‘She has computer experience …’

(Just not the kind your office needs)

How to determine if a potential employee has the necessary skills and experience a position requires

By Sally McKenzie, CEO

“Experience.” It’s a word that conveys different meanings to different people. When seeking employment, applicants naturally want to convince their prospective bosses that they bring the necessary experience to the position.

Meanwhile, employers — dentists specifically — often are in the difficult position of trying to fill vacancies quickly. Many don’t typically need a lot of convincing that the applicant represents a smile and a friendly demeanor is the one for their office, particularly when the applicant asserts that she/he has what it takes to do the job.

A scenario

Let’s look at “Dr. Carrel.” His business employee of 12 years decided it was time for a change of scenery and accepted a position out of state. That left Dr. Carrel frantically trying to fill the position. In walks applicant “Amanda.”

Amanda has worked as a receptionist and a clerk in the children’s department at a large retail store, which must mean that she’s good with people and well organized. “Both are very important qualities for this job,” a stressed Carrel notes to himself.

During the interview, Carrel dutifully covers the usual questions with Amanda, listening closely for those things he wants to hear.

“Do you have experience with scheduling?” asks Carrel.

“Certainly,” Amanda says. Meanwhile, she’s thinking to herself: I can be out with friends by 8 p.m. by 9 a.m., at the gym by 5:30 p.m. so I can be out with friends by 8 p.m. “Yes, I am very good at scheduling.”

“Do you have computer training?”

“Of course,” Amanda says emphatically. In her mind she ticks through a variety of point and click responsibilities. “I know how to buy and sell on eBay, I have all the important websites organized in my Favorites List and I have the absolute best Facebook page, just ask all 500 of my Facebook friends.” “Yes, I have lots of computer experience.”

“How would you rate your experience in effectively communicating with others?” asks Carrel.

“Very high,” answers Amanda. “You should see my thumbs go. I can text message while driving, applying make-up, even during a movie. I consider myself to be an expert communicator.”

As the story goes, Amanda is hired with the understanding that she is bringing all her “technical expertise” to the position.

While the scenario above may be somewhat exaggerated, it is not uncommon for practices to hire new employees that bring “experience,” “knowledge” and “training” in numerous areas, but oftentimes, it’s not what the practice needs or what the job really requires.

Specific computer literacy is essential

Practice needs and expectations have changed. Managing a dental practice has always demanded excellent customer service skills and knowledge of dental business systems such as scheduling, financial arrangements, insurance processing, collection and billing, recall, etc.

Yet, today the need for specific computer literacy is significantly greater.

Even jobs that would not necessarily be described as “technical” commonly require computer experience or technical skills. Dental practice employees — both clinical and business — are often expected to understand and use spreadsheet, word-processing and database software.

Although an applicant may bring some computer experience, it doesn’t mean she/he has the compulsory knowledge to access and interpret necessary reports or compile spreadsheets.

Historically, a college degree in business was not a requirement to get a position in the dental business office, and many people employed at the front office were former dental assistants or people who were trained on the job in another practice.

In addition, although most of the generations X and Y and Millennials (those coming of age in the new millennium) have been exposed to computers virtually their entire lives, if they do not go on to college or receive specific training, the skills often remain elementary.

Yesterday’s expert is today’s amateur

When hiring someone to manage a busy practice, formal business training and more than a basic knowledge of computer software is essential.

The practice management reports that can be generated by today’s sophisticated software will tell you virtually everything you must know about your practice:

• whether it is growing or declining,

• what procedures are your “bread and butter,”

• what other services or products you need to market,
able to create a treatment proposal and a financial option sheet. These are the basics. When the applicant performs these tasks, you will be able to observe skill level and decide the need for additional computer training.

Will the investment necessary to bring this person up to speed be too great or do her/his strengths outweigh the weaknesses? Can the shortfalls in her/his skill levels be overcome with proper technical training?

You’ll have clearer answers to those important questions if you carefully evaluate the applicant’s current skill level. If you choose to train, make the most of the teaching opportunities across the entire staff.

If you’re planning to train the new employee in-house, consider exactly who is going to take on that responsibility. If it’s you, the dentist, do you plan to see patients in the morning and clear your afternoons so that you can teach the new employee how to use the systems?

Chances are great that you have neither the time nor the inclination to take on this responsibility. If the responsibility falls to another staff member, do you plan to pay her/him extra so that training the new recruit can take place after hours?

What is the competency level of the person training the new employee? Is this person the “beneficiary” of layers of information that have been passed down from one worker to the next and still just trying to figure things out herself/himself? Alternatively, is the trainer truly an expert on how to use the systems fully and effectively?

Training? Make it real and relevant. Certainly, well-trained staff can be helpful in familiarizing new employees with computer systems, but plan to budget for professional training and make the most of those dollars spent.

Take specific steps to build a line-up of software superstars with an effective training system. Bring the software trainer in to teach the employee specific skills and document each session so that the new employee, as well as others in the practice, can review steps for completing specific tasks and check their level of mastery.

Keep the documentation in your Dental Business Training Manual along with a checklist of computer system skills specific to your practice that each employee should have mastered.

Each time you integrate new technology or make use of a new tool in your computer software, add the training steps to your training manual. This will allow seasoned staff to review procedures that they don’t use regularly and new staff to master new systems more quickly and efficiently.

Finally, remember the three-month rule of thumb. In general, it takes three months of supervised training to get a new hire up to speed. Don’t assume that new hires know every aspect of their job because they say they do.

Monitor a new hire’s performance during the 90-day training period and have a senior team member check the accuracy of the work with the intention of coaching, not criticizing.

Front office accuracy in new patients, collections, production and retention can be checked by the daily and monthly reports run by the computer. Instructions on reading these important reports should also be incorporated into the curriculum no matter which system you are using.

Office manager skills test for new hires

Step 1: Create a ‘dummy’ patient in the computer.
Step 2: Ask the applicant to:
  • assemble a treatment plan for this patient.
  • schedule multiple appointments for this patient.
  • post from the treatment plan.
  • gather insurance information on this patient.
  • create a treatment proposal.
  • create a financial option sheet.
Step 3: Now that you know the applicant’s skill level, ask yourself:
  • Will the investment necessary to bring this person up to speed be too great?
  • Do the applicant’s strengths outweigh her/his weaknesses?
  • Can the shortfalls in her/his skill levels be overcome with proper technical training?

About the author
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