

Human Capital

The Changing Face of Today's Workforce



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BY EVRA TAYLOR / CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

In the fast-changing world of recruitment, hiring and firing in the eyecare sector, a few things hold true: gone are the days when a competitive salary, bonus plan and matching 401K contributions were sufficient to attract and retain employees. These days, ECP practices and clinics have to sweeten the pot with incentives that address both hard and soft skill needs.

In light of the increasing shortage of ophthalmologists and optometrists in the United States,

candidates are in high demand and the profession is facing what would be termed a “buyer’s market” in real estate terms. This gap between supply and demand in eyecare is a subset of an unfortunate broader reality of a severe shortage of physicians across the board, including general practitioners and specialists in all therapeutic areas, not only in the United States but in Canada and Europe, as well.

An aging population with a resulting high incidence of comorbidities, including ocular diseases, as well as people working and living longer, have combined to create a perfect storm, resulting in a

lack of adequate eyecare resources that affects urban areas but jeopardizes rural and low-income residents and those with mobility issues, in particular.

A recent study, “Ophthalmology Workforce Projections in the United States, 2020 to 2035,” published in *Ophthalmology* journal, found that while the number of full-time ophthalmologists will decline by 2,650 between 2020 and 2035, the demand for these doctors will jump to 5,150, representing a supply and demand mismatch of 30 percent. For practices, this shortage means stiffer competition for recruiting the available talent.

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It's also becoming more difficult to find reliable support staff for ophthalmology clinics, such as administrators, receptionists and technicians. A recent report by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that over the last 20 years, the labor participation rate has declined steadily. According to the study "Job Flows into and out of Health Care Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic," published in *JAMA Health Forum*, staff turnover rates have also increased among health care workers since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

New Jobs Being Created or Lost

Evan Kaplan, OD, and associate clinical professor (Emeritus), SUNY College of Optometry, in private practice in New York City, underscores that the current health care crisis will fuel the demand for ECPs. "The need for care will be further amplified by the increasing prevalence of chronic health conditions in the United States, such as obesity and hypertension, which are closely linked to eye-related complications. Because of this, I don't believe any jobs are being lost; instead, the demand for skilled eyecare professionals continues to grow."

"Several expanding technological developments are revolutionizing the eyecare industry," stated Brett Kestenbaum, COO of Eyes On Eyecare, a digital publication that provides quality clinical and career education to the next generation of optometrists, headquartered in San Diego, Calif. The growth of artificial intelligence and tele-optometry have literally changed the way physicians do business.

"There is an increasing push throughout both health care and general business for efficiency. We may begin to see administrative tasks either automated or jobs lost within a practice. An example of this is scribe services. There are now tools that can help a practitioner take notes during their examination rather than having a scribe in the examination room," he said.

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Evan Kaplan, OD

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Experts Agree the Demand for Skilled Eyecare Professionals Continues to Grow

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“As the need for health care services continues to grow due to a variety of factors, such as the doubling of the population of individuals over the age of 65 by 2030, the need for optometry services, and thus the need for optometrists, opticians and technicians, will continue to expand during that time,” continued Kestenbaum. “We may also start to see the displacement of jobs rather than their loss or creation. This can be very beneficial for the general population, especially for people who live in areas where it is difficult to find care.

“This displacement may be seen, for example, with advancements in tele-optometry and the ability for a practitioner to see a patient without having to be in direct contact with a patient. We may find that practitioners tend even further toward living in urban and suburban areas while being able to service rural communities,” Kestenbaum said.

According to Howard Purcell, OD, president of New England College of Optometry in Boston, Mass., new jobs in the optical industry are emerging in technology-driven areas such as tele-optometry, virtual care coordination and AI-enhanced diagnostics. “Positions like digital marketing specialists for practices, telehealth coordinators and data analysts for patient outcomes are on the rise. On the other hand, traditional optical lab technician roles may decline as more automation and digital lens technology streamline those processes,” he explained.

Kestenbaum’s point of view is that the eyecare industry has a stable ecosystem of patient care and products to meet those patients’ needs. “AI opens up a whole new world as it augments the knowledge of potentially less educated individuals. With the ability to answer questions and reason out answers, AI will have a trickle-down effect bringing what typically was more specialized skills to the average person. Examples of this in the eyecare industry could be an increase in the role of the technician.”

