



HOW TO COPE WITH CAPACITY CRUNCH

Four ways to extend your practice's reach and increase procedural volume with your existing team.

BY TROY COLE



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Good help is hard to find these days. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the field of ophthalmology in many ways, including by causing a resurgence in refractive surgery

volume at many practices. Other changes are less welcome and more widespread, such as what some refer to as the *great resignation*. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 42 million US workers left their jobs in 2021.¹ Some left for new jobs, but others exited the workforce altogether (Figure).

Many employers, including ophthalmology practices, are looking to hire employees. Several practices I know of have full-time recruiters on staff but still struggle to add good people to their teams. The capacity crunch is real, and no one knows how long it will last.

While the hunt for recruits continues, your practice can use four tactics to extend the reach of your current team.

	MAJOR REASON	MINOR REASON	NET
Pay was too low	37	26	63
No opportunities for advancement	33	30	63
Felt disrespected at work	35	21	57
Because of child care issues*	24	24	48
Not enough flexibility to choose when to put in hours	24	21	45
Benefits weren't good**	23	20	43
Wanted to relocate to a different area	22	13	35
Working too many hours	20	19	39
Working too few hours	16	14	30
Employer required a COVID-19 vaccine	8	10	18

*Among those with children younger than 18 years old living in the household

**Question provided health insurance and paid time off as examples

Note: Figures may not add to subtotals due to rounding

Figure. Top major and minor reasons why US workers left their jobs in 2021. Source: Pew Research Center; survey of US adults conducted in February 2022

TACTIC NO. 1: LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY TO BUY TIME

Technology is a cornerstone of ophthalmology and one of my favorite aspects to highlight in marketing efforts. The development and acquisition of treatment modalities provide excellent promotional opportunities. You can also learn about and leverage channels such as TikTok to reach patients with your messaging.

Speed to contact is a crucial metric of patient engagement. A study by the *Harvard Business Review* that looked at 15,000 prospects across 100,000 touchpoints found that the faster a company responded to a lead, the more likely it was to make a connection.² Moreover, the likelihood of connecting was 10 times greater when contact was attempted within 5 versus 10 minutes of the lead's visiting the company website.

If your practice is short on counselors and appointment schedulers, it can be hard for staff to monitor and quickly contact the leads coming through your website. Marketing automation technology can supplement your staff's efforts and give them more time to call leads. Your practice can use customer relationship software to send automated text messages to any prospect who visits your website, confirming that their information has been received and that someone will call them shortly. The wording can read something like this: "Hello, Sally! It's Brittany at ABC Eye Center confirming

that we got your information through our contact form. John will call you during office hours to get you taken care of!"

If John is tied up with a consultation and can't call back for 45 minutes, an immediate touchpoint is created nevertheless, and a one-on-one conversation with the prospect has begun. This strategy buys time for busy John without sacrificing a premium patient experience.

TACTIC NO. 2: ESTABLISH A REFERRAL AND REVIEW PROGRAM

A unique aspect of ophthalmology is that treatments can literally change someone's life in a day. For example, refractive surgery and refractive cataract surgery can free someone of a lifetime dependence on spectacles in a matter of minutes.

Inviting satisfied patients to connect with prospective patients is a relatively small request. Individuals who are referred to your practice typically know more about your offerings and process and are more ready to speak with a scheduler than patients with no connection to your practice. The former group requires fewer resources to convert. This is a huge advantage if your staff is spread thin.

Consider making three specific requests of satisfied patients.

► **No. 1: Ask for referrals.** The request can be as short and simple as the following: "Sally, plenty of folks are going to be jealous of your new vision. Here are a few of my cards to share with them. Have them give me a call ... as long as they're as awesome as you are. Thanks so much. This is how many of our patients find us, and I appreciate your help."

► **No. 2: Ask for testimonials.** A video shoot with a big production crew isn't required. Use a lavalier microphone that typically sells for less than \$100 and a smartphone to capture audio and video footage that can be used on your social media channels, website, and more.

► **No. 3: Ask for reviews.** Google reviews are the coin of the realm. Ask patients to leave a detailed 5-star review in which they describe how bad their vision was preoperatively, any hesitation they felt before coming in, how you empowered them to make a life-changing decision, and the exciting activities they're enjoying now that they can see well.

TACTIC NO. 3: OUTSOURCE SCHEDULING IF NECESSARY

You cannot beat having an in-house team of schedulers who believe in your mission, are committed to helping patients, and see patients' results firsthand. An in-house team tends to be invested in booking consultations, and they are the sort of people you want talking to your patients.

Maybe, however, your current staff doesn't have the bandwidth to contact leads on the same day that—much less within 5 minutes of when—they visit your website. Likewise, they probably don't have the time to follow up with them more than once. In this situation, outsourcing lead management and appointment booking is a valuable temporary fix until you build your staff (see *Keep Your Eyes Peeled*, pg 62).

KEEP YOUR EYES PEELED

College coaches don't have the luxury of building a long-term team. Athletes graduate, transfer to another school, or go pro. Each year, coaches must recruit players. Practice owners and clinicians should think like a college coach and stay in recruitment mode. Keep your eyes peeled; there are talented people around you—even if they aren't currently looking for a job—who could be the perfect fit for your practice. If presented with the right opportunity, they may be willing to join your team. Consider the waiter at your favorite restaurant or the receptionist at your dentist's office. When you meet someone with excellent people skills, a desire to go above and beyond the expected, and great energy, invite them to visit your office for a quick tour and a conversation.

TACTIC NO. 4: EVALUATE YOUR TEAM CULTURE

A recent client of mine is preparing to launch his own practice. I shared with him the one trait I have found to be common among extremely successful practices: a healthy team culture. The culture you create determines a lot of things—the prices you can charge, the growth your practice achieves, and the types of people who become and remain employees of your practice. Team culture is important whether your practice is large or small, includes one or multiple specialties, or has one or more locations. It also transcends

location in a rural, suburban, or urban setting.

CRST has presented many excellent articles on culture over the years (for a sampling from CRST's The Culture Issue, scan the QR code). My recommendation is for the decision makers at your practice to ask themselves the following questions:

- Are we intentionally building our culture, or are we passively allowing it to be created for us?
- What kinds of people are we attracting to join our practice?
- Who on our team are we worried about letting go even though they

are toxic to our culture?

- Does our team culture represent what we want our patients to see?
- Is our culture strong enough to retain good team members and eject bad ones?
- What can we do in the next 30 days to improve our team culture?



CONCLUSION

Don't let the capacity crunch hold your practice back. If your practice is short-staffed, I encourage you to continue your recruitment efforts. Until staffing needs are met, using the tactics described herein can enable you and your team to continue growing the practice. ■

1. Job openings and labor turnover summary. US Bureau of Labor and Statistics. May 3, 2022. Accessed May 16, 2022. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/jolts.nr0.htm>

2. The best practices for lead response management. *Harvard Business Review*. Accessed May 16, 2022. <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/1939286/Playbooks%20and%20Whitepapers/Best%20Practices%20for%20Lead%20Mgmt.pdf>