Choosing the right people
Michael Sultan discusses the importance of staff

Staff are fundamental to any business. This is especially true in dentistry where nursing staff in particular work “on the front line”, speaking and interacting with patients, guiding them through their treatment, and putting them fully at ease.

As anyone who has ever set up their own business will appreciate, finding the right staff can be a very difficult task, and even when you think you've found the right person, sometimes it just doesn't work out. In these cases, it can often be just as hard to get rid of team members as it can be to employ them in the first place!

So, finding the right staff can be a challenging process - one made even more testing by the time commitments we must make to the general day-to-day running of our practices. Of course the solution is to make sure we employ the right people in the first place, but very often this is not as easy as it may seem.

A part of the problem stems from the fact CVs just don’t tell us what we need to know. They depict a very two-dimensional view of a person, and are often filled with the same phrases (such as “team player”, “good timekeeping”, “excellent organisation” etc) that make it extremely tricky to distinguish between candidates. And things aren’t always made easier at the interview stage either. Often we will find we ask the wrong questions, or aren’t able to sufficiently judge potential employees based on a short, and very formal conversation.

How then, are we supposed to find out what people are really like?

Here at EndoCare, we’ve recently taken to asking candidates a set of questions they might not normally expect. Aside from all the regular sorts of questions you might field in an interview, we’ve devised a few extras that we think help us to learn a little more about the people who want to come and work for us. Naturally, these questions are all “loaded” in a sense, but equally they’re not designed to bring about any kind of fixed response. Ultimately, they help us build a better picture of “who we’re really dealing with”, and hopefully, they give candidates a similar impression in turn.

One of the first questions we like to ask is: “What did your father do?” This isn’t a middle-class type of question designed to judge a person’s background. More it is a question designed to shed light on a candidate’s work ethic, and their general approach to working life. For example at EndoCare, we pride ourselves on going the extra

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mile for patients, and so we like to employ people who share our same ethic for work, whose parents may have imparted upon them some sense of going beyond the normal hum-drum of 9–5. That’s why we’re always interested to learn of candidates whose parents may have worked long hours – who may have demonstrated the need to go that little bit further to “get the job done”.

Another question we like to ask is, “What did you want to be when you were young?” and as a follow-up, “What did your parents say?” As an employer, naturally we look for a positive attitude in our employees. We are also looking for people who demonstrate some sort of aspiration. Though I doubt many people can honestly say they wanted to be a dentist, or a dental nurse growing up, the responses we tend to get are an interesting reflection on the people we’re interviewing. For example, those with parents who would crush their aspirations (even if they wanted to be an astronaut!), tend, in general, to be less aspirational as individuals and less motivated to push themselves to enhance their careers. Obviously there’s an element of generalisation here, but the conversation that emerges from the questions “What did you want to be when you were young?” really can shed some interesting light on a person!

Our third and final question we like to ask potential employees is, “Are you ‘touchy feely’?” or the slightly more refined question, “Are you a warm, empathetic person?” From experience, empathy and compassion are two elements to a person’s nature that just can’t be taught. Either you’re naturally warm person, or you aren’t. There really isn’t an in-between here. For someone working in the caring profession that is dentistry, empathy is absolutely critical. That’s why at EndoCare we rate empathy and warmth of feeling as two of the most important facets to any of our members of staff.

Of course there’s no right or wrong answer to any of our questions, and even with the last one the answer is never going to be as simple as yes or no. What these questions do is give us an opportunity to learn a little bit more about the people we may potentially employ. Obviously these questions won’t work for everyone as each business is different, and each dental practice will have its own way of doing things. At EndoCare for example, we want genuine hard working, aspirational people who are fundamentally caring at heart, and so we form our questions appropriately.

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**About the author**

Dr Michael Sulham BDS MSc DFO FRCD is a Specialist in Endodontics and the Clinical Director of EndoCare. Michael qualified at Bristol University in 1986. He worked as a general dental practitioner for 5 years before commencing specialist studies at Guy’s Hospital, London. He completed his MSc in Endodontics in 1993 and worked as an in-house Endodontist in various practices before setting up in Harley St, London in 2000. He was admitted onto the specialist register in Endodontics in 1999 and has lectured extensively to postgraduate dental groups as well as lecturing on Endodontic courses at Eastman CPD, University of London. He has been involved with numerous dental groups and has been chairman of the Alpha Omega dental fraternity. In 2009 he became clinical director of EndoCare, a group of specialist practices.

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