Best Practices in BackOps: 
Staff – Who and How Many?

The biggest asset and cost a medical practice has is its staff. The most important way to improve the patient experience is to recruit and retain good people. We know what happens in a specialist office with high patient rapport -- they return to the their primary care physician with a glowing recommendation as well as friends and family. This in turn leads to direct patient referrals who see "their orthopedic surgeon" as THE musculoskeletal provider, often times coming directly to them from then on.

Do I have the Right People?

It is important to evaluate all staff members based on their skill and personality. Is the person working your front desk smart but introverted? If you could do it again, would you place these people in the same positions?

Don’t be afraid to make changes. Medical offices tend to retain staff even when they are ineffective because the hiring process seems too daunting or because they are “loyal”. One ineffective person can slow down the entire staff and can be expensive as their pay increases each year. There needs to be a consistent review process to guide and reward staff appropriately. Semi-annual reviews encourages these discussions and allows management to communicate what they do well and what needs improvement. An example of how an effective review process can bridge expectations occurred during a 360-review, where management, the employee and peers all evaluated the employee. The information we gathered showed the employee wanted a raise, was effective in his job and a hard worker. His pay was in line with industry standard and the Doctors wanted him to take on more responsibility. Matching his skills with what was needed for the practice provided an agreeable solution and subsequently a raise.

Evaluate your current staff and the positions they are in to see if individually and as a whole they are operating at an optimal level.

How Many People?

Practices will find themselves often understaffed and piling more and more on current employees. This causes employees to be less effective in their current position and can lead to overall job dissatisfaction. Before starting the hiring process, it is important to see which functions can be outsourced. This will allow your current staff to perform at an optimal level and provide an overall improved patient experience. It is much easier to fire a Company than a person.

Understaffing means the office manager is too busy putting out fires and juggling many different roles that there is no time to actually manage the office or think strategically about operational flow, practice goals, performance metrics or how to grow the practice. Strategic planning is the only way to grow and sustain a profitable business. MGMA estimates that on average there 3.68 employees per full time orthopedic surgeon.

If you do not have the needed expertise in billing, accounting, human resources, compliance then find a company that can provide it for you. It generally costs less than a full time employee, and the right
company means less people to manage. I know practices that had great success with TriNet for HR needs, CompliancePhD for compliance needs and BackOps for HR, accounting, compliance and cost reduction needs.

The right number of staff will depend on number of physicians and ancillaries; however, support staff expenses should not exceed 20% of revenue.

Where will I find the Super Stars?

If you need to hire people, then the best finds for staffing come from within your own network and not Craigslist. Reach out to all your friends, colleagues and the Reps that visit the office with an entertaining email that pitches the position and office. This allow people to easily spread the word. Also, posting it on your firms Facebook page can help get patients involved in helping as well. A practice I worked with found two great employees that were former patients on Facebook. They were so happy to work for the doctor that helped them [through surgery] and were also great testimonials to anyone who walked in the door.

How will I know when I meet them?

A Super Star is smart and has the needed personality and skills for the position you need. It sounds intuitive, but managers often take experience in medical office over personality type and skills. For front office, customer service is extremely important and for back office, organization and analytical skills are critical. Part of having superstars is placing people in a position that best suits their personality, interests and skill set.

Do not let the resume speak for itself! All candidates should be tested on the needed skill set and interviewed by at least 2-3 other staff members to give them an opportunity to ask questions without the hiring manager present. Also, all educational and professional references need to be checked and a quick search of social media sites can tell a lot. It is a costly mistake to hire the wrong person so make sure you do your homework!

Kavita Sahai, VP Medical BackOps, spent a majority of her career in investment banking and private equity, where she focused on evaluating key financial and operational metrics to value and grow companies. She translated that knowledge to orthopedic practices over the last five years helping surgeons understand how to increase profitability as well as position their practice for a higher valuation. Contact for additional questions kavita.sahai@backops.co