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Thanks to Technology, New Jobs in Optical Industry Are Emerging

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Kestenbaum continued, “As technology becomes more capable of general and advanced diagnostics, technicians will be able to be more involved within an examination without having to synthesize as much information, since the synthesis can be done at the level of the technology. This will allow the clinician to either see more patients in the same period of time, expanding care to more individuals—more patients per hour means that in a society where we likely have an undersupply of optometrists, a larger percentage of the population will have access to more immediate care when needed—or will be able to go deeper into an examination with a patient in less time because they have tools that are managing a larger portion of the workload.”

“Technicians must be proficient in using various instruments to gather accurate data,” explained Dr. Kaplan. “The AI capabilities integrated into many of these tools—with more innovations on the way—will aid in screening patients and detecting potential issues before they become clinically significant. Additionally, optical staff must stay informed about the latest lens technologies and add-on options to effectively educate patients, ensuring they receive the best eyewear tailored to their needs.”

The Next Generation of ODs

“When it comes to our graduates, there are multiple opportunities in private, group, retail and other modalities,” said Fraser C. Horn, OD, president of the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO) and dean of Pacific University College of Optometry in Forest Grove, Ore. “I’m uncertain if this is due to new positions being created, but it feels like there is a need for providers. Some of the requests I receive are due to retirements or a need due to an increase in patient care at a practice, while others are due to openings that naturally occur.”

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Howard Purcell, OD

“The skill set of in-office staff is evolving, with many roles now requiring proficiency in practice management software, telehealth technologies and advanced pre-testing devices like OCTs.”

**- Howard Purcell, OD, president of
New England College of Optometry**



Diverse Career Paths in Optical Are Developing for Optometrists and Opticians

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New Career Paths Emerging

Dr. Purcell noted that career paths in the optical industry are diversifying with opportunities beyond traditional clinical practice. For optometrists, roles in corporate optometry, telehealth and vision science research are growing. Opticians can now branch into sales management, digital eyewear consultations and online retail platforms. Business-focused roles like practice management consulting, operations analysis and private equity partnerships in optometry are very prominent, he said.

“In-office staff typically include a mix of optometric technicians or assistants, optical dispensers, office managers and receptionists. The skill set is evolving, with many roles now requiring proficiency in practice management software, telehealth technologies and advanced pre-testing devices like OCTs. Cross-training is also on the rise, with staff performing both administrative duties and clinical support,” Dr. Purcell said.

Steven T. Reed, OD, president of the American Optometric Association (AOA), contends that paraoptometric certification promotes a skilled, cohesive care team equipped to build a practice for years to come. “We’ve seen practices measure their excellence by the level of commitment and training of their paraoptometrics. Paraoptometric certification is not only an internal validation of commitment to employees and staff expertise but also an external investment in the future of an optometry practice.

“Additionally, with the increasing demand for primary eye health care services delivered by optometry, as well as optometric scope of practice advances nationwide, optometry practices need competent paraoptometric staff who can demonstrate a high level of clinical capabilities and practice management knowledge to truly set themselves apart,” stated Dr. Reed.

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Optical Industry Steps Up to Meet the Needs of Today's Recruits

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Revolution EHR, based in San Diego, Calif., is a firm specifically designed for optometry practices to simplify patient management and business processes by consolidating computer systems and reducing paperwork. The company reports that new career trends, such as academic or public health settings, are changing the face of the optical industry. Additionally, many optometrists are moving toward specialized fields in optometry, such as pediatric or sports vision, to provide tailored eyecare services to patients.

These optometry career trends are impacting hiring practices, with employers hiring those comfortable with technology and paying bigger salaries to compensate for specialized skills.

Shifting pay and benefits expectations, and a new focus on building a professional network and reputation, are also impacting the future of optometric careers.

"The landscape of medical practice has undergone significant changes in recent years," stated Dr. Kaplan. "Traditional optometric careers in private or retail settings are evolving due to the growing influence of private equity in private practices and the consolidation of local hospitals into larger health care systems."

He pointed out that as hospital networks expand, many large MD/OD practices now rely on optometrists as primary care providers to fill the gap left by ophthalmology residents, who increasingly pursue specialty training. Contact lens and pharmaceutical companies recognize this shift, targeting optometrists for roles such as medical directors, medical science liaisons and leaders of professional or academic affairs tasked with educating current and future providers on their products.

"There are the typical career paths of associ-

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Optometry Is Still Grappling With the Challenge of Staff Turnover

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ates, employees, partnerships, faculty and industry,” commented Dr. Horn. “Often, I think career paths may not have changed drastically. However, there are ways that practices have changed. Whether that is integrating some of the latest in specialty care, for example, dry eye, aesthetics and myopia control, or delivering care via remote examinations, there are ways that our colleagues can share their passion to make an impact on our community.

