While physicians provide the foundation upon which a practice is built, it can be said that support staff are the pillars that uphold the structure. Having a non-clinical team that can confidently educate, engage, and connect with your patients is vital to the customer experience, and in turn, practice success. Knowing this, you can employ a winning team by hiring people with attitudes that match the company culture, providing sufficient time and resources when training new employees, and tactfully enticing staff to stay and grow with your practice. Essentially, you must recruit, train, and retain support staff using a SMART approach.

Although SMART goals are commonly known as Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-based, I was recently introduced to a new iteration of this acronym—Specific, Motivating, Achievable, Relevant, and Trackable. For purposes of this article, I will use this new iteration of SMART goals as outlined by Jim Trunick, a highly experienced industry trainer and author.

RECRUIT
Historically, hiring non-clinical staff has been a challenge. Today’s tight labor market is no exception. With that said, use the SMART recruitment strategies outlined below to help your practice capture ideal candidates.

Use Specific recruiting statements. Since prospective employees often search online job postings by keyword(s), you must be specific in your description. Attract desirable candidates by highlighting the core personality traits and professional skill set you desire. I recommend focusing and hiring based on personal skills and traits, since they are mainly fixed. Ultimately, the “right” person can always be trained on job functions.

Motivate prospective recruits. Prospective employees will likely check your practice’s social media accounts. Motivate them to apply by painting a picture of your company’s service culture with enticing posts of your team and practice. For instance, “why I love working at…” testimonials and team-based posts such as trainings, events, and calling out an employee of the month, all demonstrate a culture that supports the team. Such posts will help present an inviting culture that is more likely to attract and recruit service-minded individuals.

Make possible Achievements known. When recruiting, state what candidates can achieve personally and for the practice. Additionally, be clear what the position or person needs to achieve to contribute to practice success. Rewards can be monetary and emotional. Knowing that rewards are available for a job well done is attractive to prospective employees.

List Relevant experiential opportunities. Having viable candidates shadow current employees for a day should be a best practice, as it allows both you and the candidate to see if the relationship is a good fit. In your job posting, specifically state that you want candidates to experience a “day
in the life.” Setting this expectation will deter from applying those who do not understand the importance of the opportunity.

Track strategies, resources, and language. Successful practices track referral sources, conversion rates, and patient reviews (among other variables). Since your team is just as valuable as your patients, employ the same practice when recruiting by tracking strategies, resources, and language found to be successful. Those that attract the best candidates can be used as a blueprint for future recruiting efforts.

TRAIN
When hiring on personality and culture alignment, you may get great recruits who fit in well with the practice. However, they may not be “plug-and-play” employees, meaning they cannot be dropped into a support staff role and hit the ground running. In these instances, you must provide time and direction, allowing new recruits to learn the fundamental aspects of the support role. To ensure new non-clinical staff can provide an excellent customer experience, follow the pre-defined SMART training approach outlined below.

Have a Specific training curriculum. Anyone can answer a phone. However, it takes time, detailed instruction, and repetition for new hires to master their role as the “gatekeepers” between you and your customers. Have a defined training curriculum that covers the fundamental aspects of the job to provide new employees with the tools they need to be successful.

Motivate with opportunities. While your support staff are not service providers, they must understand what happens in a consultation or exam room to successfully communicate with prospective patients. Motivate them to learn by undergoing the patient experience as part of a multi-level training opportunity that, when mastered, provides new hires full insight into what happens behind closed doors.

Recognize Achievements. When training new recruits, acknowledge their achievements with small rewards and accolades. Certificates that recognize successful learning, team applause, small gifts, or celebrations are little things that mean a lot to staff and can encourage future accomplishments. You may also consider increasing a probationary salary once training is completed.

Provide Relevant guidance and feedback. Undergoing training can be stressful for new recruits. If you truly want to build a capable team, you need to offer kind, thoughtful guidance throughout this process. Don’t wait until there is stress, a misstep, or distress to provide feedback or garner ideas from your team. Instead, take the time during training (and throughout an individual’s career) to ask for pertinent feedback and give relevant direction.

Track progress. As treatments, technologies, and the service culture evolve, you must constantly review, refine, and update your training programs to ensure staff remains knowledgeable. Challenging staff to constantly learn is key to creating a team that truly believes in and aspires towards continuous improvement.

RETAIN
While compensation is relevant, it is not a fallacy that retaining good people takes more than money. Whether an employee wants to grow or is content in his or her current support role, you must have a comprehensive strategy to hold onto good talent. Follow the SMART recommendations below to create such a strategy.

Promote Specific development. If you don’t ask, you won’t know the aspirations of your team members. Keep an annual pulse on the unique goals of individuals, as it is key to understanding how each team member wishes to grow and contribute to the company. Not to be confused with an annual performance review, this discussion should focus on growth rather than being compensation-driven.

Motivate the individual and team. Retaining a strong team with cohesive members requires motivating circumstances. You can be proactive in this regard by including your staff in motivation-based team building exercises (i.e., strategic planning). Furthermore, consider how you can use performance measures to encourage team members,
facilitate growth, and organically develop leaders.

Assess Achievements. Without goals, it’s difficult for an individual or a team to be objective about performance or know when success has been achieved. Individual goals, performance reviews, self-assessments, and team objectives are all necessary when defining achievement. When these standards are met, it signifies that accolades should be given, which aids you in retaining your best support staff.

Offer Relevant rewards. As you get to know your staff, consider how rewards—which can include kudos, money, perks, gifts, and team outings—can be personalized. For instance, rewarding a receptionist, who is a young mother, with a spa day ensures she has a special, memorable experience, whereas a simple financial bonus would likely be put toward family needs. To truly make the acknowledgement personal, ask your team members their reward preferences and mix it up!

Track success. Retaining your strongest players requires tracking important details and keeping tabs on significant milestones. This may include completed training, goals that are met (or exceeded), employment anniversaries, and moments that greatly contribute to a successful patient experience. By tracking these items, you will know which team members consistently make meaningful contributions to your practice and deserve acknowledgement and rewards.

A STRONG SUPPORT TEAM

Patient service teams that support providers from the front desk, back office, and every other step in the patient journey are a necessary part of providing the best possible clinical care. For this reason, consider everyone you hire as an investment. While employing a plug-and-play hiring approach may seem convenient, in the long run, using SMART recruiting, training, and retaining strategies will save time and create a stronger support team that offers excellent patient service.

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