

## How Can I Hire, Train and Retain Good Podiatric Medical Assistants?

by Lynn Homisak, PRT

I don't believe that question can be answered with a single response. It is a three-part question that needs to be dealt with on three different levels. Before delving into those levels, the more introductory question that should be asked is, "Why do I **need** to spend so much time on staff?"

The answer is, because if done properly and with conviction the right hiring, training and management of your assistants will come right back into your lap, resulting in the development of a staff that feels a sense of dedication, enthusiasm and professionalism in what it does. It's a ripple effect that surely will add to the efficiency and success of your practice.

Your staff members are usually the first people that your patients come into contact with in your office; they are the representatives of your practice, the patient's first impression of you! Looking at it from this perspective, wouldn't you want to draw on this opportunity, with the aim of developing better patient relationships right at the start?

I am a firm believer that "working" in a podiatric office does **not** a podiatric medical assistant make! As a result, you need to decide (ideally **before** the hiring process) what **exactly** you expect your new hire to accomplish. Create a job description first, then fill the opening/position according to those specifications. For instance, if you want someone to do just your filing, you know your job requirements will be minimal; just make sure they know their ABCs. If, on the other hand, you want to hire someone who is interested in making this a full-time career, you will want to focus on more qualified skills - professional and social.

### The Hiring Process

Remember, when you hire someone, your intent should be to hire him/her for keeps. A high staff turnover is not very reassuring to your patients and can turn the proficiency of the office upside down, not to mention the financial beating you take each time you have to go through the process. After your applicants have been screened and selected, the part of the hiring process that is the most crucial is the actual interview

What you need to concentrate on during your interview is their attitude. Keep in mind that everyone that responds to your ad is going to be on his or her best behavior during the interview, so you need to weed through that pseudo-exterior and get down to the nitty-gritty. Don't get so hung up on the letters of recommendation! They could be written by the applicant's best friend, or by a former employer who can't wait until this person is out of his or her employ and will go so far as to write them a flattering letter just to get rid of them!

No, your most important concerns at this point should be behavior, philosophies, people skills, ability to handle conflict and approach to problem-solving. During the face-to-face interview, present the applicant with a typical patient scenario, for example, a patient who complains of waiting too long in the reception room or one who presents with a bill he/she thinks is totally unfair. Don't ask the applicant to explain **how** they would handle the situation. Instead, do a bit of role-playing. You be the patient and

observe the applicant's behavior as you watch him/her handle these types of delicate situations.

Did they:

- apologize;
- take responsibility (and not blame someone else) for the situation;
- diffuse anger and avoid conflict;
- take action to solve the problem; and
- offer alternate solutions.

Remember the words of Yogi Berra, who said, "You can observe a lot by watching." As silly as it sounds, he makes a valid point!

### Basic Training Tips

Once you've successfully gone through the hiring process, you need to think about training. While everyone, I'm sure, has their "preferred" methods, I can share some points of reference that were (and are still) helpful to me:

- Carefully **outline** and **review** all job responsibilities associated with this position with your new assistant. Vague interpretations can lead to intimidation, disappointment, failure and frustration (on both your parts).
- Make proper telephone etiquette an essential part of the training. Don't take for granted that your new assistant comes to your office equipped with perfect telephone skills. The telephone is a very important communication tool. Take the time to make **sure** he/she learns how to operate it effectively and does not practice during patient calls.
- Arrange for regular in-office "training sessions" for your staff members to allow them to practice certain techniques (e.g., padding and strapping, casting, nail clipping, various physical modalities) on each other and you. Not only does this method allow assistants to "experience" the procedure, they can better tell the patient what to expect by having first endured it themselves. Their actual initial training should be monitored personally by you and once again, for heaven's sake, do **not** subject your patients to a new assistant's trials and errors.
- Don't assume that everything you say is (or will be) remembered! Encouraging your assistants to carry a small pocket pad to jot down bits and pieces of information as they go along will help speed up the learning process. In fact, make it mandatory that from day one, they not be seen without one.
- Cultivate an office of "cross-trained" assistants. While it is productive to have assistants "specialize" in one area of the office, it is advantageous for them to be able to overlap at some point. It results in less stress and fewer mistakes and keeps the office running smoother, with no time lapses and more attentive patient care.
- Always keep the doors of communication open. Hold regular staff meetings to discuss all office matters, whether there is a problem or not!
- Encourage your staff members to educate themselves by attending seminars, reading and when time permits, show them an x-ray and explain some of the anatomy and procedures. That's how they learn. Growth and education are never wastes of time or money! They not only build knowledge and professionalism, but also strengthen careers and elevate self-esteem.

## How Do You Retain Good Dedicated Employees?

Simple! Learn to be a good manager and:

- stay focused and work on one thing at a time;
- encourage staff members by praising progress at every opportunity (and be sincere in your compliments);
- show concern and continued interest in what they do;
- be supportive;
- be fair;
- set high standards, but offer tolerance, patience and understanding in reaching them;
- build on strengths and don't dwell on weaknesses;
- show respect and make them feel important by believing they **are** important;
- never belittle or ridicule them; and
- remember to say "thank you!"

Realize that management is not something that comes automatically just because you have people working for you. President Dwight D. Eisenhower said that effective managers know how to get the best efforts out of people, not by pushing them or forcing them, but by working with them and helping them along. "Leaders," he said, "don't push; they pull!" This concept is golden, even today.

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