

The Associate Top Ten

Ten things you need to know about ensuring successful associateships.

Changing economic factors and patient/customer demands are making it necessary for healthcare facilities to offer improved methods of delivering their services. Facilities incorporating more than one practitioner can offer superior methods and delivery systems more easily. The selection of suitable “workmates” however is fraught with many pitfalls and requires strategies foreign to many healthcare practitioners. The following “Top Ten” will give you ten of the most important strategies, steps or questions that you will need to use to improve your chances of finding the right associate.

1. If you have 2,500 or more active patients and see at least 20 new patients per month you could support an associate. In fact, you probably need an associate. There is a point where more work becomes counter-productive with too many hygiene checks and too many small “needs” related appointments. The biggest danger is that when you get comfortable just keeping up with your hygienists and looking after all the basic “needs” related work, you miss the discretionary services that you enjoy and that your patients want.
2. If 90% of your schedule is booked for the next 3 weeks or longer, you probably need an associate. If patients wait longer than 3 weeks for an appointment, surveys show they rarely refer friends or family to the practice because they feel you are too busy. Patients are your only “raw material.” Like any business, if you cut off your source of raw material eventually you run out of things to do. In the natural world nothing is static, everything is in a constant state of change, including your practice. You either get bigger or you get smaller.
3. If your volume of needs related dentistry is keeping you busy, it is also likely keeping you from providing the comprehensive dentistry your patients want. If your patients cannot get the dentistry they want from you, they will get it from someone else. Don’t lose the opportunity to provide comprehensive care and, certainly, don’t lose patients because you are too busy.
4. Before you start the associate recruitment process, put down on paper your criteria for the ideal candidate. You should be able to develop a list of at least 20 criteria or characteristics that would be important to you about any future associate. Take a couple of weeks and write them down when you think of them, otherwise you may forget.
5. When choosing an associate recognize that personality type and match are at least as important as clinical skills. Personality issues are the number one reason for associate failure. Core values, work ethic and beliefs and behavior regarding people skills are the principal reasons for associateship failure. This is a good place to get some outside help if you have any doubts about your personality assessment skills.

The Associate Top Ten

6. Before you start any interviewing process you should know what questions you need to ask and why you are going to ask them. Asking a series of structured and effective questions will assist you with choosing the best candidate. Have “What would you do if . . .” discussions. Use a variety of social settings to get acquainted with your best prospects. A relaxed environment often brings out qualities, both good and bad, that stay hidden during a more formal interview.
7. Before you start the interviewing process, you need to know current compensation structures and ranges. Poorly structured associate compensation packages may scare away good candidates. It may make it difficult to sell your practice for what it is worth if the associate compensation level is too high and will ultimately cost you money or if the package is too low.
8. You absolutely need an associate agreement that has been professionally prepared specifically for your situation. Properly prepared associate agreements should **fairly** deal with the commitments of each party, the associate’s compensation and the various restrictive and protective measures you need to safeguard your practice. Do not do this yourself.
9. Remember that when you choose your associate – you may also be choosing your partner. Once an associate has been with you for over 2 years you should transfer a percentage of the equity and then enhance the practice to ensure that your personal income does not decrease. After two years, patients begin to form strong relationships with associates . . . this is good. After two years associates that leave take patients . . . this is not good.
10. Adding an associate should increase both the cash flow and value of your practice. If you are not sure this will be the case, find out before you start your recruiting process.

Recruiting and integrating an associate into your practice may be one of the most significant milestones in your career. There are many issues to consider in addition to the ten noted above, however, they are a good place to start. Having the right associate can be a wonderfully rewarding experience while having the wrong associate can be a nightmare. Following the proper steps in recruiting and integrating your associate can almost ensure that your experience will be wonderfully rewarding

Derek Hill, C.A.

Derek Hill is co-founder of The Hill Kindy Group, an international company providing dentists with management, clinical and practice transition consulting services.