group in Hollywood, Florida.

Cross-training reduces the turmoil of staff turnover. “My entire team is cross-trained to work front desk or clinic,” said Ms. Lee. “When I hire for any position, it is with the expectation that they will eventually learn clinical skills as well.”

Ante Up for the Hiring Process

Try a staffing agency. It might be worth trying a staffing agency, though you will have to pay a fee once a technician is placed with your practice, said Vanessa

Valladares, COA, OSC. “Candidates are generally experienced technicians, and if it does not work out in a specified amount of time, our staffing agency suggests more candidates without an additional fee,” said Ms. Valladares, who is the practice administrator at Eye Institute of Essex in Belleville, New Jersey.

Ask staff for referrals. You can encourage staff to help recruit technicians by offering them a referral bonus, said Ms. Hoffman. “You can give half the bonus when the new person starts and the balance after his or her six-month anniversary.”

Reduce interview no-shows. “I recently heard of some practices offering gift cards to applicants who show up for interviews,” said Brian Pfeifer, an EMR support specialist at Illinois Retina in Harvey, Illinois.

Are Staff Members Happy?

Use exit interviews to explore why staff are leaving, and then consider what the practice can do to address those issues, said Ms. Valladares. “What are your hours? How many patients are you processing a day? Do you have enough support staff? Do they have to work at multiple offices? It all counts,” she said. “Generally, if staff are happy, they are not leaving.”

Note: The above tips are drawn from an AAOE-Talk discussion thread. The quotations were edited for length and published with the permission of the discussants.

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