

# Identifying the Causes of Staff Turnover

*You may be able to reduce turnover by finding out how your practice looks through the eyes of your staff.*

Judy Capko

Staff turnover may be costing your practice more than you think. In addition to putting a considerable dent in the practice pocketbook, it is also costly in terms of patient and staff satisfaction.

According to The Health Care Group's 2001 Staff Salary Survey, turnover is highest among receptionists, but it's a problem for many other positions as well. A general rule of thumb for determining whether your practice is experiencing high turnover is to look at the percentage of staff your practice turns over

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in a five-year period. In my experience, 15 percent staff turnover in five years is reasonable; 20 percent or more is considered high. [See the box on page 31 to learn how to calculate your practice's turnover rate.]

Fortunately, by critically evaluating the positions in your practice and soliciting feedback from your staff, you can uncov-

er the sources of turnover and make your practice a place where people *want* to work. The key is to put yourself in their position, literally. >

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ILLUSTRATION BY WILL TERRY



Staff turnover can cost your practice money and morale.



Your practice is experiencing high staff turnover if you've lost 20 percent or more of your staff in the last five years.



Uncover the source of staff turnover by evaluating each position in your practice one by one.



Look around your office to find out if you're providing a pleasing work environment for your staff.

## Evaluate positions one by one

Because each position is different, it's best to evaluate one at a time. The examples in this article focus on the receptionist position, but the process can be applied more broadly. The evaluation of a particular position should be done by the position's immediate supervisor, which may often be the office manager or sometimes a physician, depending on the position.

Before you get started, try to gain as much cooperation and input from the staff as possible. Assure everyone that the mission is to help you understand their jobs and identify what can be done to make things easier for them. Also, be sure to involve the staff in every step of the position evaluations, including development of potential changes to the position.

Begin by spending half a day observing the employee whose position you're evaluating, noting what tasks he or she takes on and under what conditions. It's best to conduct the assessment on a typically busy workday. As part of your observation, ask yourself the following five questions. The answers will help you understand why staff in this position leave and how you can reduce turnover:

**1. Are you creating a desirable work setting?** Work environment plays an important role in staff job satisfaction. This includes everything from having the right tools available to providing basic comfort, such as proper lighting and noise control. Staff members also need to have ergonomically designed work stations that include a comfortable chair that's the proper height and distance from constantly used work equipment such as the telephone and computer. It's also important to ensure that the work area is laid out logically and efficiently.

While observing the receptionist, look at the front-office layout. Is it noisy and chaotic? Do staff members congregate at the reception station to visit or use the copy machine? Do nurses stand there to review charts on arriving patients or access a computer to schedule a work-in? Do billing staff use the area for discussing insurance issues with patients? Do file clerks gather there to discuss missing charts or dictation?

You can uncover the sources of turnover and make your practice a place where people *want* to work.

For example, if the receptionist is constantly being interrupted by incoming phone calls while trying to assist arriving patients or is having to leave the reception station repeatedly

to look for charts, you could ask someone else to triage incoming calls and require that file clerks retrieve the charts. This way the reception station won't be abandoned, and the receptionist can take on tasks that are more easily interrupted when patients need assistance.

**3. Are you hiring appropriate staff and training them adequately?** Keeping staff turnover low begins with hiring staff mem-

## KEY POINTS

- Your practice is experiencing high turnover if you've lost 20 percent or more of your staff in the last five years.
- Spend half a day looking at a high-turnover position through the eyes of the employee to find out where improvements can be made.
- In exit interviews and surveys, ask departing employees how they viewed the practice and their positions.

If so, easy solutions can be implemented to improve the situation. For example, make sure the arrival counter where patients check in is situated within three feet of the receptionist's desk so that patient-receptionist interaction isn't strained; place a computer terminal in the nurses station for easy access to charts and/or scheduling; and instruct the billing staff to discuss billing issues in a more appropriate location. As for the copy machine, it may be wise to relocate it or consider purchasing a second copier in a department with high-volume needs. It might also be worthwhile to invest in a telephone headset for the receptionist to make telephone conversations easier.

**2. Are tasks appropriately assigned and performed?** Compare the job description for the position with what the staff member really does. Determine whether the work that staff member is doing is appropriate to his or her position. Would it make more sense to have someone else in the office do it?

bers who are a good match for the practice and the position. My article, "Hiring the Right Physician for Your Practice," [September 2000, *FPM*, page 41] offers suggestions for matching candidates to practices.

Although the article is about hiring physicians, many of the suggestions offered in it, such as conducting thorough reference checks, finding out why a candidate left a previous job and ensuring a candidate's skill set matches the job description, can be used for hiring staff as well.

You should also evaluate your training processes. Find out whether staff members are following standard procedures to accomplish tasks. If they're not, it may point to a problem in the way they were initially trained (or to a problem with the procedure itself, in which case you should certainly invite the staff member to help you improve it). It's critical that adequate time and resources are dedicated to providing proper training and enhancing the skills of new staff members.

If you have a training procedure for receptionists, revisit it and ensure that training was handled properly for the current receptionist. If you don't have a training procedure for this position, now is the time to put one in place. Written training protocols, or manuals, are the most effective training tools and can be maintained and updated when policy changes are made. Not only will a manual help new hires learn their jobs, but it will also force follow-up on decisions and prevent policies from changing daily.

**4. Are you offering effective ways for staff to communicate?** Rather than looking around the office to ask a question in person, your staff can gain a great deal of efficiency by using an intercom system, voicemail and/or e-mail to communicate. Primary care practices that have implement-

ed e-mail systems frequently tout their success in improving communication.

