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Finding the Right Associateship:
Navigating Through the Interview Process

Entering private practice as an associate is the most common career option for recent dental school graduates. Becoming an associate provides the new dentist with the opportunity to transition from the academic environment to clinical practice without the pressures of practice ownership that often seem daunting to a new dentist. The time as an associate can help the dentist assess his/her clinical and practice management philosophies, providing the opportunity to experiment with different models before applying them to his/her own practice. Many dentists find that being an associate fulfills their professional goals and decide that practice ownership is not the right path for them. Whether practice ownership eventually suits you or not, taking the time to carefully evaluate the practice as an associate candidate will help you create a successful and rewarding career.

The Interview Process

From the perspective of the practice owner, choosing a professional associate may be one of the most important decisions the owner will ever make. This choice will affect the staff, the well-being of the practice and the welfare of the patients. Many practice owners decide to take on an associate with the goal to offer extended hours, gain clinical support and companionship, provide mentorship and allow for the sharing of ideas on complicated cases, work toward retirement and relieve the owner of some of the patient load, help grow the practice and expand the practice's mix of clinical services.

The interview process provides an opportunity for both the practice owner and associate candidate to assess whether the working relationship will be compatible. This is the associate candidate's chance to discuss with the owner approaches to treatment, chairside manner and staff arrangements before deciding to become an associate of his or her practice

Preparing for the Interview

Once you have submitted your application, it is important to track and follow-up with prospective employers. Keep a detailed list of the jobs you have applied and all contacts you have had with the employer. Also, keep track of the CV and cover letter submitted with each position. It will be important to have these available to reference should the employer contact you for a brief phone interview and/or in-person interview.

When you are contacted by a practice after applying for an associate position, you will likely have a brief phone interview as an initial screening. Because you will not know when the interviewer will be contacting you, make sure the message you leave and ringtone selection reflect you in a professional manner. If you notice a call coming in from an unfamiliar phone number, answer the phone with enthusiasm and you may consider stating your name, such as, "Hello, this is Mary." If you are not in a place where you can have a brief conversation, it may be best to let the call go to your voicemail and return the call when you are more prepared to talk.

Remember, outside of your CV and cover letter, this phone contact may be the first impression you make as an associate candidate. All information gathered from this phone call will be used to evaluate you for the position. On the phone, gain a sense of the in-person interview setting. For example, will the practice owner conduct the interview or will an office manager be a part of the interview as well? Will the interview be held in the practice or at an off-site location, such as a restaurant or coffee shop?

Prior to an in-person interview, make sure you do your research on the practice and are prepared. Carefully review the practice's website if one is available. A significant amount of information can be collected from the practice's website, and knowing this information in advance of the interview will demonstrate your interest in the practice and associate position. Many websites will provide information on the providers' backgrounds, the dental team, the practice's mission and treatment philosophy, the type of technology offered to patients, the type of dental benefit plans accepted, the type of patient demographics that the practice serves, the treatment niche and patient policies. In addition to studying the website, conduct an Internet search on the practice and provider(s) to see what information you can find. You may come across online reviews of the providers or gain a sense for how the practice is marketed throughout the community.

To best demonstrate your skills and strengths, you may consider assembling a professional portfolio. The portfolio should include a copy of your CV, the cover letter that you submitted for the position and pictures of cases you are proud to show and discuss in the interview. Be sure to de-identify any photos or other patient information to abide by HIPAA laws. Additionally, you should consider bringing a list of references and/or letters of recommendation to either include in the portfolio or have available upon request.

When choosing your attire for the interview, it is best to dress professionally and conservatively. Select attire that draws the focus to your face and will not be distracting to the interviewer. Loud patterns or extremely bright colors may seem like a smart fashion choice, but those are usually not the right choice for an interview setting. Women are often uncertain about how to wear their hair — if you tend to fuss with your hair when you are nervous, consider pulling your hair back into a professional and clean ponytail or bun. Be aware of what your accessories, hair (including facial hair for men) and shoes may say about you — they may be a distraction to the interviewer.

