

# Hiring a Consultant for a Medical Practice

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Employment of medical and health services managers is expected to increase by 16% from 2006 to 2016, which is more than the average increase for all occupations.<sup>1</sup> The health care industry will continue to expand and diversify, requiring managers to help ensure smooth business operations.<sup>2</sup>

Managers in all medical settings will need to improve quality and efficiency of health care while controlling costs as insurance companies and Medicare demand higher levels of accountability. Managers will also need to oversee the computerization of patient records and to ensure their security as required by law. Additional demand for managers will stem from the need to recruit workers and increase employee retention in order to comply with changing regulations, implement new technology, and help improve the health of their communities by emphasizing preventive care.<sup>2</sup>

Employment will increase the most in practitioners' offices and in-home health care agencies. Many services previously provided in hospitals will continue to shift to these settings, especially as medical technologies improve. Demand in medical practice management will grow as group medical practices become larger and more complex.<sup>2</sup>

## Prior to Selecting a Practice Consultant

Before selecting a practice consultant, identify the current needs of the medical practice. Why does the practice need a consultant and what will be the consultant's duties?

Once these answers are clear, establish a list of goals to be accomplished as a result of establishing a relationship with a practice consultant, and identify what the expectations are after hiring a consultant. In order to find the right fit, there needs to be a clear understanding of what the practice currently needs. For example, does the

practice need help in certain departments, such as human resources (HR), billing, or physician and employee management? Is the practice having a hard time retaining key employees and recruiting physicians? Is the practice trying to avoid a future lawsuit because the current HR rules and regulations are not updated? Having a detailed list of what the practice needs in order to improve will ensure that the right consultant is found.

## Common Service Offerings of Practice Consultants

Now that the needs of the practice have been established, the next step is to review the practice consultant's service offerings. Most practice consultants offer a variety of services. The most common services are outlined in the following sections.

### Office Efficiency Review and an Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

An office efficiency review helps physicians determine the overall efficiency of the medical practice. Prior to knowing how efficient the practice is, consultants will list several key items that will determine the practice's level of efficiency. For example, the consultant may want to know how many patients each provider sees, how much revenue the providers generate per patient, and if the support staff is doing all they can to maximize revenue for the practice.

Another service that may be offered by some practice consultants is a detailed analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the practice. A full SWOT analysis precisely identifies what each medical provider is contributing to the practice and allows the staff to make the best decisions regarding the growth and development of the practice.

## Practice Management

Effective management is critical to the success of all businesses, especially medical practices where it is important for the staff to give patients superior services every day. Finding the right staff, motivating them, and learning how to keep them happy are skills that every manager should know.

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Practice consultants will address a myriad of issues that currently affect managers because they possess a unique vantage point of the medical field. Working closely with a practice consultant to determine the management needs of the practice can help improve areas, such as growing and motivating employees, delegating tasks, managing difficult employees, and improving employees' performance reviews.

### HR Management

Does the practice have the necessary paperwork on file for each of its employees? Is it complete and up-to-date? When was the last time the employee handbook was reviewed and updated? A practice consultant will address the weaknesses within HR, such as policies, procedures, and handbooks. They will assist the practice with implementing standard operating procedures for all new hires and existing employees, and will also address the current inconsistencies or inefficiencies within HR policies and procedures.

### Insurance Contract Negotiations

How much is the practice being paid by each insurance company? Which insurance companies are paying below Medicare rates? What is included in the insurance contracts?

Practice consultants can help guide the insurance contract negotiation process to ensure that the practice is being reimbursed at or above current Medicare rates. They will review the practice's current contracts and will make recommendations to improve reimbursement rates by changing the terms, key terminology, and percentage rates in the contract.

### Office Challenges

Medical practices face unique challenges every day due to the nature of the industry. In order to navigate through the myriad of challenges, practice consultants offer guidance on Occupational Safety and Health Administration policies and procedures; the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act; patient privacy; electronic medical records; medical emergency plans; practice communications; and security.

### Marketing

Successfully marketing a medical practice is a learned skill. Practice consultants who specialize in marketing can utilize their knowledge and experience to build awareness of the medical practice and the services the practice provides. They will review current marketing efforts and help design an effective, multidimensional marketing program that drives new patients into the practice.

## Three Keys for Hiring a Practice Consultant Education and Knowledge

Knowledge of the medical industry and dermatology is critical for a successful relationship between the consultant and the physician, the consultant and the medical practice, or both. Practice consultants build their businesses by continually striving to keep abreast of current events as they relate to the business of medicine.

### Experience

Experience in the dermatology field is a key to developing a successful partnership with the right practice consultant. Working and actively participating in the field of dermatology allows a practice consultant to be up-to-date on current industry trends. Practice consultants who have experience in the field of dermatology will be able to provide valuable benchmarking information and provide dermatology-specific marketing strategies, practice management strategies, insurance contract negotiation strategies, as well as assistance with challenges specific to the specialty.

### Support

In order to follow through with the recommendations that have been made and to continually improve the operations of the practice, support is also critical when hiring a consultant. Experienced, professional consultants should stay in contact with the practice and provide ongoing support. They should also have resources available that the practice can utilize in order to improve the practice. Some examples of these resources listed in the following sections include toolkits that I recommend.

*Office Efficiency Support Materials and SWOT Analysis—The Essential Tool Kit for Dermatology Practices* is a comprehensive resource that provides everything for building a strong dermatology practice and includes the entire contents of the *HR Tool Kit*, *Managers Tool Kit*, *SWOT Analysis Tool Kit*, *Office Challenges Tool Kit*, and support materials in one convenient binder.<sup>3</sup>

*HR Toolkit*—The *HR Toolkit* includes all the regulations governing HR recordkeeping, advice about hiring, and maintaining a winning staff.<sup>3</sup>

*Practice Management Tools*—The *Managers Tool Kit* offers strategies for effective management, which is critical to the success of all businesses, but especially medical practices where it is important for the staff to give patients superior service every day.<sup>3</sup> Finding the right staff, motivating them, and learning how to keep them happy are skills that every manager in the practice should know.

*Insurance Contract Negotiations*—*Clear View* is a proprietary format that can take any billing reporting

# PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

output and generate a report that can improve the ability to understand actual revenue performance. *Clear View* offers breakthrough control of financial reporting; allows a physician to know exactly what is happening with accounts receivable; allows hundreds or thousands of report pages to be reduced to a few simple tables and charts; and allows physicians to spend minutes, not hours, understanding their accounts receivable status.<sup>4</sup>

*Marketing Support Materials*—Patient newsletters help the practice by retaining existing patients and attracting new ones. A practice newsletter provides a friendly reminder of what is happening in the practice and is the perfect vehicle to help retain the patient base and increase referrals and the bottom line.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

Due to the increasing complexities of running a medical practice, physicians are looking to their practice managers and consultants to help keep their practices thriving through all the changes. Selecting the right consultant depends on the nature of the practice and the areas that need to be improved. Prior to selecting a consultant, determine the needs of the practice first. Then, match these needs with the service offerings of the practice consultant.

A qualified practice consultant should have extensive knowledge of the industry, industry-specific experience, and the ability to offer ongoing support. These 3 keys ensure that the practice receives the support it needs before, during, and after the consultant is hired. Lastly, it is important to stay up-to-date by reading industry-specific journals, attending meetings, and incorporating tools from customizable kits and CDs. Just like the old adage states, knowledge is power. The more that is known about the practice and what can be done to improve upon it, the more efficient the practice will be. The relationship developed with a practice consultant should be a long-lived, mutually beneficial partnership.

## References

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