



**MEMBER
FEATURE**
PEER-TO-PEER ARTICLE

THE CHALLENGE OF UNSCHEDULED CHAIR TIME

MEMBER ARTICLE | BY JENNIFER PUJO, MAADOM

What's a manager to do when the doctor is out of the office or the schedule falls apart? Hopefully your doctor's time out of the office is scheduled and can be planned for. Hopefully your patients never cancel. This would be ideal, but if COVID has taught us nothing else, it has taught us to expect the unexpected.

I've been an employee somewhere or another since I was sixteen and old enough to drive myself to work—just a little bit longer than I've been an employer. I know from an employee point of view what a consistent paycheck means. As a business owner, I take my payroll commitment to the team as seriously as any financial commitment of the practice. When I hear doctors or office managers talk about sending employees home early or asking them to come in late because the schedule has fallen apart, or an assistant being told they don't need to come in because the doctor is out of the office, I cringe inside. As the person who does

payroll and keeps tabs on income and expenses of the practice, I understand where the sentiment originates. If we don't produce the office doesn't get paid, and it's hard to keep up with cash outflows when inflow isn't happening. It's stressful. The practice's bottom line is important. However, a solid, engaged and invested team is also important. Negative impacts to an employee's finances by cutting hours is inconsistent with that goal.

When hiring an employee we make a commitment to each other. We hire for a specific role, at a specific rate of pay and predictable schedule. We expect our employees to show up for every scheduled shift on time and prepared to do the job for which they were hired. Our employees in turn expect to work the hours agreed upon and to receive wages for those hours. Our business has regular expenses: supplies, rent, payroll, utilities, and so on. Our

employees, or rather our team members, who are engaged in our practice mission and vision, and aligned with our core values, have their own financial obligations: rent, utilities, car payments and so on. This is a big part of their "why". If they didn't need the paycheck, they would probably choose to spend their time doing something else.

As employers, we need to honor our commitment to our team members. If business decreases consistently maybe we need to adjust our staffing requirements, but that is a different conversation. This conversation addresses the hopefully not-so-common occurrence when there are no patients for our team to care for in big blocks of time for various reasons. If we're asking, or expecting, an employee to take unpaid time because the doctor is out of the office,

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or the schedule has fallen apart, why would they be engaged or committed to the practice?

When the doctor has planned to be out in advance, such as for vacation or CE, our team may have options for that time. Perhaps they will plan their own vacation, choosing unpaid time or using



MEET THE MEMBER

Jennifer Pujo, MAADOM, is the office manager at Merrimack Valley Dentistry and is a lifetime member of the American Association of Dental Office Management, (AADOM). She came into the dental industry from positions with large and small technical sales organizations to work with her life and business partner husband, Jason. She credits the community she found within AADOM for helping her find her own career path in dentistry while helping to grow their practice. During her tenure, Jennifer has helped grow the practice from a single employee to a talented team of five, and has completed a commercial real estate acquisition, build-out and practice move. Jennifer received her AADOM Fellowship, (FAADOM) in 2018 and in September of 2022 was inducted as an AADOM Master, (MAADOM).

vacation benefits. Perhaps they choose to temp. It would be just as viable to plan work that can be done in the office during that time when the doctor is out.

In the case of unplanned time, such as the schedule falling apart, it is in everyone's best interest that our first goal be to fill the time as appropriate. Can changes be made in how the office schedules? If hygiene is experiencing a season of frequent blocks of unscheduled time, are there appointment types scheduled with the doctor that could be seen by a hygienist?

When filling the schedule isn't appropriate, for example if the doctor is out for an unanticipated reason or attempts to fill the schedule have been unsuccessful, it is helpful to have a list of areas where team members can lend-a-hand that otherwise are difficult to complete during a full schedule.