“Within optometric education, there are wonderful changes being made through an integra-

tion of active learning strategies. This helps us to engage with our students in different ways and, hopefully, help them understand optometry and health care. Faculty are utilizing myriad techniques including, but not limited to, in-class polling systems, gamifying topics, and utilizing virtual reality and AI. The use of technology is truly adjusting how we’re delivering education and it’s a fun time to be in education,” Dr. Horn said.

Meeting the Needs of Today’s Recruits

Workforce requirements have changed over the

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Optometrist Recruiters Must Weigh Needs and Wants of Job Seekers

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years, with the current cadre of graduating and newly-practicing ECPs seeking a new and different set of hard- and soft-skill-related criteria for employment. Personal aspirations are now just as important as professional ones, and workplace culture and a sense of community are paramount.

For Gen Zers and Millennials, a company with tangible community involvement and a sense of giving back is essential, not only for the hiring organization but for its employees as well. Work-

life balance is a phrase that dominates any discussion in the hiring process as candidates view themselves as their own corporation.

In some cases, loyalty to oneself may take precedence over long-term loyalty to a company, with a mindset of being self-employed in the sense of managing and driving their own career, even while working under the aegis of an ECP practice. In this context, the ability to set their own schedules, with limited or no overtime, is key. Work is no longer “everything” but rather,

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Work-Life Balance Dominates the Hiring Process Discussion

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just one component of an otherwise busy life.

Expected earning potential, patient demographics and patient volume are major considerations in choosing where to work. Young ECPs seek professional training as well as learning and development opportunities to further their career. In addition, financial considerations are enormous in terms of receiving adequate remuneration to pay off student debt.

The Challenge of Staff Turnover

According to Dr. Horn, within optometric education the turnover of faculty varies based on the program. “I think most, if not all, programs were impacted with turnover of our clinical and administrative staff during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. We have had challenges with recruitment and retention of various positions,” he noted.

Kestenbaum contends that turnover rates for the eyecare industry are relatively low at the physician level, and relatively normal for administrative positions. Optometrists and opticians have a tendency to stay in their positions for longer periods of time than front office staff. There are a few reasons for this. First, optometrists and opticians are typically well-compensated and have fewer financial incentives to look for positions elsewhere. On top of that, the industry is relatively small, and there are only so many opportunities within a given geographic area, and the practice owners may all know each other.

Kestenbaum said, “For administrative positions, these individuals aren’t limited to working in the eyecare industry. They can be administrators in almost any field, so switching jobs can be a much more available option. Right now, in 2024, we’re seeing considerably lower turnover rates than we have in the past. That’s because employment is cyclical, and we’re coming off one



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“Workforce requirements have changed over the years, with the current cadre of graduating and newly-practicing ECPs seeking a new and different set of hard- and soft-skill-related criteria for employment.”

of the highest employment rates in recent history, where we saw phenomena such as ‘silent quitting’ and job mobility hitting all-time highs.

“Now, we’re in a cycle where there are fewer open jobs and unemployment rates are climbing. This is due in part to the federal reserve raising interest rates, which tends to slow down economic activity, and the federal government decreasing the amount of stimulus within the economy. At a point in the future, we will see this shift again, but

in the present we’re in a period where we’ll likely see lower turnover rates and a slowdown in the rate of wage increases within any given position,” Kestenbaum said.

Role of the Optometrist Recruiter

Kestenbaum views the recruiter as a consultant, helping practices understand the current hiring climate, the needs and wants of job-seeking optometrists, and the process of moving from a pro-



spective candidate to a new hire and a new team member. “Recruiters are constantly talking to both practices and optometrists, so they’re able to see the industry from both sides with a 360-degree view. This knowledge is very helpful in making successful employment happen,” he said.

“Recruiters also assist with negotiations to ensure that offers are appropriate and accepted. It’s typically in a practice’s best interest to hire interested candidates since there is an undersupply and immediate need to fill a vacancy. Ensuring that the process ends in a hire rather than a rejected offer is a critical component. The goal is always to create a win-win for the practice and the

job seeker, where all parties feel good about the outcome,” Kestenbaum commented.

“The role of the optometry recruiter for our optometry students is to be an ambassador for their employer,” stated Dr. Horn. “Within optometry education programs, we expect recruiters to be honest with our students about the offerings of working for the business. In addition, we hope that they’ll provide our graduates with opportunities to have mentorship from those in business or in the community. This truly helps our students transition into the optometry community.”

Dr. Purcell pointed out that recruiters assess not only clinical qualifications but also the cultural fit

within a practice. They’re tasked with identifying trends in the profession and ensuring the practices they work with stay competitive by hiring optometrists who have the technical skills and some business acumen to thrive in today’s market.