Finally, to prepare for the interview, practice, practice, practice! Role-play the questions you might be asked and the questions you wish to ask about the practice and owner. You may know what you want to say, but often if not practiced aloud, it may be difficult to convey your message effectively. Practice in front of a mirror or ask a friend or family member to role-play with you. Practicing should go beyond your talking points — be sure to practice your body language and expressions. Make sure you have good posture, you are comfortable making eye contact and smiling, you do not cross your arms and that you face the interviewer squarely. Open body language demonstrates confidence and respect.

The Interview

The interview process can be time-consuming and complex. As with any professional assessment, you need to take great care and consideration to ensure the right decision is made. Trust your instincts — if some part of the arrangement doesn't sit well with you, do not ignore this sign. The following provides a comprehensive list of questions to ask and questions that the practice owner may ask of you. Being prepared to answer and ask these questions will help both parties determine if the working relationship is a good fit

Questions the Practice Owner May Ask:

To Assess Experience/Skill Level:

- Tell me how your education has prepared you for this position?
- What challenges did you face in dental school and how were they overcome?
- Tell me about your range of clinical experience and what you enjoy most/least?

To Assess Patient/Time/Team Management:

- A patient arrives 20 minutes late for an appointment. Tell me how you would handle that situation. (or "you are running 20 minutes behind")
- A patient doesn't agree with your treatment plan. Tell me how you would handle that situation.
- A patient comes in for an emergency appointment. How would you handle that situation?
- Describe a time when you had a conflict with a colleague and how you dealt with the situation.

To Assess Motivation/Goals/Desire to Learn:

- What do you want out of your career in the short term? Long term?
- How do you set and measure your success?
- What makes you the ideal candidate for this position?
- What do you enjoy the most/least about dentistry?
- Where are you strongest/weakest clinically? What do you want to learn?
- How would you improve this practice?

To Assess Leadership/Interpersonal Skills/Communication:

- Two staff members are having an argument in front of a patient. What do you do?
- Our new patient volume decreases. What do you do?
- You see a better way to manage the schedule. What do you do?
- Which of your previous employers/instructors did you like best and why?

"Due Diligence" Considerations for the Associate:

For many of the questions listed below, the importance or reason for the question follows in orange text. This will help you to identify whether these questions are relevant and important to you as the associate candidate or potential practice owner if the opportunity exists. **While most of these questions are appropriate to ask in an interview, some of these may simply be questions to ask yourself as part of your evaluation of the practice before accepting the position.**

Practice Production/Collections/Patient Flow:

- *What is the practice's annual, average monthly and average daily production?*
- *How many new patients does the practice have each month?*
  — Approximately 20 new patients a month per provider is a common benchmark to indicate a healthy growth

- *When the associate is brought on, what will be the work days and hours? What is the anticipated work schedule for the associate?*
  — This question is important so you, as the associate, can understand the expectations of the practice owner. Some practice owners hire associates to reduce hours while other owners want to be present to coach the associate.

- *How many patients do you anticipate the associate to see each day?*
- *How will patient assignments be made between the owner and associate?*
  — This is important if paid on production — you will want to know how new patients are delegated to ensure the potential production generated will provide you with fair compensation.

- *What is the daily production range (or average) you anticipate the associate to produce based on the practice's patient volume?*
- *Ask to see three sample days of the schedule — a slow day, a moderate day and a busy day over the past six months. The practice owner should de-identify any charts before sharing them with an associate candidate to abide by HIPAA regulations.*
- *What percentage of the production is restorative versus hygiene?*
  — Most practices operate at a 75 percent restorative 25 percent hygiene ratio for one doctor and one hygienist. If the restorative number is low, this may indicate that the practice is under-diagnosing or has low case acceptance.

