

First Year. First Impressions.

Getting the most from your first associateship – from Day One.

Congratulations, dental graduate! Welcome to the world of dental associateship and your first days in the office. You've reached one goal and are on the road toward your dreams. But your first job represents more than just a steady paycheck after years of hard work in dental school. It is a critical juncture in your development as a dentist. If you're lucky, you'll build a strong philosophy of work and success that will set the tone for the rest of your career.

Follow these important steps to making the most of your first year in practice and keep your eyes on the prize. You too can live the life you've always wanted as a dental professional.

Professionalism Counts

When your first year is complete, what do you envision? Do you see yourself as a leader within the employer/doctor team, or do you see yourself as an employee, one of the gang? How you launch and position yourself within the office environment is a key consideration. Since your first associateship may eventually become a new partnership, put your best foot forward from Day One.



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Earn the trust and confidence of the owner and the dental staff by being a consummate professional. One way to ensure a smooth transition is to meet the staff before your first day on the job. Personally introduce yourself to the team and share your credentials, background, hometown and family information that



will offer a connection with your new teammates from the beginning. By proactively establishing rapport, you are providing the staff with some insight into who you are, so they can speak authentically about meeting you and pass along their positive impressions to patients.

Like a family, a dental office relies on healthy relationships between team members to ensure harmony and success. Like any successful business, a profitable dental office also balances efficiency and productivity with high quality service that ensures patient satisfaction. To meet these needs, strike a balance between

being a leader and an employee. Avoid unconsciously undermining the employer's human resource structure by becoming "buddy-buddy" with team members and taking problems or conflicts into your own hands.

Should personnel concerns be handled by the office manager? The owner doctor? Whatever the situation, heed the boundaries of engagement and respect the office structure for resolving problems. Maintain composure and seek a mutually beneficial outcome with the individual or challenge before you. This is the only way to avoid getting in the middle of sticky

situations between other employees and the owner doctor. Remember that you needn't be a counselor or advocate for the team to be a respected professional.

Wear appropriate professional attire to the office and be sure to stay on task, remaining productively engaged in work-related activities as much as possible. One common complaint about younger associates is that they spend more time online and at the computer than more experienced counterparts. Employers look unfavorably at checking email, blogging, shopping and playing spider solitaire on company time. You know this, of course, but it's easy to get sidetracked when the computer is within arm's reach and your schedule is free. Make it a rule to stay off the computer during office hours unless it is a work related task. Being viewed as a motivated, hard-working and enthusiastic associate will reap rewards during your first year - and beyond.

Position Yourself for Success

Now hear this: All associates must pay their dues. You will be expected to work the hours that no one else wants — including evenings and Saturdays. Instead of grumbling about it, view it as an opportunity to build relationships with patients during these patient-friendly appointment times. You also will spend more time performing hygiene procedures and exams during the first six months of practice. Welcome the responsibility of caring for two to four hygiene patients each day and consider this time a golden opportunity get acquainted with patients and their particular dental issues. Caring for them also will give you insight into the patient base and overall market area, as well as help you hone presentation skills. Understanding the market you serve will also will help you conduct more effective self-promotion and self-marketing campaign within the community.

Consider developing a marketing plan to increase your patient base. As an associate in a busy practice, you may be tempted to rely on referrals and new patients that happen to visit. But no practice is static, and patient volume can change quickly. It's best to strive for a

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solid patient base that you actively build through your own reputation. Reach out to the local community. Join local business organizations. Get involved in area events and functions, to develop professional and referral contacts with whom you can network.

Never Stop Learning

Your first year is the best time in your career to embrace all that a senior doctor can offer in terms of experience. You will benefit greatly from a mentoring relationship, and your senior doctors will likely enjoy watching you develop. To demonstrate your enthusiasm and commitment to the practice make sure to meet with the owner doctor regularly to discuss patient care, treatment plans, and staff issues. Schedule time regularly and in advance on the same day and time each week so you can fully benefit from your mentors. Regular mentoring time also allows senior staff to see your progress in presentation skills, communication skills and even decision-making as it relates to the business or clinical issues.

Everyone expects the new doctor to take more time during procedures as skills become more proficient. If you keep an open mind about ways to work more efficiently, you'll be viewed as gracious and eager to grow. Ask senior doctors to offer advice or suggest ways to build on your skills. If you notice that materials or special instruments you may need for patient care are not readily available, be sure to discuss these issues with your assistant before the patient arrives in the room. Preparation is a key part of teamwork that will allow your productivity and reputation to grow.

Pay attention to monthly practice statistics and trends. Chances are, you will be familiar with monthly office collections since your compensation is likely dependent on it. And you can go a step further. Knowing and understanding key practice trends will clue you in on the practice's strengths and weaknesses — knowledge that may be important for long-term planning for your future. For example, does the practice enjoy a growing patient base? Are your marketing efforts paying off? Is your time utilization steadily increasing? Do you have too much downtime? Answers to these questions provide a snapshot into the practice's health.

You'll also do well to know statistics related to your personal production. New dentists tend to produce about \$175 an hour, and up to \$250 per hour with some experience. How do you compare? Is your case acceptance rate stagnant or on the rise? What steps can you take to encourage patients to accept recommended treatment? Grasping the details of running the business, as well as identifying your role in it, will be valuable as you contemplate owning your own practice or future partnership opportunities.

Make Every Moment Count!

The first year of associateship is a great opportunity to learn, grow, develop and prepare for your future professional endeavors. Actively participating in your employer's business as a thoughtful, energetic young doctor offers invaluable experience and knowledge that will serve as a foundation for your entire dental career. Make the most of every minute of the experience, as you enjoy the accomplishments and earn the respect you deserve as a dental professional. The future awaits you, so make the best of this first year!

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