

# The War for TALENT



If it brings any comfort to the despairing laboratory owner; you are not alone in the battle to find and retain good technicians. Many consider the staffing challenge to be one of the biggest facing the industry in the years ahead. Dental laboratory technology educational programs are closing their doors, baby boomers are retiring and the entry-level pay isn't exactly intriguing the Millennial generation. While it might be easy to assume that this is yet another sign of the slowly dying profession, in fact it's a problem for industries across the board. The American Society for Association Executives Foundation recently released research that identified 41 drivers of change that capture a range of trends related to associations, but several have relevance to the current workforce challenges and serve as indicators of what to expect in the future as the landscape evolves.

AS THE AMOUNT OF AVAILABLE DATA CONTINUES TO EXPAND, WORKER REPUTATION SYSTEMS WILL PLAY MORE OF A ROLE IN LANDING THE JOB.

One of the drivers of change they identified was Automating Work. With the increase in machine learning and innovative robotics, additional areas of work have the potential to be automated. The impact could be substantial and will affect workers on every level including the desired skill set and profile when hiring.

Second was Bifurcated Workforce. They identified two classes of workers; mission-critical players who move the organization forward and foot-soldiers who do the basic work and are relatively disposable, with lower prestige and pay. If this mindset exists in the lab, the entry-level technician will not cultivate loyalty and will easily move on.

Another driver that applies was Cartel Capitalism. Mergers and acquisitions have rippled into fewer companies having a more dominant presence in the industry which can reduce competitiveness. These larger organizations can also attract the best

talent which captures a disproportionate share of productivity growth.

When it comes to the hiring process, it was interesting to consider Reputation by the Numbers. As the amount of available data continues to expand, worker reputation systems will play more of a role in landing the job. It will be more about the individual's algorithmic match to the HR need.

Last was Higher Education 3.0. As noted previously, DLT education programs are few and far between. This research pointed out that traditional educational models are under tremendous pressure as changes in work, technology, and student expectations demand new curricula and new modes of instruction. A question to ask, is this profession evolving their educational offerings to meet the new student need?

While these are all thought-provoking concepts as to how the workforce has developed to this point and an anticipatory prediction of how change will

continue to be driven forward, it doesn't present a solution. There is no solution; or at least an immediate one. The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) has, however, created a guide for building a workforce-ready talent pipeline entitled, *Overcoming the Manufacturing Skills Gap*. One of the opening statements is, "if you are experiencing a manufacturing skills gap in your pool of potential mid-skilled and entry-level workers, you are not alone." While dental technology may not fall in line with their targeted manufacturing industries, the recommendations on how to solve the dilemma are widely applicable. NAM clearly lays out the tremendous effort required though in order to receive the payoff. "Solving' the manufacturing skills gap cannot be handed off to government or educational institutions. Neither can you launch a solution and put it on automatic pilot. Creating a sustainable manufacturing workforce development program requires systemic change and ongoing commitment from the manufacturing community to ensure the industry's needs are met."

## 1. ASSESS AND CONNECT

Before aligning with others, understand and determine your own company's skills gap and hiring needs. Inventory already available skill-building and training resources within the community and then connect with other stakeholders to build relationships.

## 2. ALIGN/COLLABORATE

Joining forces creates a louder voice to spur change. Alliances should determine common goals for competencies and skills needed and create potential solutions such as training programs, etc. before creating a call to action for the community.

## 3. ENGAGE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, OTHER TRAINING PROVIDERS

Once a solution is identified, engage to find the right training provider and then launch a recruitment plan for the first class of students for the new training approach.

## 4. CREATE A SYSTEM TO BUILD AND SUSTAIN A TALENT PIPELINE

The most important element to long-term success is to build interest in the career and develop future employees. NAM recommends engaging with

secondary schools to promote the industry as a career choice, clear misperceptions and offer scholarships.

The Foundation for Dental Laboratory Technology has taken these concepts and has been working hard to advance this momentum forward within the profession. In order to achieve the goal of creating an engaged and readily available workforce, it will take more than just the Foundation. Labs of all sizes struggle with the issue and don't know where to begin to initiate change. Altering the workforce landscape first begins at home by identifying what changes need to take place at the lab to make hiring and maintaining an easier process.

**Daxton Grubb, president of R-Dent Laboratory located in Bartlett, Tenn.**, has experienced significant growth over the past ten years and used to rely heavily on finding and hiring experienced technicians. In 2015 he decided to move away from this hiring practice because of the lack of retention.

"We spent more time and money 're-training' experienced techs to our system and most ended up not being able to make the transition and holding onto 'old ways' still," said Grubb. "Now we use ZipRecruiter for finding the right people and we train them to where we need. I wish I had stopped hiring experienced technicians many years sooner."

Wiand Dental Laboratory based out of Scottsdale, Ariz., shares similar struggles with finding seasoned talent that fits into their culture. They do at times recruit locally using Craig's list or indeed.com but focus primarily on internal promotions. Word-of-mouth referrals from current employees have engendered success along with the grooming, training and advancement from within. They typically hire for personality and skill versus experience and then train. The next question is, if they invest the time to train employees, how do they retain?

"We retain talented employees because of the owner's generosity with salary, benefits and recognition programs," said Betsy Finder, Wiand HR Director. "It's very unusual for high-level techs to want to leave."

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**Beth Wiand, co-owner and Director of Marketing and Sales,** said, “Another retention element is that we always empower employees so they grow and feel challenged. They know we value them and their input. Everyone knows we need to work well together to achieve our standards. New hires need to be able to adapt to our culture. We take into consideration how a potential new hire will fit within the team.”

During the hiring process Wiand evaluates the potential employee’s personality using the DISC profile along with a dexterity test that a lot of dental schools utilize. Profiles are compared to the ‘superstar performers’ in the laboratory. If all falls in line, the candidate moves forward to a personal interview and a ‘working’ interview with the other technicians.

Technicians are encouraged to cross-train each other to fill the gap and advance the company toward a common goal.

“With less and less schools, it has become the lab’s responsibility to utilize staff to alleviate the burden as a team” said Wiand. “The hard part is that most technicians don’t initially set out for this career so they don’t have the same buy in. We have had some success with recruiting from art schools and cultivating that artistic ability into a sustainable profession. I will say that hiring an HR director

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was one of the best things we ever did as owners as it took a lot off of our plate. It is an immense amount of work to continually fill the funnel with potential hires and be deliberate about bringing good people in on a consistent basis. I highly recommend having a dedicated resource just for that, even if only part-time.”

While these labs have started to make a difference in their hiring success, global hiring still remains a challenge. Grubb points out that not only do entry-level candidates balk at a low pay scale but now that the industry is evolving into a more ‘gamer-type’ skill set for CAD/CAM, it puts dental technology firmly in competition with many other technology industries. His best recommendation is to first, find good people, and second, find the right place for them.

There are many areas of concern and frustration when it comes to the hiring and retention of good employees, but all is not lost. If laboratories are able to collaborate with each other along with educational/training programs, stakeholders, and the community to promote dental technology as a career choice the possibilities are promising. You may feel alone fighting the daily human resource battles, but the war for talent calls for a unified stance. **JDT**

## ➔ CHECK IT OUT!

Episode three and four of the podcast **Voices from the Bench** hosted by Elvis Dahl and Barbara Warner Wojdan, CDT, AAACD, focuses on recruitment and retention of dental laboratory technicians.

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