**5. Are staff members supporting each other?** Obviously, all staff members need to support each other, but sometimes these efforts deteriorate without anyone realizing it or doing anything to correct it. Your observations may reveal tell-tale signs that staff members are focusing solely on their own work rather than their work as part of the

team. The phrase "it's not in my job description" simply won't do. For example, if another staff member sees the receptionist has two patients arriving at the same time, you must

ensure that he or she puts the patient first and provides immediate assistance.

Once you've gathered the information from these five questions, sit down with the staff member and discuss your evaluation of the position with him or her. Ask the staff member to respond to the same questions, and then discuss any differences in your answers. This will help you get a clear understanding of the position from the perspective of the employee and management, and it will show your respect for the staff and your desire to build and maintain a solid team.

### Solicit feedback

Evaluating each position in your practice can help you spot problem areas you need to work on. But to get the full picture of how staff members view your practice and their position in it, you'll need to hear directly from them. It's important to regularly solicit feedback from your entire staff in one-on-one meetings and staff meetings. This helps keep you constantly informed of what's working, what isn't working, what's changed and where improvements may be needed. It will also show that you value your staff's point of view, which may increase job satisfaction. In addition to this informal method of soliciting staff feedback, it's also helpful to conduct formal feedback solicitation through exit interviews and exit surveys.

**Exit interview.** When a staff member leaves your practice, you need to find out why. This requires an extensive exit interview with each employee. A staff member will almost always offer *some* reason for

Work environment plays an important role in job satisfaction.

### SPEEDBAR®



Determine how closely the work a staff member does compares to the position's job description.



Check to see if an accurate, up-to-date training manual exists for each position in your practice.



Make sure your staff members can communicate easily with each other through an intercom system, voicemail or e-mail.



Determine whether your staff members are focusing solely on their own work or are working together as a team.

### CALCULATING YOUR TURNOVER RATE

To calculate the rate of staff turnover in your practice, divide the number of employee departures your practice has experienced in the last five years by the number of staff members you've employed over the last five years. Then, multiply that number by 100.

A 15-percent turnover rate in five years is reasonable; 20 percent or more is considered high.



After you've evaluated a particular position, ask the staff member currently holding the position to evaluate it as well.



In addition to conducting position evaluations, solicit feedback from staff in one-on-one meetings and staff meetings.



Another good way to learn why turnover occurs in your practice is to conduct an exit interview with departing employees.



Ask for suggestions from departing employees on how their former position could be improved for future employees.

## EXIT SURVEY SAMPLE

[Practice name] wants to thank you for the dedication and loyalty you exhibited during your employment in our office. Your contribution to the practice was valuable. Although your departure is a loss to our practice, we wish you the very best in your new position and future career choices.

We feel that our departing employees are in the best position to tell us how the management of the practice works and if we are meeting employees' needs. We value your opinion and would appreciate it if you would take the time to complete and return this *confidential* survey to our office within one week. Please explain any "no" answers and give additional comments/suggestions on the reverse side. Thank you!

	Yes	No
Were employees informed ahead of time about changes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you feel in control of your workload?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did management care how you really felt about your work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was management open and honest in dealing with employees?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did management have the ability to solve major administrative problems?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was more emphasis placed on the quality rather than the quantity of the work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you have a clear understanding of what was expected of you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were employees eager to come to work most of the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was the office environment between employees and physicians comfortable?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name three things we could do to better serve our employees:

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

leaving up front, such as he or she was looking for a new challenge, wanted a job closer to home or wanted higher pay. These things may be true, but there are probably some other underlying reasons for his or her departure as well.

To avoid making the employee feel defensive or inadequate, ask questions that invite open dialogue and focus on the practice rather than the employee. For example, don't ask, "What do *you* think is wrong with the position?" or "Why weren't *you* able to handle

the position?" Instead, ask, "How can *we* make this job easier for the next employee?" Ask for the employee's help in critiquing his or her former job description and the tasks

required for the position. The answers to these questions may give you some insight into how the staff members view practice operations and

the management's performance. See "Exit interview questions" for a list of specific questions you can ask employees in an exit interview.

To get the full picture of how staff members view your practice, you'll need to hear directly from them.

**Exit survey.** In addition to the exit interview, consider having the departing employee fill out a written exit survey form. Some people find it easier to be frank on paper than in a face-to-face interview. If a written survey is conducted, limit the oral questions

to five and the written survey questions to about 10. [See the sample survey on the preceding page.]

### A new perspective

Keeping staff turnover low is important.

It requires being aware of the current state of the practice work environment, choosing appropriate new hires and providing them with proper training, talking to staff members and solving problems as they emerge. You should strive to provide superior leadership in your practice, keep communication lines open and support the entire staff. Periodically take time to examine the workplace from the employee's perspective, and continually seek to improve it. This will help you create and maintain a place where people want to work and stay! **FM**

### EXIT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**A**sk staff members who are leaving your practice questions like these to determine the causes of staff turnover and how you can prevent it:

- What can we do to make this position better for the next employee?
- What could we have done differently so that you might have wanted to stay with the practice?
- If you could define our practice philosophy in one sentence, what would you say?
- How did our management do at treating you and other employees as our first customers?
- Have we been fair and consistent in our dealings with employees?
- What can our physician(s) do to better express their loyalty to staff and to gain loyalty from staff?

### SPEEDBAR®



Because some people are more comfortable being frank on paper, it's also helpful to conduct exit surveys.



If an exit survey is conducted, limit the exit interview questions to five and the written questions to about 10.