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The most effective strategies  
won't cost you a dime.

# GOOD STAFF

## WAYS TO RETAIN

*Roger Shenkel, MD, and Cathy Gardner*

Good employees are hard to find, and even harder to replace. How can you keep good employees around when they could be making more money or working an easier schedule elsewhere? Not long ago, we sought to answer that question. Our office manager polled our employees to see what they liked about working in our practice and what kept them here. The most highly rated items weren't decent wages or perks. Instead, the most common responses fell into these categories:

- Positive, caring relationships: "We appreciate that our physicians care about us and our families. They recognize us on special days like work anniversaries and birthdays, and are supportive when we have family issues."

- Recognition of achievement: "The physicians express their appreciation when we do a good job or come up with a good idea."

- Pride in the organization: "Our doctors are very professional and well-respected in the community. We are proud to be a part of this organization."

- Opportunities for growth and advancement: "We are given the opportunity to increase our level of responsibility or change positions within the organization."

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tell your nurse and your  
receptionist what a good job  
they have done – and mean it.**

Based on our employees' input and over 50 years of combined experience managing a medical practice, we offer the following tips for retaining good staff. What they have in common is that they cost very little,



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While employees need decent wages and benefits, those are not the factors that will help you retain them.



Employees want a workplace they can be proud of, one that provides positive relationships, recognition, and opportunities for growth and advancement.



Go out of your way to talk to your employees, particularly those you may not see regularly.



To help your employees do well in their jobs, provide them with an accurate job description and regular feedback.

yet can make a good job a great one – one that employees will stick with even if other options arise.

**1. Talk to your employees.** I may go a week and hardly speak to my physician partners. They could care less, but with employees such behavior is a real mistake. Physicians should always speak to their employees. When you see them, address them by name. (Institute name tags, if you have to.) It's fairly easy to visit with your medical assistant or nurse, but go out of your way to say "hi" to your front-office employees and your business staff. Meet with new employees briefly and find out a little about them. In addition, make sure your office manager is readily available to talk to staff, particularly when they have an issue or new ideas.

### 2. Recognize good work.

When a day runs smoothly, tell your nurse and your receptionist what a good job they have done – and mean it. When collections are going well, let the billing staff know that you appreciate it. In a bigger office, consider awarding an Employee of the Month, nominated by peers

**By keeping staff informed, you communicate that you think they are a valuable part of the team.**

### FPM ARTICLES ON STAFFING

The following articles from the *Family Practice Management* archives can be accessed free online at <http://www.aafp.org/fpm>.

"Questions You Should Ask When Hiring." Cardinal P. June 2003:46-48.

"Five Steps to a Performance Evaluation System." Capko J. March 2003:43-48.

"Serving Up the Feedback Sandwich." Dohrenwend A. November/December 2002:43-46.

"Identifying Causes of Staff Turnover." Capko J. April 2001:29-33.

"Interviewing 101." Beach RA. January 2001:38-40.

"Job Satisfaction: Putting Theory Into Practice." Syptak JM, Marsland DW, Ulmer D. October 1999:26-30.

"Staff Retreats: Time for Reflection and Renewal." O'Connor JP. January 1998:56-62.

### KEY POINTS

- To retain good employees, you must offer them more than decent wages and benefits.
- Employees need to be recognized for a job well done and remembered on special occasions, such as a work anniversary.
- When employees show signs of readiness, entrust them with new tasks and greater responsibility to keep them challenged and engaged.

and announced to all employees. Any award will be greatly enhanced if a physician takes the time to deliver it face-to-face.

**3. Get personal.** Know when your employees have special events in their lives

– good or bad – and discuss it with them. We circulate a newsletter each Monday to keep all employees and physicians aware of important personal issues. For

example, we celebrate staff birthdays and anniversaries of employment, which is a big deal for our employees.

**4. Help them succeed.** To do well in their jobs, employees need an accurate job description and an annual review that lets them know how they are performing and what they can do to improve. They also need access to an employee handbook so they can understand the expectations of the organization. Provide employees with these tools, and as they show signs of readiness, be willing to entrust them with new tasks and greater responsibility.

**5. Keep them in the loop.** When good or bad things happen to patients outside the office, be certain to let staff know promptly. Don't drift past them in the office and let them find out some other way. By keeping staff informed, you communicate that you think they are a valuable part of the team and important to patients. In return, most employees will go the extra mile for you over and over again. **FPM**

*Editor's note:* To read about the theories behind staff motivation, turn to page 54.

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