- *If the schedule is slow or there are a lot of cancellations, will I be asked to not come in? If we are both working the same day and our schedule is slow, will I be asked to take the day off or will we each be responsible for our own patients?*
  — This should only be a concern if the associate is classified as an employee. As an independent contractor, you should be responsible for managing your own schedule and patients

- *What is the office policy on canceled or now shows? Does the practice charge the patient for a last-minute cancelation?*
- *What is the policy on late patients? After how many minutes of tardiness do you reschedule the patient or cancel the appointment?*
- *How is accounts receivable managed? What percentage of the practice's accounts receivable is …*
  — 30 days or less?
  — 60 days or less?
  — 90 days or less?
  — 120 days or less
  — More than 120 days?
  — This is important especially if being compensated based on a percentage of collections. You will want to know how quickly you can expect payment to be received.

- *What is the practice's overall collection to adjusted production percentage?*
  — The industry benchmark is 98 percent collection to adjusted production rate. This is important to monitor if being paid on a percentage of collections.

- *Can I review a copy of the practice's fee schedule? How often are the practice fees analyzed?*
  — Fees are typically reviewed on an annual basis. It is important that fees are evaluated and increased as necessary to remain competitive for the area.

Procedure Mix and Dental Benefit Plan Make Up:

- *What is the insurance makeup of the practice? Percentage of PPOs, Capitation, FFS patients? If capitation, how does the practice post payments for capitation?*
  — This is especially important if being compensated based on production.

- *What procedures are performed at the practice versus referred out? What procedures do you anticipate the associate performing?*
- *Will the practice owner be responsible for submitting claims on behalf of the associate or will the associate be responsible for his or her own claims?*
  — It is important to understand the relationship the associate will have with the plans in which the practice owner is contracted. For more information, reference the resource Considerations when billing for an associate.

- *Are procedures billed under a corporate name, under the owner's name or under the associate's name?*
- *In case of nonpayment from the insurance or patient, who is responsible? Will there be a deduction in the associate's pay?*
- *Who will cover the emergencies? (Am I supposed to be on call on weekends? Will I be expected to come to the office for an emergency patient?)*

Staff:

- *What is the current staff structure? What changes, if any, will be made to the structure once the associate joins the practice?*
- *How is the team managed and how is performance evaluated and measured?*
  — Performance evaluations should be completed on an annual basis, at the least. The process for evaluations should be documented, preferably as part of the practice's employee manual.

- *What staff management responsibilities, if any, will the associate have?*
  — It is important to know prior to beginning any associate position, the managerial responsibilities that are expected, if any.

Hygiene Management:

- *How are hygiene exams coordinated? Are hygiene exams discussed and coordinated in a morning huddle each day?*
- *How will hygiene exams be distributed? Will I be responsible for only checking my patients? Will I be responsible for checking your patients? Tell me how you conduct your hygiene exams and coordinate treatment plan recommendations with the hygienist(s).*
- *How is the production for hygiene recalls tracked? (If compensated on production) What part of the hygiene appointment will be tracked as the doctor's production (i.e. exam, radiographs?)*
- *How many patients are seen in hygiene a day? A month?*
- *What percentage of the restorative production is generated from hygiene recall? (in other words, not generated from new patients)*
  — A common percentage of restoratives that derives from hygiene recall patients (not new patients) is 40-45 percent. If this number is low, it may indicate that the practice is not reinforcing necessary treatment for patients who are seen for hygiene care.

- *What is the hygiene recall percentage? What percentage of patients are pre-appointed for their next recall?*
  — Most patients, in the 98 percent range, should be pre-appointed for their next hygiene appointment. This number will reveal how successful the practice is at retaining patients.

Mentorship/Leadership:

- What is your treatment and practice management philosophy?
- What is your vision for the future of the practice?
- What is your motivation in bringing an associate into the practice? (Do you want to decrease your hours, increase the practice's production or develop a transition plan?)
- Are you open to mentoring me in areas that I would like to develop or that I have not been exposed? What about in terms of utilizing supplies, materials and equipment that may be different from those I had in dental school (or the last practice I was in?)

