



A Generational APPROACH

Lab Management IN A DIGITAL WORLD

MANY DENTAL LABORATORIES HAVE BEEN A SECOND AND THIRD, SOMETIMES EVEN A FOURTH-GENERATION BUSINESS. THESE LEGACY LABS ARE COMMONPLACE AND ARE KNOWN FOR THE SAME LAST NAMES, JUST DIFFERENT FACES AS THE YOUNGER GENERATION ADVANCES. AS THE INDUSTRY AS A WHOLE IS CHANGING SO QUICKLY, THERE IS VALUE IN TAKING A STEP BACK AND ASKING HOW THE DIFFERENT GENERATIONS ARE APPROACHING THE ISSUES AND CHALLENGES WITHIN THE LAB. WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES? WHAT CHANGES ARE IMPLEMENTED? WHAT DOES EACH GENERATION CONSIDER VALUABLE?

One would typically conclude that there would be a vast difference in approach between those raised using a rotary phone versus the smart phone. Yet back in 2015 the JDT interviewed certified dental technicians from four different generations to gain insight on why they believed certification was important and how they perceived the current state of the industry. While each generation, from Traditionalists through Millennials, demonstrated unique motivations and expectations, the end result was the same. All wanted to achieve personal career satisfaction and advance the industry as a whole. When it comes to lab management in today's digital world, it also appears that the generational gap is slimming as the mutual end goals fuse. When Jerry Ragle, CDT, of Ragle Dental Laboratory, Inc., CDL, Champaign, Ill., was approached about this article he took the idea to his children Nick and Natalie who also work in the lab. His son's response, "I don't agree with the differences between first generation and second generation of dental lab ownership being oversimplified to generational differences." So does generation really make any difference in today's digital world?

DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS

Wayne Payne, Master Ceramist and president of Payne Dental Lab, Inc., located in San Clemente, Ca., has been in the industry for forty years and has seen a lot of changes. Payne's communication style is to have very close and constant communication with his clients. He works in conjunction with the dentist to discuss the patient's needs and how to best reach ideal outcomes together. He built the lab's reputation and success on fixing the seemingly unfixable. He has realized, however, that with the digital age there is little room for error on what the doctor sends. Payne's son Tyler, who has been in the business since 2001, doesn't hesitate if they can't see the margin or the bite is off to return and ask for another bite.

Tyler Payne also emphasizes that he is much more prone to check out opportunities for outsourcing. He said, "Finding new help has been really tough. I would rather focus on the things we are good at rather than spin wheels on other things. We outsource to Argen and let them do what they are good at. It's different because my dad is really good at anything — he can make anything fly. I on the other hand am always trying to outsource to get back that same quality level."

W. Payne agrees that finding well-seasoned technicians is almost an impossibility and predicts a whole new evolution coming when it comes to partnering and outsourcing. "In the digital world what you design is what you are going to get back," said W. Payne. "If you focus on design work then you get a quality product in return. If you send garbage you get back garbage. Being able to just focus on design and letting Argen do the milling gives us the time and ability to get that nicer product and alleviates stress on the quality employees we do have. If the unit breaks, they consume the energy and cost. This hybrid approach is a different way of thinking for me as an older generation, but it has to be the way of the future."

Elizabeth Curran, CDT, DT, owner of Ahwatukee Dental Lab, DAMAS in Mesa, Ariz., works with her son-in-law, Heath, and admits that she is more emotionally attached to the creative process.

Curran said, "My education was front-loaded and formal and this created a narrowly focused, slow to act, deliberate management style. I feel that

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the younger generation is more service-focused and expects knowledge on demand as needed across devices and sophisticated technologies. Their management style is more fluid, risk-taking and cutting edge. In the reverse, my education has provided me a seamless link between my knowledge and that of the dentists and allows me to predict possible production issues and front load solutions whereas the younger generation can at times lack a well-rounded education and depth of experience and only acquires knowledge at the point of issue."

She also believes that there isn't an adequate pool of technicians. She worries about a technician's ability and skill to create a consistent product that meets her standard and will work overtime. In contrast the younger generation might envision the production expansion solution as another CAD/CAM tooth style catalogue and a faster mill and scanner with overnight unattended product capacity.

Matthew Chapman of Chapman Dental Lab, Inc. in Tacoma, Wash., has been working for the past 19 years alongside his father who owns the lab. While he currently manages the day-to-day operations of the business in the past he has worked in almost every aspect of the lab and considers his approach different than his father's.

"I think my dad's approach to management is hands-off; do your work that you've been paid for and leave," said Chapman. "I've been more involved in the lab and the direction that it's taken these past few years."

Around ten years ago he realized that his lab was more a meat and potatoes type providing a lot of PFMs, high noble, gold work and single units. When gold prices started skyrocketing and there was the beryllium scare, it was scary and he knew they needed to incorporate digital. He took a strategic and well-researched segmental approach before purchasing a 3Shape scanner. Every step after that between frameworks, milling, waxing and design was taken incrementally and included outsourcing and partnering with another laboratory until they could afford to bring it in-house.

MERGED VISION

Even while recognizing the different generational approaches, in the end the differences appear to be slim in comparison to the necessitated approach mandated by the entry of labs into the digital world. Each generation keeps coming back to digital — perhaps it is the ultimate unifying element to yesterday's management differences.

"The lab industry has changed so dramatically within the past five years and if you look back ten years it's almost unbelievable," said W. Payne. "You can't be stuck in one place with management style. The younger and older generations have had to merge into a 50/50 relationship in order to meet the new demands of the digital dental age."

Sometimes a blend of styles does work best within the digital world. So how does the multi-generation lab mutually reach that end game?

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