

Are you manager material?

Find out what it takes



By Mark T. Harris

Managing a medical office is not always a smooth sail on a calm lake. In fact, office managers can almost count on choppy waters or even the occasional storm as they navigate the complex responsibilities of running a modern medical practice.

Could it really be otherwise? A medical office manager or practice administrator may be responsible for everything from ensuring the carpets are clean and office supplies stocked to planning the budget and negotiating insurer contracts. Indeed, the typical office manager's position is not for those unsuited to the pressures of multitasking. But effective office managers also have the satisfaction of knowing their leadership and planning are critical to creating an environment that consistently enhances patient care.

Naturally, the responsibilities of an office manager will vary depending on a practice's size and specialty. But most

positions require a core competency in such areas as finance, negotiations, and human resources.

Do you have what it takes?

For medical assistants, aspiring to a management position can be a positive, highly rewarding career goal. But translating an aspiration into an accomplishment takes education, experience, and the commitment to acquire the skills necessary for a successful career. Such a goal also requires, at the outset, a measure of self-assessment, because not everyone is suited to the many demands of office management. Even proficiency in the areas of finance, negotiations, and human resources does not necessarily translate into the skills you will need as a manager.

"Just because an individual is competent at their job doesn't guarantee they will be a good manager," notes Karen Zupko, president of Karen Zupko & Associates, a Chicago-based business

consultant to physician practices. "A manager has to be able and willing to share information and to convey to staff how to do various tasks. A good manager is defined by [an] ability to help staff go through the thought process involved in a task," says Zupko. "Unfortunately, not everyone is comfortable telling other people what to do. Some are extremely challenged by the concept of delegation. In management terms, [avoiding delegation] can be a fatal flaw."

In other words, it's all about leadership

For Charlene Endre-Burgett, MS, CMA, office manager for North Scottsdale Family Medicine in Scottsdale, Ariz., successful leadership is a kind of balancing act. "You have to be detail-oriented in this position," says Endre-Burgett, "but you also have to be able to see outside the box. You have to understand the other person's viewpoint, as well as the larger needs of the practice."

Learn as you climb

For those CMAs who become successful office managers, a common denominator appears to be their commitment to continuing education as they take on new job challenges.

As a veteran manager, Cheryl Fatzinger, MBA, CMA, has witnessed technology and other changes transform the industry. A few years back, she came to the hard realization that her position at Piedmont Ear, Nose, Throat & Associates (PENTA) was gradually outgrowing her skills, a recognition which led her to acquire an MBA at local Wake Forest University. "It was the hardest challenge I've ever faced, but also the most rewarding." The MBA degree equipped Fatzinger to meet increasingly complex finance, organization, and negotiation issues faced by a large and growing practice.

Since becoming a CMA, Charlene Endre-Burgett of North Scottsdale Family Medicine has also acquired a BA in business management and an MS in health care management. She is working toward a doctorate in business administration through a distance learning program. She also has specialized certifications in coding and medical office management.

"Certification shows employers that you're dedicated to your profession and interested in learning more," says Endre-Burgett. "Undoubtedly, my credentials beginning with certification as a CMA have helped me move up the ladder into different levels of authority within organizations."

"If you're too much the people person and everybody's friend, that's obviously not going to work," she notes. "But if you're too task-oriented, then you risk becoming more of a dictator. A good office manager has to learn to balance the needs of the staff versus the needs of the office, doctors, and patients. It's much like walking a tightrope."

In her 20 years of experience, Endre-Burgett has learned that the responsibilities of a manager can vary widely, depending not only on the specific needs of a practice, but also on its management style. "Some physicians are more hands-on. They want to control more of the business management side. In other practices, the physicians don't want to have anything to do with the business side. They hire someone who has the experience and knowledge base, and expect the office manager or practice administrator to handle it all."

In her current position with North Scottsdale, where she has been for three years, Endre-Burgett manages a staff of 25 to 30, and is responsible for all human resources, finance, purchasing, insurance, and reimbursement issues. She also wears a property management hat, supervising the building upkeep and vendor contracts for plumbing, heating, and cooling. This environment is definitely more on the "handle it all" side, she says.

Do you thrive on change?

Ideally, adds Zupko, aspiring office managers should have the opportunity to work for a first-rate manager, meaning one who is primarily focused on planning, and not in a constant reactive mode. "Unless you are Mozart, very few of us are going to be able to acquire the skills we need simply by reading a book, watching a training video, or going into the smallest solo practice we can find and teaching ourselves," she says. "You need to be in an environment in which you can learn and practice."

Cheryl Fatzinger, MBA, CMA, has had varied experiences as an office manager. Originally affiliated with a small practice, Fatzinger is today practice administrator for Piedmont Ear, Nose, Throat & Associates (PENTA), an eight-physician, 52-employee clinic with four offices in the Winston-Salem, N.C., area. It's a position she's held since 1990.

In her career, Fatzinger's responsibilities have indeed provided an opportunity to learn and grow, gradually evolving from a focus on daily operations to more strategic concerns. It's a natural trajectory for many successful managers.

Today, Fatzinger finds herself negotiating new ancillary services (e.g., a proposed ambulatory surgical center is in the planning stages), as well as contracts for audiology services and products. Fatzinger relies on her MBA accounting skills to evaluate balance sheets and income statements, often making strategic business recommendations. The practice is large enough that an administrative assistant now manages most accounts payable and payroll tasks.

If you are thinking about a career as an office manager, it's a decision best

made with your eyes wide open. There's no question the business of health care has become more complex. For managers, just staying up to date in such areas as human resource rules, coding, and other changes can be a major challenge. Staff turnover, shortages of clinical personnel, and seemingly ever-changing business and insurance practices are also symptoms of an industry under stress.

"It takes a certain kind of mentality to want to be in this position and want to stay in it," concludes Endre-Burgett. "There are a lot of frustrations. The personnel issues that come up on a day-to-day basis can be stressful. You have to think in a blink of an eye and juggle many different responsibilities. You also have to be very open to change. If you don't like change, this is not the job for you."

Still, the rewards are there, not only financially, but also in the satisfaction that comes with doing an important job well. ◀

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