Some ideas include:

- sharpening instruments
- organizing supply areas
- deep cleaning operatories
- updating the supply formulary (ours often has handwritten updates to codes or new products)
- keeping current on annual trainings like OSHA and HIPAA—there are online self-paced courses available
- working on overdue recall
- making reminder calls—we use a contact management tool, but there are still a few calls to be made each week
- reviewing the upcoming schedule for patients due to

update medical history or other forms

- assisting with verification of active dental benefit plans for upcoming appointments
- reviewing outstanding treatment reports and reaching out to patients and/or updating the list
- tackling a project like cleaning up lists in your PMS system—insurance carrier lists can notoriously get messy with multiple iterations of the same carrier; the unscheduled treatment list can also get messy
- doctor CE
- planning routine maintenance or scheduling your water line tests

In general, use the time to your best advantage.

Brainstorm a list specific to your office during a team meeting. Post your list where it is accessible to team members when they are looking for something to fill open time and where it's easy to add projects as you think of them.

Finally, sometimes our employees do need a break, and a long lunch or coming in an hour later may lighten their load and be a blessing. In our office I do tell my team that I am not asking them to clock out and I am not trying to send mixed messages when it comes to large openings in the schedule, but I also understand being a working parent. Sometimes using that open time, unpaid, to handle personal matters makes their life less stressful. I want to support them as long as the needs of our patients are being met.

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...CULTURE CONTINUED

When you invest in your team members they will be able to



MEET THE MEMBER

Lan Alexander, MAADOM grew up in Cambridge, MA and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Behavioral Neuroscience. Lan's dental career passions include creating a positive, fulfilling work culture and providing exemplary service to patients.

She has been an AADOM member since 2017 and serves as a board member for the Boston Chapter of AADOM. Lan received her AADOM Fellowship, (FAADOM) in 2019 and received her AADOM Mastership, (MAADOM) in September 2022.

Outside of work, Lan loves spending time with her husband, Ron. She loves movies, exploring new restaurants, and going on walks.

learn and grow within their field of expertise and can bring those new skills to your practice.

Another form of investing in your team is making sure they have the equipment they need to do their job to the best of their ability. If the administration team really wants that dual monitor or a better scanner, consider it! Other examples could include providing a new set of scrubs to the assistants so they all match, purchasing cassettes for the hygienists instruments or even investing in branded jackets for everyone to keep them warm in the office. There are many ways to invest in your team so they can feel confident and proud to work for your practice.

3. HAVE FUN TOGETHER!

Rewarding your team with fun events both at work and outside of work will help build strong professional relationships and boost morale. Here are several ideas for ways to help your team feel valued and appreciated:

- Parties and celebrations: birthdays, work anniversaries, appreciation weeks, baby showers, wedding showers, graduations, different holidays/themes throughout the year, etc.

- Outside work events: game night, bowling, escape or challenge room, paint or crafts night, axe throwing, doing community service together, a meal out, shopping, spa day, a museum or aquarium, ice skating, apple picking, etc.
- Low financial investments: appreciation/kudos wall, impromptu mini "dance-it-out" break during lunch, scheduling a show or movie with popcorn and snacks during lunch, coloring contest, book club, ice cream bars, hand written cards of appreciation.

By mixing different types of events you can make sure everyone's unique interests are included at some point or another.

Workplace culture is becoming an extremely relevant and important topic in today's world. There is so much more to explore on the topic and hopefully these three tips can help nourish your dental practice's awesome culture. After all, as leaders within our practices, it is our responsibility to inspire a healthy, professional and positive workplace environment for our valued team members. ■

...CHAIRTIME CONTINUED

They are, after all, our reason for coming to work; they are our priority.

We are on this journey together with our team; let's handle scheduling situations with grace

and not expect them to pay financially for non-booked time. Expecting employees to take a cut in pay because the schedule fell apart does not make them feel valued or appreciated. With the current trends in the cost of living,

we can't expect employees to accept a cut in pay. If you can't keep them financially whole, based on your mutual commitment to each other, in this job market someone else will. ■