



Teams in the Dental Office: The Role of a Dental Office Manager

Managing any business is a trained profession; the job of a manager is to make sure that the routine administrative tasks get taken care of so that the specialists can do their job, which generates revenue. One long-time manager likened it to being the person who follows the parade with the push broom, sweeping up the sawdust, confetti, and elephant droppings.

Most dental practices know full well the value of a good dental manager, and dental manager jobs are ones that are difficult to recruit for; they usually have a high retention-rate, especially in local or small dental practices. The types of education needed for [dental office jobs](#) usually build on the same set of skills needed for [dental technician jobs](#); many dental [office managers](#) started their careers as dental hygienists or dental assistants.

This type of position, like that of a dental hygienist, involves a fair amount of course work in math, science, and general medical and dental practices, along with a serious course load in business administration skills. This type of position requires enough interpersonal skills to handle a patient and enough administrative skills to handle both filing medical records and handling the vagaries of insurance paperwork.

Among the science and technical skills you will be expected to have fluency in are dental and general anatomy, basic radiology procedures, and dental health and safety requirements. You will be expected to be able to generate and read X-ray films, to inform the dentist before he or she sees a patient, and to file with proof of treatment for insurance paperwork.

For the rest of your duties, you will be expected to manage patient records, accounts receivable, bill payment necessary to keep the facility up and running, and insurance paperwork. (Indeed, in larger [dental practices](#), the number of insurance specialists grows rapidly; it becomes more cost-effective to hire someone specifically to deal with insurance and related certification paperwork than to have those tasks split among the extra work done by technical staffers.)

Dentistry is a field that grows at roughly the same pace as the general population does; more and more people mean a growing market for dental services, and as dental practices take on more patients, the needs of a dedicated dental manager grow as well. This type of position, with a bachelor's

degree supporting it, pays anywhere from \$35,000 per year at the low end, to upwards of \$80,000 per year at the high end, with some regional variation in pay; the pay is higher in the Midwest and on the East Coast than in the South.

Some of the more important tasks of a [dental office manager](#) are scheduling appointments, knowing which staff members are where and handling which patients, and trying to keep the traffic flow of patients through the office as smoothly and as quickly as possible. Some days this is easy: the patients come through the office, nobody's appointment ever runs long, and the paperwork is handled in a timely fashion. Most days are less than the ideal of dental management perfection: every patient shows up late, most fail to fill out their paperwork adequately (in large part because the insurance-company mandated forms are less than clear on how they should be filled out), and appointments run long, which has a domino effect on following appointments and visits.

Because of these frailties of human nature, most dental office managers are fighting a desperate rearguard action against utter chaos; their job is to make sure the chaos does not interfere with the work schedules of the [dental practitioners](#) and hygienists.

Furthermore, as the dental office manager, you are usually the human face of the dental practice you work for: the person who answers the phone (or gets referred telephone calls for scheduling), the person who has to answer patients' questions on bills or on how to handle specific at-home treatments (like packing gauze into the socket of an extracted wisdom tooth), while also being the human interface into the insurance-claim processing cycle.

The fortunate news for people with the skill set for dental office managers is that the field is growing and there is a strong demand for people who are medically knowledgeable about the ins and outs of the field of dentistry with all its technical details. It is also a position that is appreciated by



Dental Career Feature

your co-workers, most of whom are all too glad to leave the job of managing which patients go to which rooms and to focus on the myriad details of their own jobs.

As with all managerial positions, your job is predicated on being able to help others do their job with the minimum of disruption. It is not too far of a stretch to think of yourself as

the coach on the dental practice team, the person who makes sure that everything happens while freeing people up to do their own jobs. This takes knowledge of both the technical aspects of dentistry and of time-management practices and business-school acumen. It is a challenging career with an impressive mix of scientific, medical, business, and interpersonal skills sure to keep you on your toes.

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