



The Interdependent Relationship Between **Labs** and **Dentists**

Research conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford Research Center concludes that 85 percent of job success comes from having well-developed soft and people skills and 15 percent of job success comes from technical skills and knowledge. Even in an ever-increasing automated business climate, it still boils down to relationships. In fact, today's job market favors those who are team players. David Deming, a professor of education and economics at the Harvard

Graduate School of Education, recently released research that showed that jobs requiring high levels of social interaction are growing. Workers who combine social and technical skills fare best in the modern economy, as measured by a 7.2 percentage point increase in available jobs and a 26 percent wage increase between 1980 and 2012. Deming's conclusion is that people can still thrive in an area where computers come up short: interacting with other people.¹ There are those who decry that the dental laboratory industry is being degraded by technology and automation.

Perhaps even go so far as to say that soon there will be nothing left of the industry. Clearly there are challenges to overcome with the aging of the dental technician workforce, influx of technology and the evolving laboratory business model. That doesn't mean though, that the game is over. Dentists will always be there to help patients, and the dental laboratory will be there to help the dentist. It is a very connected and interdependent relationship that shouldn't fade in the face of automation, but rather flourish. Hear from both sides on how to create that relationship.



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Todd A. Fridrich, CDT, FNBC, is the General Manager of Thommen Medical, North America. He is Vice President of the American Prosthodontic Society and has served on the editorial review board of The Journal of Prosthodontics and the Journal of Dental Technology. Mr. Fridrich is a frequent presenter and has international experience incorporating over 30 years of clinical/technical/implant proficiencies. Comfortable in either a lab coat or sport coat, Todd brings a unique perspective to patient treatment and team oriented communication.

What do you think is the most important element to creating a harmonious relationship between the lab and the dentist?

Trust.

I realize that my response may sound flippant but I am being sincere. Especially since the technician makes the final determination on whether an impression is accepted or rejected. Technicians by nature are “Can-Do” people. We like challenges and are reluctant to refuse work even when it doesn’t meet our quality standards. At some point every tech has done one of those “Do the best you can” cases. When these occur, we need the ability to speak honestly with the entire restorative team, which sometimes leads all the way back to the surgeon if implants are involved. In the end, it’s all about the quality of the treatment outcome. Without trust and the ability to speak openly, we live in fear of offending our team. Since the “team” is also our “customer” we need the ability to break the golden rule of sales when necessary. “Do the best you can” must remain the exception and not the rule.

What do you think some dental technicians aren’t doing or understanding to create this connection?

I believe in a simple concept that helps bridge this divide. “Technicians should be students of teeth and dentists should be students of crowns.”

Early in my career I used to look forward to glazing and polishing crowns, partly because it meant that I was nearing the end of my day. After a soak in the ultrasonic, I carefully placed my shiny jewels in

foam lined boxes for delivery. At the time, I thought of them as jewelry but I didn’t realize that my view from the bench was so myopic.

My career followed a path from standalone labs to in-house technician, then into a university environment. The clinical venues opened a broad opportunity for chairside experience. I will never forget those patients who cried at the end of treatment. Some tears from happiness and some from unmet expectations. Those events and emotions changed my vision of purpose. Even now as I work from the manufacturer’s side, I never lose sight of the fact that at the end of our journey, there is a person in treatment and a person ultimately responsible for their care. I strongly believe that technicians need to be immersed in the clinic before they retreat to the insulated environment of the lab. As for myself, the clinical environment allowed me to engage my curiosity in teeth and tissue. I studied root form and emergence profile, all of which influenced the contour of my restorations especially with implants. At the same time that I was saving jars of extracted teeth, I pushed my clinicians to absorb the technical challenges of duplicating Mother Nature with manmade materials.

What simple steps can be taken to build the clinical/technical relationship?

You have to look beyond the myopic view from the bench. Get involved with societies whose memberships include more than just fellow technicians. Seek out societies that treat technicians and clinicians as equals. Look for prosthodontic organizations that offer full membership with voting

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rights. I was simply not comfortable with the segregation of an affiliate member title. I joined the American Prosthodontic Society 22 years ago and I am honored to be serving as president this year. If you want respect, earn it. Get involved and be willing to serve. Your efforts will build lifelong professional relationships based on friendship and trust. Look, a day of hands-on training at a technical meeting is awesome, but it is not enough to change your professional trajectory. Better, cheaper, faster is ultimately a race to the bottom. If you go there you will have plenty of company. If you want to build lasting professional relationships, pursue social networking with a handshake, not social media through a handset.

How do you think it's different today than what it used to be in the past?

I remember a day when the technician was only recognized when they missed the shade or the case was late.

To be honest, technology is now the strategic driver in dentistry, but relationships remain a key component of business and growth. Implants are a prime example of how the sum of the parts makes a greater whole.

Implants have provided a prominent platform for technicians to demonstrate their proficiencies within the restorative team. From treatment planning to delivery, the technician's contribution is no longer hidden or taken for granted. Even though our primary interest remains patient treatment, we must also be mindful of the business to ensure that we are compensated appropriately for our efforts.

