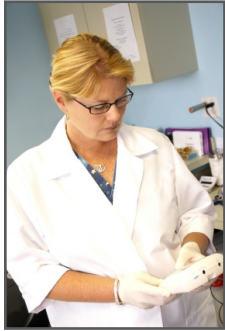




Dental Laboratory Technicians

By C. Rock

If you love to help people and you love technical and scientific work, a career as a dental lab technician may be the right choice for you. It's a career that combines both art and science in the service of a compelling human need: dental health.



What Are Dental Laboratory Technicians, and What Do They Do Every Day?

Dentists often find it necessary to perform a procedure that involves taking a mold of parts of a patient's gums, a patient's mouth, or a patient's whole set of teeth, or the dentist may take some other measurements in order to prepare for the creation of a dental device.

After the dentist or orthodontist prescribes a dental product or device to suit the patient's dental care needs along this line, he or she must then commission a specialist to carry out the prescription and create the product. This specialist is the dental lab technician.

Because of differing client needs, no dental laboratory technician has the same job as the next; they are as unique as the dentists, orthodontists, patients, and manufacturing companies that call on them. A dental laboratory technician is responsible for crafting a variety of products essential to many people's dental health, including partial dentures, full dentures, bridges, crowns, veneers, and orthodontic appliances. Dental lab techs use materials such as porcelain, composite, steel, alloy, wax, and plastic.

These days, as technology continually improves, dental laboratory technicians have been granted the exciting challenge of needing to constantly polish their tech skills and learn the newest techniques. For example, today dentists and orthodontists may use digital imaging to craft a model of a patient's teeth rather than using a clunky, old-fashioned mold.

It's important to lab techs and to the field of dental care in general to create treatments that are both functional and attractive. Dental lab techs will spend a bit of time paying careful attention to the physical appearance of their products using specialized instruments intended to foster a high level of precision in crafting. Dental lab techs will often see a project through from start to finish, examining the original plan, the design and creation of the product, and the final result.

In its yearly *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) notes that dental lab technicians often specialize in a given field within their industry, though it is also possible for a dental lab tech to be trained in all fields. Areas of specialization center on different products that dental technicians make and include ceramics, complete dentures, partial dentures, crowns, bridges, and orthodontic appliances. Dental lab technicians can even take on different titles according to their specializations. The BLS lists "dental ceramists" as an example.

What Are the Requirements to Become a Dental Laboratory Technician?

Dental laboratory technicians are not required to attend a specific course of training after high school and can pursue their interest in dental laboratory technology in a few different ways. Those interested in dental laboratory technician work do not necessarily need to attend a dental school. The American Dental Association (ADA) suggests that those interested in this particular dental care profession should choose a two-year program that they can attend at a technical college, vocational college, community college, or four-year university. The interested applicant needs only a high school diploma to enter into a program to study dental technology and from there can either attend a two-year or four-year program. In addition, quite a few dental laboratory technicians will receive training on the job by working with skilled and experienced fellow lab techs.

The ADA website states that there are around 24 accredited dental technology programs located across the country. The Commission on Dental Accreditation for the American Dental Association is solely responsible for assigning accreditation to these programs. A dental technician who receives certification by passing an exam proctored by an accredited program will become a certified dental technician or CDT. These certifications are awarded by the National Board for Certification in Dental Laboratory Technology.

How Are Dental Laboratory Technicians Compensated?

The BLS reports that in May 2006 the median hourly earnings of wage and salary dental laboratory technicians were \$15.67.



Dental Career Profile

On the whole, dental laboratory technicians earned from \$9.16 an hour (the lowest reported wage) to \$26.13 an hour (the highest reported wage). Two industries employ dental lab technology the most, according to the BLS: medical equipment and supplies manufacturing and offices of dentists. Median earnings for jobs in these areas were \$15.09 and \$17.74, respectively. In addition, the BLS reports that jobs in dental lab tech should be relatively easy to attain since there is not a lot of competition for these jobs.

Dental lab technicians can increase their earning potential by teaching classes in dental lab technology or by opening up their own dental technology businesses.

Are There Other Advantages of Working for a Dental Laboratory?

The ADA cites several reasons to pursue a career in dental lab technology, among them flexibility, creativity, security, and personal fulfillment. Dental laboratory technicians

can work in a variety of different environments ranging from those with a mom-and-pop feel to those with a more corporate feel. They often work without heavy supervision. In addition, their work has a marked creative element and is bolstered by the unending need for dental products. At the end of the day, dental techs know that they are performing work that will help others maintain their health, well-being, looks, and confidence.

Sources: American Dental Association website, July 18, 2008, www.ada.org; Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008-09 Edition*, July 18, 2008, www.bls.gov/oco

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