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What if your billing staff won the lottery?

by EyeWorld Staff

Strategies to cope with possible mass departures that may arise.

What would you do if five of the seven people in your billing office won the lottery? Roger Gomillion, practice administrator, Eye Center of North Florida, Panama City, Fla., is facing such a challenge.

Recently, six members of the practice office, including the office manager, discovered that they and three friends won the \$27 million jackpot of the Florida Lotto. Once the group took the cash payout, each received about \$1.7 million.

One employee told Mr. Gomillion not to start looking for a replacement while others seem to be contemplating their options for the next phase of their lives.

"I heard it on the news," he said. "I heard a couple of them were retiring. But I don't know which couple they are."

Whether they plan to stay or not, Mr. Gomillion is trying to determine his next steps.

"If you've got a million dollars or whatever in your bank account, and somebody asks you to stay and do something, and you really want to leave, you're a little more independent about going ahead and leaving," he said. "So, right now, most of them are saying that they are going to stay. I think time will tell."

This is not the first time Mr. Gomillion has faced such a dilemma.

A few months ago, an employee inherited several million dollars from a family estate. That employee said she would stay too.

"Well, that lasted about 90 days or so, and then she quit," he said.

Survival strategies

Mr. Gomillion has been in communication with several members of the Florida Society of Ophthalmic Administrators, a network group he is a member of, as part of ASOA, to see if there are other options for him to consider such as outsourcing his billing, but he has not found one to his liking.

"We try to make sure each day that everything is billed out for that day before everybody leaves so that we can transmit those claims," Mr. Gomillion said. "It's hard to find somebody to work all of that and that will put the same effort into it as you would if you were an employee."

You also lose quality control and the ability to answer patient questions on-site, said ASOA President Morgan Taylor III, C.O.E., C.P.A., Stuart, Fla.

"I've not seen an outside billing company in ophthalmology that has done as good a job as can be done with the right staff in-house," Mr. Taylor said. "Patients usually come in and want to know how much they owe, they want to pay their bills or have their questions answered now.

Outside billing companies typically do not have information available in

the office.”

It may be easier to outsource other areas and move people with some experience at the practice into billing, said Laurie Brown, C.O.M.T., C.O.E., Eugene, Ore.

“You can outsource payroll and accounting functions fairly easily,” she said. “What you may want to do is reorganize for the interim, and things that you can farm out, farm out. Move them from someone who is very experienced and can take over the reimbursement for awhile.”

Hiring new employees would take some time, Mr. Gomillion said, as there is not a stable of experienced candidates in the area. And that time would cost the practice money.

“Ophthalmic practices live by cash flow, and that would affect our cash flow,” he said.

Take control

One way to handle such a challenge is through pre-planning. Some practices have employee contracts or protocols that request employees who plan to leave give the practice adequate advance notice.

If an employee or group of employees plans to leave, consider asking them for ideas on the practice, said Donna Suter, president, Suter Consulting Group, Apison, Tenn. That may buy you some time before their departure and also get you an honest assessment of your practice, she said.

Ms. Suter suggests asking employees what they would change at the practice. You might also ask them what tasks waste their time and what obstacles keep them from accomplishing tasks.

“They have no reason not to tell the truth all of a sudden, and that’s powerful. Usually, you have to pay somebody like me to tell you the truth,” she said. “I would try to get their buy-in on that.

And with a bit of luck by asking for their input about process improvement, the practice could plan an exit strategy with them that they would honor.”

Foster relationships

The most effective way to retain an employee in this situation may simply be to have built, and continue to build, solid relationships.

A happy employee may not want to quit a job. An employee who feels needed may not want to leave co-workers in a bind.

“Hopefully, this is a great lesson for all administrators, that they should be fostering these relationships all the time,” Ms. Brown said. “So that if something like this comes up, employees don’t immediately think they can cut a cord without thinking of any responsibility to the practice.”

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