Even though we have made continuous progress we still have hurdles to jump. It is frustrating to attend a clinical presentation and observe that the efforts of the technician are somehow absorbed into the clinician's accomplishment of "dentistry." Or maybe it's a journal article in which the technician's contribution

does not merit a citation. I wonder what happens to the artistic property rights of the technician when "team oriented dentistry" simply becomes the "dentistry" of a clinician? From a technician's viewpoint, the artistic rights of the preparations belong to the clinician while the artistic rights of the restorations belong to the technician. It's sort of like buying a Picasso; you can buy it and own it but that does not mean you painted it.

How would you describe the "perfect" relationship?

I have been fortunate in my career to have worked with colleagues that not only shared credit for our collaborations, but also helped propel me to reach higher professional achievements. That is "the perfect relationship." Peers and colleagues, working together as a team for a common goal. Never losing sight that at the end of this journey a patient might just shed a tear. One way or another...

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What do you think is the most important element to creating a harmonious relationship between the lab and the dentist?

I think the greatest ingredient to success is to have a relationship built upon the investment of time and energy of really getting to know one another. A challenge I've seen in the lab/dentist space is that a dentist will get the name of a good lab, or ask another dentist what lab they are using based on photos, and make the assumption they can send to that lab and get the same result. In some essence that's true because it's a reflection of the gifts of the ceramist but a great final product is also an expression of the relationship between the dentist and lab; how they work with another, an unspoken understanding of needs, and proven communication patterns. That piece of the puzzle takes effort as both the dentist and ceramist need to stay on the front end to invest into that relationship. As with any relationship, you need to have realistic expectations and put in effort in the beginning. It's critical to spend time together and discuss each other's needs and what success looks like. Once that's established the relationship becomes easier as you will know and understand what the other wants. Every case is an opportunity for further learning and growth. When I get a case back, I am progressing our relationship when I pick up the phone and say this was great, keep doing this, but can you please do this another way, and vice versa. Know each other.

What do you think some dental technicians aren't doing or understanding to create this connection?

A barrier to creating a harmonious relationship is that time is in short supply for both the dentist and lab. The lab has a lot of clients the same as I have a lot of patients. What's the most important and also the most elusive is determining how to connect. I prefer to talk as I find it hard to develop a relationship in an email or text; but technology has increased communication options. I think the other barrier is hesitancy on the part of the dentist to ask the technician questions and also the technician feeling uncomfortable questioning the dentist and judging the quality of the work. There are ways to have this conversation in a non-judgmental way.

What simple steps can be taken to build the clinical/technical relationship?

At my practice, I see my lab and specialist as a member of the interdisciplinary team. In the beginning we created expectations and communication preferences. How are we going to communicate and what is the time frame? Can I reasonably expect the lab to come to the phone if I have a patient in the chair and can they expect to get me on the phone? Set reasonable parameters. This must be done on the front end. When there is a case and there's pressure and time crunch, emotions get involved and communication

Business pressures on both sides of the fence are different, not to mention the constant new technology."





struggles get magnified. I live by the formula of Expectations - Reality = Conflict. Both parties have expectations and when those aren't matched by reality that results in conflict. Yet if expectations are clearly defined and communicated on the front end we will limit the time reality doesn't match that. Expectations can at times live in our own heads. It's hard to live up to expectations if you don't know what they are. I need to know what my specialist needs from me to in order to do their best work.

How do you think it's different today than what it used to be in the past?

Things are different now simply because the relationship piece was inherent years ago. Back then, dental practices were smaller with a much higher percentage of solo practitioners and the lab industry was the same. My father was a ceramist and owned a small dental lab and he personally knew every single client. Now, more and more labs are bigger with multiple waxers and ceramists and my contact might not be the person doing my work. I might not always have the same person doing my wax-

ups and I think this poses challenges on both ends. Dentists are seeking turnkey relationships, to fill out a form and get back what they want, but at the same time labs have gotten busier and have to figure out systems for higher capacity. Business pressures on both sides of the fence are different, not to mention the constant new technology. I don't think most dentists really understand the current processes involved in fabrication because the materials and technology are changing so rapidly. That's a huge challenge. If dentists don't understand the steps the lab is taking to fabricate a restoration they can't problem-solve and walk backwards to find out what's going on.

How would you describe the "perfect" relationship?

The perfect relationship is a partnership. There is a vast amount that I can learn from my ceramist that will make me a better dentist and will give me the opportunity to offer a better result for my patient. In return, a ceramist can learn a lot from me that will allow them to do better work and have a better

understanding of the patient. Sometimes the lab side and patient care side is more likely to work in parallel when it should be collaboratively.

When I started working with my lab I made the worst first case mistake; I sent a single central. Through that I experienced their willingness and ability to work with me and figure out a successful solution even given the limited familiarity. I knew if we could do it on that case we could do it on anything.

It's challenging to develop a relationship in this market. If I want to distinguish myself, it isn't going to be about having a better commodity. Patients don't understand or value that. But having a relationship with a patient where they know that their best interest is my top concern, and I will do everything I can to take care of them, is what differentiates me. I believe those same things are true from the lab to the dentist. Don't be a commodity. Be different and be a partner and enable your clients to be a better dentist and pass it forward to their patients. **JDT**

- (1) <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/10/social-skills-increasingly-valuable-to-employers-harvard-economist-finds/>