



Holding on to your best staff

How do you make sure your staff feel appreciated and motivated? **David Gilliver** outlines the key issues in retaining talented personnel



Rex Features

In the last two features in this series we looked at how to recruit staff – particularly in those areas of under supply outside of the major urban centres where vacancies can be hard to fill – as well as how best to train those staff and ensure that training is put to practical use. But now that you've gone to the trouble and expense of recruiting and training them, how do you go about making sure that you hold on to them?

It goes without saying that different people will have different priorities depending on their circumstances. For many the money will obviously be the key thing, while with others it might be work/life balance or training and management opportunities. So is there a formula for establishing loyalty to your practice, especially in those areas where good staff can be hard to come by and likely to be subject to a stream of tempting offers once you've got them?

'I don't think it has ever been as simple as a pay packet,' says direc-

tor of professional recruitment for Specsavers, Chris Howarth. 'All the available evidence shows that people want a good deal more than that from an employer – it's about career development opportunities, the ability to learn, and working for an organisation that they feel proud to be part of, which means employer brand is very important. It's about making sure that every single individual in the organisation has got the opportunity to access a personal development plan, to have a clear understanding about what their future looks like and to expect the support of the organisation.'

Clarity from day one

According to director of the TMR consultancy, Martin Russ, it's essential that you do all you can to establish this clarity from day one. 'If you want to set your staff off on the right footing, the immediate thing is to give them a very detailed job description when you first employ them,' he says. 'That way you've made it clear what you expect of them, and both sides are starting

from a clear understanding.'

This still holds true for existing staff, he says, and one of the best ways of achieving it is through regular appraisals. 'The purpose of an appraisal is that it's two way,' he stresses. 'You can share the aspirations of the business and their role within it, but equally you hear how they think they're doing and how they could expand on that to help achieve the objectives of the practice.'

One of the best ways of maximising this potential and ensuring that staff feel that they are genuinely part of your organisation is by having structured training and career pathways in place – as closely attuned to the needs and aspirations of individual staff as is practically possible.

'Our career pathway is clearly set out and well supported in terms of training and development,' says head of professional resource and development at Boots Opticians, Richard Edwards. 'We took a decision that we would like more of our optics practices to be managed by optical professionals, so we've got a lot more optometrists and



DOs managing small practices. It's also creating a pipeline of professional staff for our business who can become our franchisees of the future.'

The wider the range of opportunities available the better, so there's more of a chance that it matches up with what your staff really want. 'Our view basically is that wherever our key people want to go, they can go,' says Howarth. 'If they want to have a professionally orientated development programme then we work very hard to make sure that that's what they've got. But if they're inclined in a more commercial direction then there's the option of our joint venture partner development programme. We've got lots and lots of people who joined Specsavers as Saturday workers and who are now quite senior people or joint venture partners in the group, and that's because we genuinely have a firm belief that that's how you keep your very best people.'

Staff surveys

But how do you really know what your best people's intentions are? Appraisals are obviously a very good indicator, but people may hold back in an appraisal for all manner of reasons, and just because you hear them saying the right things in those circumstances doesn't mean they won't be tempted by that generous offer when a headhunter gives them the call. So it can be a good idea to regularly take the temperature of staff satisfaction across your organisation as a whole.

'Twice a year we do a survey across the whole of the business,' says Edwards. 'It's a standard set of questions and we track the responses, which gives us a score of ongoing job satisfaction. We measure and monitor it very closely, which helps us identify any issues that may not be immediately obvious – the results are then fed back into our planning process so we can address the key drivers of job satisfaction.'

There should also be robust structures in place for making sure that that job satisfaction is someone's responsibility, rather than an abstract concept that's discussed in meetings but little else. 'Our regional managers have actually got turnover targets as part of their performance contracts,' he continues. 'It's a key priority in terms of the things they get measured against, and we do audit that.'

But there can be simple ways to inspire loyalty outside of money and career prospects, says Russ. 'If you're able to, offer incentives and

bonuses – they don't always have to be monetary. It could be something like an extra half day off because they've done a particularly good job – there are a lot of part time support staff in practices and for them it's often not the money that makes that much difference. It's more about their time and flexibility, so that can be a good way of showing you appreciate them.'

It's important to give them as much freedom and flexibility as you can in terms of their everyday role, he adds, whether allowing professional staff the freedom to choose frame and lens ranges or giving optometrists a say in when the equipment is upgraded or changed and input into practice layouts when it's time to refurbish.

But the main thing, he says, is to make your staff genuinely feel part of something. That way you'll not only get the best out of them but they'll be less likely to jump ship to a competitor for a modest increase in salary. 'Regular updates are important – it's about sharing information and openness about practice performance and their part within it,' he says. 'Many people turn up and think they're doing a good job and the place is doing wonderfully well, and nobody really knows the truth because the boss – and this tends to happen particularly in smaller practices – keeps those things close to their chest.'

'I'm not talking about sharing the individual pounds, shillings and pence of profitability, but it can be things like "we've gained this many new patients this month – what can we do to gain more?"' he continues. 'That way they become more a part of the practice. That's not just at support staff level, it's at all levels. I think that has far more impact on whether people feel valued, rather than just turning up, being paid to do a job and going home again.'

But how many of these things hold

true across the board? The optics sector is far from a homogenous job market, and a different set of rules may well apply in rural Cornwall than central London. 'You can't get away from the fact that whether it is an area of over supply or under supply will dictate whether there are more attractive options that people can move to,' says Edwards. 'That will create the benchmark conditions that drive turnover or not.'

Practice culture

Of course, all of this aside, it would be extraordinarily naive to try to say that salary didn't matter. 'We benchmark our benefits package against the industry so we're comfortable that the whole package we offer people,' says Edwards. 'But in terms of retaining people over the longer term, I think it's about the culture and whether people are comfortable with the organisation they work for and feel that it has the values that they want. The career pathway and career potential is important but a key driver is the culture of the practice. If people turn up for work five days a week and enjoy what they do, like the people they work with and feel in tune with the culture, then it doesn't matter whose name is above the door, they're not going to be in a rush to look for another job. I think the practice manager and the organisation have a responsibility to create that environment.'

Howarth agrees. 'Obviously, you have to offer up competitive salary and benefits packages, and we always take very great care to make sure that's what we do, but that's just for starters as far as we're concerned. Offering people a decent salary, benefits and terms and conditions are just the building blocks – those are the things that stop people from being unhappy. But the things that make them happy are much more to do with ensuring that they have access to the very best quality learning and development programmes and that they've got very real career opportunities throughout the organisation.'

But not everyone is necessarily driven by career progression and management opportunities. 'That's the purpose of the appraisal – to identify the things that motivate people,' says Russ. 'Some people might not want that at all and say "Just because I'm a good optician, doesn't mean I'm a good manager." But if information and everyone's input are shared and taken serious note of, then people feel more than just a peg in a hole. It's the glue that keeps them there.' ●



It is a good idea to monitor the level of staff satisfaction