

Staffing Shortages? Time to Consider a Virtual Assistant

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We are experiencing declining reimbursements and rising costly overheads in American healthcare. The modern healthcare provider faces the challenge of balancing efficient healthcare with the overload of paperwork that is increasing burnout and motivating doctors to early retirement. Using virtual assistants as a staffing alternative addresses the needs of many medical practices, regardless of their size or location. This article explores the role of virtual assistants and their ability to revolutionize healthcare delivery and offers information on implementing a virtual assistant.

KEY WORDS: Virtual assistant; scheduling; insurance verification; prior authorization.

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Many crises are occurring in American medicine. Since the pandemic, however, we have seen healthcare workers leaving the profession, and fewer individuals willing to fill their positions.

Any decrease in staff affects the care we can provide our patients. Such shortages can affect doctors, nurses, technicians, and our patients. Several factors contribute to shortages in medical staff:

- **Population growth and aging.** As the population ages, the demand for healthcare services is increasing. Older populations who have more comorbid conditions typically require more medical attention and more time than the standard 15-minute appointment, leading to a decrease in both quality of care and patient satisfaction.
- **Increased complexity of healthcare.** Advances in medical technology and an aging population who require medical attention have led to increased complexity in healthcare services. This complexity often requires a more extensive and specialized workforce to provide effective and comprehensive care.
- **Educational and training bottlenecks.** The lengthy and rigorous education and training required for healthcare professionals contribute to the shortage of healthcare workers. Limited enrollment capacity in medical schools, nursing programs, and other healthcare training institutions can contribute to shortages.
- **Burnout and job dissatisfaction.** High stress levels, long working hours, and challenging work environments contribute to burnout among healthcare professionals, currently running at a reported 50% of physicians, allied healthcare providers, and medical staff. This, in turn, leads to a higher attrition rate, further exacerbating shortages.

- **Global health crises.** Events such as pandemics or large-scale health crises can strain healthcare systems immensely, leading to an acute shortage of medical staff. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, highlighted the vulnerability of healthcare systems to sudden surges in demand. The pandemic caused significant burnout among healthcare workers, many of whom have not returned to our offices.
- **Regulatory and immigration policies.** Stringent immigration policies and regulatory hurdles can limit the ability of healthcare systems to recruit medical professionals internationally, exacerbating shortages in some regions.
- **Economic factors.** Economic factors, such as budget constraints and funding limitations, can affect the ability of medical practices to hire an adequate number of staff. Financial constraints may lead to cost-cutting measures and a reduction in available positions.

Hiring a virtual assistant can address shortages in medical staff and help manage many of the burdensome administrative tasks that plague our practices. A virtual assistant can schedule appointments, manage patient records, handle insurance issues, and respond to many patient calls.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

The number of patients requesting access to healthcare professionals has increased. Healthcare professionals are maxed out, and administrative staff are overwhelmed with ensuring that these appointments are managed sufficiently, resulting in appointment overload.

The increase in the number of patients being seen results in increased waiting times to achieve an appointment and

see the doctor. This results in an increase in patient discontent and a decrease in patient satisfaction.

The increased volume of patients calling the office and requesting appointments can affect staff members' job satisfaction and overall well-being.

Burnout is affecting nearly 50% of all healthcare providers. Not only do physicians experience burnout, but the practice's staff may as well. The increased volume of patients calling the office and requesting appointments can affect staff members' job satisfaction and overall well-being.

With a hectic schedule, errors can occur, such as the following:

- Double booking of patients;
- Entering the wrong data;
- Failure to obtain insurance verification; and
- Failure to achieve prior authorization.

All of these errors lead to confusion for patients, doctors, and staff.

TIME FOR A VIRTUAL ASSISTANT

Virtual assistants are trained to manage all administrative tasks for a medical office. They can manage incoming calls. They can answer patient billing questions, provide information, manage prescriptions, manage referrals, and perform other administrative tasks. This increases practice efficiency, patient satisfaction, and enhanced productivity.