Marketing:

- *What is the marketing plan to introduce the associate to your patients and the community?*
  — The practice owner may have a plan as to how the associate will be introduced to patients and the community. For more information on announcing an associate, reference the resource Sample Announcement of New Associate/Partner.

- *As far as the associate generating new patients, what are the marketing expectations for the associate? Which party is responsible financially for the associate's marketing?*
- *What type of marketing does the practice currently do? What percentage of patients come from each marketing source? What percentage of patients come from patient referrals (internal marketing)?*
  — It is important to make sure that marketing is monitored and tracked by collecting referral data from patients and tracking referral sources.

Facility/Practice Location(s):

- *Are there multiple locations? If yes, where will the associate be practicing? In all locations, in just one? Are there different staff in each location or do staff go between all locations?*
- *Does the current location/facility have growth potential? Is the facility equipped for another provider?*
- *What are the patient demographics? Is the community growing, leveling out, or declining in population?*

Associate Agreement/Buy-in/Partnership/Compensation:

- *What is the compensation structure for the position? If on production/collections: What percentage? What production does that include (i.e. hygiene exams)? Will there be a daily base pay or an initial draw? Who is responsible for lab costs?*
- *Will the associate be classified as an employee or independent contractor?*
  — It is wise to seek legal advice to ensure you are properly classified. This classification will make a significant difference for the associate in terms of total compensation and employment taxes. Be sure to speak to a tax advisor before committing to either type of classification.

- *If classified as an employee, are there employer-paid benefits such as health care, retirement plan, continuing education, liability insurance coverage and association membership dues?*
- *If classified as an independent contractor, are there overhead expenses that the associate would need to cover, such as a percentage of staff costs, supplies, equipment, rent?*
- *If an independent contractor, how will the facility be shared? What parts of the facility will the associate be able access? Are there any areas that would not be accessible or any times/days when the facility cannot be accessed?*
- *At what point in the interview process will an associate agreement* (Sample Associate Agreement) *be available to review and consider?*
  — It is highly recommended that a written agreement be prepared. This should be reviewed by an attorney and available for both parties to review and sign before the associateship begins.

- *What are the terms and length of time for the associate agreement?*
- *What is your transition plan (if ownership potential exists)? How long do you envision the transition to take?*
  — If a transition plan is decided, have a set date in writing when the transition is complete and the selling doctor will no longer work in the office.

- *If ownership is an option, what objectives need to be met in order for the buy-in to progress?*
- *Is there a current practice valuation that I could review?*
  — If ownership is in the associate's future, the practice valuation and all legal documents pertaining to the practice purchase should be prepared before the associate joins the practice.

Questions Specific to Large Group Practice (LGP) Interviews:

As employment among dentists in large group practices (LPGs) increases, there are typically a number of practice management differences in LGPs in which the associate candidate should be aware. There are many advantages to working for an LGP, such as strong employment and management protocols, advanced marketing strategies, a fast-paced environment, a wide variety of patients and exposure to a variety of treatment plans. There also tends to be some fairly significant differences among LGPs than what you might see in a solo individual or group practice. For example, LGPs tend to be contracted with a high volume of dental benefit plans, which brings in a high volume of patients, but will likely mean that the practice's fee schedule is on the lower end. The following questions are geared toward some of the differences among LGPs that the associate candidate should be aware and carefully evaluate.

- *What are the advantages of working for a large group practice as opposed to a solo practice?*
- *What is the average number of new patients seen by a dentist each month?*
  — Many LGPs see a high volume of new patients because of the number of dental benefits plans in which the practice is contracted. A high volume of new patients may appeal to you or it may not. Either way, it is wise to know the numbers before accepting the position.

- *What is the average dental benefit plan fee for the most commonly performed procedures (i.e., crown)?*
  — Because LGPs tend to contract with a number of dental benefit plans, the average fees for certain procedures may be lower than the fees you might see in a solo practice.

