

How I nearly lost my \$1.2M Practice.
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I've been an optometrist for 40 years. My office has grown to 2 full time docs and a staff of 5. On a sunny Thursday in August 2016, I had progressively worsening side pain, but kept working until 6pm. The pain was severe enough that I went to the ER and told them I thought it was my appendix. By 11PM radiology studies confirmed that my appendix had ruptured and when the surgeon saw the results (hurrah for telemedicine) he said to "put him down, get a team in, and he was on his way". After emergency surgery at midnight I was transferred into the hospital for recovery. I missed that fully booked Friday, but was released at 5pm, less than 24 hours from entering ER. That in itself was a surprise as the surgeon reported to me as he let me go home that I could have died from the "ruptured gangrene appendix", required multiple surgeries removing intestine and tissues, or could have been 6 months or more in recovery before perhaps returning to work on a limited basis. That prompted me to ask when I could go back to work. He replied, "When you feel strong enough." Knowing I had the usual fully booked schedule Monday, I took the weekend off. But THAT wasn't what nearly wiped out my \$1.2M practice...

In the next week back to work, 4 of my 5 staff members gave notice they would be gone in less than 4 weeks. The front desk/ insurance handler was going to have a baby and take 3 months off. I've had enough staff members over the years tell me this and never return, to expect to see her back. The optician was moving cross-country after wrapping up a divorce. The pretester got a non-optical job 100 miles away in a larger city. The other pretester was headed to first year Optometry school (with my assistance, mentoring, and blessing). The only remaining staff member had been with me 8 years and ran front desk, did some insurance work, and had mild cross-training in optical to assist as needed.

Staffing has always been an issue. Management advisors and AOA recommend 4 staff members per Optometrist. My staff had been at a "recommended level of 8" in 2012 but I'd been losing 1 staff member per year for various reasons not in my control. New staff are hard to come by, but to lose 4 of 5 trained paras all at once was devastating. Experienced paraoptometrics don't exist and training someone from scratch is a full time job by itself, hence HR personnel. Due to the overhead needed every month and the number of staff required to generate that figure it looked like I would be closed before the end of the year.

I've always paid for staff to attend education, held weekly staff/ education meetings, conducted bi-annual office retreats, and took staff to state and regional conferences. I called an ABO optician who had worked for me 35 years, but had been out for a year recovering from a severe motorcycle accident. I told her if she was planning on coming back it was now or never. She said she'd do whatever it took, as long as she could physically. I also contacted another fully trained ABO/certified pretester/ front desk/ insurance person who had been with me 20 years, but left 4 years prior after going thru a divorce. We came to terms we both could accept and

she also returned. With this core of 3, within the next 2 weeks, I found a new person to begin training in pretest/ front desk and was back to 4 staff. So in the space of only 5 weeks I had lost 4 staff and recovered 3. We managed to get thru the end of the year with maximum effort and lots of prayer. The other member of staff did indeed return from maternity leave after the beginning of the year, and I had narrowly escaped my 40 years of work evaporate before my eyes.

Was I just 'unlucky', or perhaps 'lucky'? NO. What if I told you that YOU have the same risk of this happening to you? Further, what if I told you that YOU have the same opportunity I had in this scenerio.

In 2011 paraoptometrics were incorporated into the AOA as a section. As part of AOA membership Optometrists have the FREE benefit of registering all their para employees. Once registered paras have access to 3 levels of 13 "basic skills" online courses. There are also free online webinars and articles on many topics in eyecare. As staff gain more knowledge and experience there are 3 levels of certification available (CPO, CPOA, CPOT) and added in the last few years a 'Coding and Billing' certification. Qualifications of each level are assessable at AOA.org under "Para/ Staffing" tab. Further, there is a complete breakdown of the knowledge needed for each staffing position in a FREE downloadable "Career Ladder". Staff areas covered are: Front desk, Optician, Pre-tester, CL tech, Staff Manager, & Coding & Billing.

The career ladder gives ODs a guide in creating job descriptions to assist in hiring the right person for the job. It assists the OD in cross-training staff members. It allows the OD to establish a guide for annual reviews and future goals for employees to allow them to become more valuable and increase both their and your income. The career ladder also directs ODs and paras to available resources AOA has to educate and accomplish the certifications at AOA Marketplace.

I wasn't unlucky, or lucky. We live in a world that is constantly in motion and today's employees are far more mobile than previously. Staffing isn't something that happens once, nor by itself. It is an ongoing process that is vital to our personal and professional survival. We may be the "Doctor in the house" but our paraoptometrics are the lifeblood and are fundamental to our practice thriving. Registering, training, and certifying your Paraoptometric staff are critical to our survival. Had I not invested in staff over many years, I wouldn't have made it through this challenge. Congratulations if you already do this. If you don't, START NOW. It's free, it will make your office more professional and profitable, motivate your staff, and protect your investment in your practice.