Why orientation is so important

By Pat Rosenzweig

“She seemed so great at the interview. Why didn’t she work out?”

Lately our days are always too short, with never enough time to accomplish everything. Before it’s time to close the laptop, get some sleep and start all over again. This lack of time is translating into every aspect of our offices, including the training of new staff members — and that’s getting to be a real problem in many practices.

Hiring someone with implant experience and knowledge of our office software should be only the beginning of the new employee experience, not the entire process. Well-oriented and trained staff members are able to get much more accomplished in much shorter time frames than those who are always hunting around for the correct instruments, procedures or keystrokes.

So what makes up good orientation training? We can actually sum it all up in one word: planning.

Prior to hiring any new employee, we need to have a clear job description for the position, preferably in writing. We need to know what the specific job duties are, when and how they need to be performed and what additional side or shared duties are also parts of the job. This is now our roadmap to set up training for our new employee.

From there, we need to choose the right staff member to act as a trainer. The trainer needs to be well-trained herself, as well as being a patient teacher. Frequently, the type of personality that makes a great lead assistant or treatment coordinator isn’t the best teacher, so we need to choose the most qualified person for our trainer — which is not necessarily the staff member who’s been with us the longest.

Ideally we should begin our first training day on a day with no patients. This allows time for a basic orientation about where everything can be found, how everything works and what our software has to offer. I know many trainers would disagree with me on this, as they feel that hands-on is always the best type of training. I’m all for hands-on training, but when it begins on an employee’s first day, it’s frequently more like sink-or-swim than hands-on.

Our training plan needs to be in the form of a written checklist so we can check off completed items as we go. Also, the ideal training plan contains frequent stops to test or use the acquired skills on sample patients. While this type of training plan sounds time consuming, it only needs to be created once, then can be used over and over.

Begin orientation at the beginning. Show the new staff member how to turn on all equipment and what procedures we set in place at the start of the day. We’ve all had the experience of wasting time going into the office on our own for the first time and fumbling to find the light switches and the power switches for electronics. Use some orientation time to actually orient the new staff member to the environment.

If you’re exposing the new hire to software for the first time, have a program set up to train on the software as well as the systems. Go over the icons and procedures in a step-by-step fashion and allow lots of time for note taking.

Next, do a walkthrough of the initial phone call for desk staff or patient seating for op staff. Use a “cheat sheet” for the initial call, even if the current front desk staff usually enters patient information directly into the computer. Having a template gives a new staff member confidence that he or she is getting all the information required. Review the front desk systems and the operatory set ups. Have a written manual in place that details these areas for reference. No one will remember it all the first time around.

Finally, be patient. Every new staff member will have his or her own individual learning curve, and some of the best assistants and front desk staff I’ve worked with took a bit of time to get the hang of the software and the systems.

Pat Rosenzweig is co-founder of Mosaic Management Professionals providing management and business consulting for dental and specialty offices. Mosaic Management Professionals functions on a belief that every office is unique with its own special dynamic and its own needs. Mosaic is committed to creating a plan for each client that puts the office’s particular strengths into play. For more information, see www.mosaicmanagementpro.com