- *What is the average hourly/daily net production (after dental insurance write-offs) for your associates?*
- *What ownership potential exists? After how long?*
- *What are the production expectations for associates? Does this increase year to year? Is there a base salary or initial compensation until I increase my speed?*
- *What is the process of the practice's new patient appointment? How is treatment presented? Who discusses finances with the patient? When is the patient seen for hygiene?*
  — Many LGPs have strong patient and financial systems in place, and often have a high number of staff who are responsible for these procedures.

- *How is the practice managed? By whom?*
- *How are the staff managed? By whom?*
- *How are the associate doctors managed? Are there opportunities to be mentored by more senior doctors?*
- *How is the practice marketed? Who is responsible for marketing and generating new patients?*
- *What are the terms of the associate agreement? (Are there any restrictions or length of term requirements to be aware of?)*

The Working Interview

Scheduling working interviews may be beneficial in the decision-making process and are very common. Working interviews allow candidates to practice in the clinical setting and provide them the opportunity to observe how the practice owner conducts his or her office. For practice owners, working interviews are the best way to observe a candidate's technique and will demonstrate how he/she interacts with patients and staff.

Before the working interview, you need to be sure you have your own professional liability coverage. Sometimes the owner will mistakenly tell you that you will be covered under his or her policy. This is not likely the case. Contact a liability carrier and request a binder for a working interview. Do not go to any interview without coverage.

Be sure to clarify with the practice owner whether you will be performing treatment on patients or whether your time in the practice will be a day of observation. It is fair for you to expect compensation for a working interview, and the amount is typically based on a per hour rate, $70- $100 per hour is not uncommon. In addition, you will want to know if payment will be given at the end of the business day or if payment will be mailed to you within 48 hours. Be sure that all arrangements that are mutually agreed upon are in writing and determined before the day of the working interview. Keep a copy for your own records.

Ask the practice owner or office manager about the attire for the working interview or pattern your attire for the interview with that of the practice owner. If treating patients during the working interview, be sure to ask if the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) will be provided. It is better to ask these questions before the working interview than it is to come unprepared.

During the working interview, request to review some of the patient records. Look for any pattern of practice issues and signs of supervised neglect in patient charts. This will help determine whether you will be comfortable joining the practice. Be aware that joining a practice whose services are below the standard of care places you at risk of professional malpractice, as you may be held liable for the negligence of others with whom you associate. Also, ask for proof that the practice owner has professional liability insurance. If he or she practices "bare," seriously consider passing up the position rather than being a lightning rod for malpractice cases.

Ensure the potential employer has like approaches to treatment, philosophies and patient communication skills. Effective resolution of future patient and business issues may rely upon your like values. Observe the practice owner's case presentation techniques and the way in which the practice owner interacts and coordinates treatment plans with the hygienist(s) in the practice.

The working interview is an excellent time to observe the interactions and behavior of the staff. Watch how the entire dental team interacts and communicates — does the day run smoothly and does communication flow easily between staff or does the doctor seem stressed and the staff appear to be frazzled? Are the appropriate staff acting within the scope of their license? Are infection control standards being followed? How is the communication between the doctor and dental team? Does the team meet for a morning huddle to discuss the day's schedule? Are there communication breakdowns that you can see between the front and back office? If yes, how are these errors managed and resolved?

In addition to observing the staff dynamics, the associate candidate will have a chance to interact with the dental team. Make sure your interactions are professional — after all, this is still an interview. Although it is important to maintain a respectful and kind relationship with the dental team, you should be cognizant of becoming too much of a confidant the staff. Remember, if you become an associate in the practice, you will serve in a leadership capacity, whether directly managing staff or not, and should demonstrate this role throughout the interview process. Ask the staff lots of questions about their roles in the practice. This will not only show you how the practice is managed but also give you a sense of the team dynamics.

Following each stage of the interview process, it is appropriate to send the practice owner, or whoever conducted the interview, a thank-you note. Always check for spelling and grammatical errors when sending written correspondence. Simply thank the interviewer for the opportunity and point out a few aspects you appreciated about the interview, the associateship opportunity and/or the practice.