By Cynthia Matossian, MD, FACS

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Staff retention requires staff help

Mentor programs assist with new employee training.

In October 2009, 13 months after Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy, this country's unemployment rate was 10%. Were you worried about employee retention in your practice? Probably not — if someone had a job, that someone did what was necessary to keep the job.

By last month, that rate had dropped to 4.9%. Has retention become an issue in your practice? A *MarketWatch* article from January reported that ophthalmic lab techs had the fifth lowest unemployment rates out of the top-12 professions. Physician assistants came in second.

I feel confident that the employees in our three practices are relatively satisfied with their positions.

The reason? We make sure new employees learn their job well, in a supportive environment, and feel valued.

That assurance comes in two ways: All new employees are assigned a mentor, who stays attached to the new employee's hip for several months. And we pay the mentors for their additional training responsibilities. This makes it all happen as seamlessly as possible.

FIGURING IT OUT

In the beginning, I had two employees. Their evaluations were informal and done by me.

While we were smaller, employees found time to adopt a newbie. But as we got bigger, existing staff had more responsibilities, so new hires felt lost. Without a designated person to turn to, new employees were leaving within a few weeks of their start date.

We realized, after much introspection, that the employees were not developing a connection to the practice or staff.

So I started researching employee retention tactics. We tried peer evaluations, but this method did not work for us. This system was supposed to help an employee, who would hear constructive criticism from their peers. But it was a disaster. We tried it for one year and abandoned it. In looking back, staff used the peer evaluation time to complain about colleagues and spread rumors.

SKIN IN THE GAME

Two years ago, after doing more research, we began a new program with a few embellishments of our own.

When an employee starts, he or she is assigned a mentor for the duration of the new employee's 90-day introductory period. That mentor is an experienced colleague in the same department. If that employee is still with the practice at six months, the mentor gets part of the cash bonus; at 12 months, the rest of the bonus. This way mentors have skin in the game.

A new employee meets with his or her supervisor at three months, after the supervisor gets feedback from the mentor. If the new employee gets a thumb's up, the employee is permanently hired. If the new employee is still struggling, we extend the introductory period for one more 90-day period.

If that person is still struggling at that point, we cut the cord. We extended the initial introductory period because some people learn slowly and shine later. There is also an annual employee evaluation, including self-evaluation, preceded by a mandatory self-evaluation that focuses on future goals and training. We have little voluntary staff turnover now that we have implemented the mentor program.

As for how we choose our mentors, they express an interest, and we evaluate how they do. Some people give an instruction once and expect the mentee to get it. They aren't invited back. Not everybody can be an effective teacher. OM