One of the most beneficial aspects of virtual assistants is their ability to handle appointment scheduling without errors. Patients don't have to leave messages to schedule, re-schedule, or cancel appointments, thus reducing the number of missed calls and decreasing the workload on the front desk staff, who can concentrate on patient care.

A well-trained virtual assistant can follow up on patients after their visit, send follow-up emails; schedule recall appointments; take care of social media management; and even perform reputation management. A skilled virtual assistant also can perform tasks such as medical transcription, administrative support, faxing, and appointment scheduling.

A virtual assistant is available at a fraction of the cost of hiring an additional staff member. These cost savings maintain the quality of service you provide your patients, and the addition of a virtual assistant can enhance the patient experience.

The benefit of a virtual assistant also improves the patient's experience with the practice. With a virtual assistant, patients have shorter telephone hold times and quicker access to information, leading to higher patient satisfaction.

Improvement in appointment accuracy and efficiency translates to shorter waiting times to gain access to the practice, thus increasing overall patient satisfaction.

Key considerations and steps to take when hiring a virtual assistant for a medical practice include the following:

- **Define tasks and responsibilities.** Provide the virtual assistant with a clear job description. Consider listing the specific tasks and responsibilities you want the virtual assistant to handle. This could include appointment scheduling, answering phone calls, managing emails, updating patient records, and handling other administrative duties.
- **Medical knowledge and training.** We suggest hiring a virtual assistant with healthcare or medical administration background. Familiarity with medical terminology and processes can help the assistant integrate seamlessly into the practice. Consider a previous employee who knows your practice, know your process of care, and knows the other employees.
- **HIPAA compliance.** Given the sensitive nature of healthcare information, ensure that the virtual assistant understands and complies with the HIPAA regulations. Protecting patient confidentiality is crucial, so the virtual assistant should be well-versed in privacy and security measures.
- **Proficiency with technology.** Ensure the virtual assistant is proficient in the technology and software used in your medical practice. This may include EHR systems, appointment scheduling software, telehealth platforms, and other relevant tools.
- **Communication skills.** Effective communication is essential in a medical practice. The virtual assistant should have excellent written and verbal communication skills to interact with patients, colleagues, and other referring physicians.

The virtual assistant does not need to be located near your practice. A virtual assistant might be a new parent who wants to work from home, a recently retired employee, or a previous receptionist or coder from your practice. If your medical practice serves patients across different time zones, consider these factors when establishing a work schedule to ensure adequate coverage. If your practice has patients who speak languages other than English, consider looking for a multilingual virtual assistant.

Consider starting with a trial period to assess the virtual assistant's performance and compatibility with the medical practice. This allows you to adjust and ensures that the arrangement meets your expectations.

Ensure the virtual assistant has a secure and private workspace for handling medical information. Discuss technical requirements, such as a reliable internet connection and specific software or hardware needs.

Provide comprehensive training and onboarding to familiarize the virtual assistant with your medical practice's policies, procedures, and workflows. This may involve virtual

training sessions, documentation, and ongoing support. If you have regular staff meetings, invite the virtual assistant to attend those meetings. Just because they are not physically in the office doesn't mean they are not part of a team.

Hiring a virtual assistant for a medical practice can increase efficiency and cost-effectiveness, allowing healthcare professionals to focus on patient care. However, careful consideration of the medical field's unique needs and regulatory requirements is essential throughout the hiring process.

Although we don't have any data to prove that having a virtual assistant will reduce the no-show rate, we believe that this is a possibility that may motivate practices to consider a

virtual assistant, especially those that are experiencing a high no-show rate.

Bottom Line: Healthcare is having trouble attracting and maintaining medical staff. A virtual assistant is a potential solution for staff shortages, offering relief from administrative tasks and revolutionizing healthcare delivery. No one ever imagined we could care for patients virtually using telemedicine and not be required to be face-to-face with the patient. Now, we can rely on virtual assistants to handle many of the administrative tasks, alleviating the burden on our in-office staff, which allows the staff to do what they do best — take good care of patients. ■■