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The Professional Dental Assistant

Being a dental assistant isn't just a job, it's a profession

Is dental assisting your profession or are you just in it because it is a job? Are you a dental assistant professional or are you “just a dental assistant?” Are you talking dentistry with patients or are you just sucking spit? To become a dental assistant professional you need to get out of the “just a dental assistant mentality.” How is this accomplished? The first thing is to realize what the differences are between a dental assistant professional—someone who is career-minded—and someone simply here for a paycheck.

Dental assistant professionals understand that dental assisting is a vocation that requires learning. They educate others, create value for themselves within the practice, brighten smiles and impact people’s lives. Those who see dental assisting as a job simply see themselves as “just a dental assistant”—they “do a job,” they show up to get paid and feel they are “jobbed.” Webster’s Dictionary defines an employee as “a person working for another person, business or firm for pay.” It further defines profession as “a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation.” Which one are you?

Dental assistants need to realize that there are workplace skills for the twenty-first century that they need to possess, whether they have been in the profession for a few months or for many years.

Interpersonal Skills—You must be able to communicate with yourself and your team first. Otherwise, your message dies on your lips. This can include all aspects of communication such as listening, persuading, asserting, nonverbal communication, and more.

Self-Motivation—You have to be able to create value in what you do for yourself.

Conflict Resolution—Conflicts can occur due to unmet expectations. You need to be able to find the source of a conflict and handle it elegantly; otherwise, there is resentment and blame.

Salesmanship of Oneself and One’s Product—What is your specific selling proposition? What makes you stand out as a dental assistant and makes you special and unique?

The Ability to Give Presentations—Do you give presentations? Of course you do! Every time you speak to a patient, you are giving a presentation.

Companies are in the business to make money. Staff members must become business people and not employees. Employees do as they are told while business people figure out what needs to be done and then do it. Business people are peak performers; they have different beliefs and they look at what is possible or what they are willing to change. They ask different questions and enjoy the process. If you don’t like the answers you’re getting, you need to ask a better question! Business people bear full responsibility for their actions; employees don’t. Business people know they are accountable for results and accountable to each other. Employees aren’t expected to see or understand the big picture. Business people know they must take action and will do so. Part of being a professional entails taking the initiative.

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3. The third appointment is for follow-up and patient feedback.
   - discuss how the TAP® is working and how the patient feels
   - determine if patient is ready for follow-up sleep study
   - order sleep study
   - schedule a one year follow-up appointment with the patient

Kricket says she would recommend that anyone in the dental field explore this opportunity as it is a tremendous way to strengthen the health and well-being of your patients.

Dental Sleep Medicine (DSM) is an emerging field and the patient population with SDB is endless. The opportunity to treat is there for dental practices and in particular dental assistants. Assistants who have training in DSM are in high demand and very valuable in the dental job marketplace.

For more information on Dental Sleep Medicine and training opportunities please visit www.tapintosleep.com or www.pattersondental.com.

References
3. Gearing for Gain; Moore, S.; Sleep Review Magazine; 24–27, September 2010
4. Oral Appliance Local Coverage Determination; Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, January 2011
7. Factors Impacting Mandibular-Repositioning-Device Therapy at One-month; T. Morgan, J. Montague, V. Melzer, D. Popovic, D. Levendowski; Scripps Hospital, La Jolla, CA: abstract presented at the AADSM Meeting, San Antonio, TX 2009

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One way to create value for yourself is to stay one step ahead of the doctor. This can be accomplished by being prepared: having the same setups in each room, directing the doctor, knowing when and how to ask for training, and telling and/or showing the doctor how your expanded functions create more time. Be organized, be creative and inventive, stay educated, ask questions, be committed, take charge where appropriate, and know enough about everyone else’s job to be supportive. Other ways for a dental assistant to show professionalism is by asking the doctor what a good job looks like, having a checklist in place during the learning process, asking questions and being willing to listen.

It’s not enough to say that you are going to create value for yourself in the practice. You need to put yourself in the position to be recognized as a professional rather than an employee. Demonstrate leadership—show your doctor what you are capable of. Do whatever you are legally delegated to do in your state. Show your doctor how your expanded functions can add to the bottom line. It is often said that “knowledge is power” but it’s potential power. What you know doesn’t make the difference—using what you know is REAL power. Empower yourself to become a professional dental assistant. If we don’t take the first step and elevate ourselves and our profession to a higher standard, no one else will do it for us. By taking these steps we move from the “just a job” mentality into seeing ourselves as professionals who take pride in our work. That’s what being a dental assistant is about.