“The problems I’ve encountered often arise from prospective employees misrepresenting their qualifications or the job description not accurately reflecting the actual role. A skilled recruiter can help mitigate these issues by ensuring that only qualified candidates are considered and that applicants fully understand the responsibilities and expectations of the position they are applying for,” added Dr. Kaplan. ■



Recruitment and Outreach Methods to Attract Top Talent

How and where ECPs advertise job opportunities has evolved so dramatically over the years that the methods of outreach signify a totally new landscape. ECPs use omnichannel marketing driven in large part by social media and online job boards. There is consensus among the experts that, for the most part, traditional advertising modalities no longer apply.

“There are a variety of places to advertise open OD positions. Schools and state associations typically have job boards,” stated Brett Kestenbaum, COO of Eyes On Eyecare. “Large, generic hiring sites such as Indeed or ZipRecruiter are available, and niche websites such as eyesoneyecare.com, where I am one of the co-founders, are also available options.

He continued, “The best approach is to be as wide as possible with your efforts because the goal here is speed-to-hire. Prolonged vacancy is what a practice really needs to try to avoid, and all options should be on the table to speed up the hiring process. I always recommend practices start the hiring process well in advance of having a need. For example, if a practice sees that they have an expanding patient base, and they ‘may have a need for another optometrist in the future,’ I’d recommend starting the process when they begin to get that sense. Work to hire someone one day per week.”

Kestenbaum said that hiring a recruiter is a great approach as recruiters work on contingent contracts, meaning, they only get paid if they find a physician who ends up taking the job and working at the practice. “At Eyes On Eyecare, we’re able to reduce hiring times by over 50 percent through active recruiting versus advertising methods only. The faster the physician is hired, the earlier they’ll be available to see patients. And the biggest missed opportunity for a practice is a missed patient engagement, since every pa-



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tient is also the potential for a referral, so if you miss the opportunity for one patient, you may actually be missing the long-term opportunity of two, four or eight patients,” added Kestenbaum.

Casting a Wide Net

Colleen Halfpenny, MD, a managing partner at Valley Eye Professionals and clinical instructor at the cataract and primary eyecare clinic at Wills Eye, said that they’ve found most of their physicians through the network of residents and fellows that she or her colleagues already knew or personally trained. “If you live in an area with a lot of residency programs, it’s a great resource, especially when you’re involved in teaching them and can recruit them at an early stage, if they’re interested in staying in the area.”

“This past year, VSP Vision conducted a study examining how optometrists in various stages of their career are navigating the profession,” stated Quy Nguyen, OD, director of doctor relations at VSP Vision. He noted that one segment of respondents—the novice practitioner, comprised

of Millennials and Gen Zers—are prioritizing their health and well-being to create a lifestyle that’s beneficial to a career in optometry. “When hiring this next generation of optometrists, all practice modalities should be mindful of providing a supportive practice environment, mentorship and growth opportunities as this group looks to learn, grow and pay off student debt.”

Dr. Nguyen continued, “Through VSP Premier Edge Career Support, practices are advised to go a step beyond simply listing their open position. They’re encouraged to highlight their mission and work culture to ensure both the practice and the candidate’s passions match. It’s important to note that approaching the hiring process with a ‘one size fits all’ method can have an adverse effect. Each practice should be thoughtful about what exactly they’re looking for in a candidate, whether it’s a skill set, perspectives or behaviors, and try to stay true to those needs as best they can. Customized job postings help ensure practices hire the right candidate the first time around.”

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How Recruitment and Outreach Methods Attract Top Talent

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Where to Advertise

According to Dr. Purcell, today's optometrists typically advertise job openings through industry job boards like AOAExcel and *Vision Monday*, as well as using LinkedIn. In addition, practices often post listings in regional or state optometry association newsletters. Outreach methods are expanding to include networking at trade shows, alumni associations from optometry schools and targeted email campaigns. Practices are also adopting referral incentives for current employees to attract high-quality candidates through word of mouth.

Evan Kaplan, OD, associate clinical professor (Emeritus), SUNY College of Optometry, pointed out that social media has largely replaced local newspaper advertisements, church bulletins and educational in-person events as the primary advertising method. "Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram allow practices to use direct ads for products or share posts containing general educational content, whether in written or video format. These posts can cover topics like disease awareness, the importance of regular eye examinations, or the introduction of new technology and products at the practice. These are all excellent ways to increase visibility and promote the practice to a broader audience," he said.

"Our members find success with LinkedIn, Indeed, ZipRecruiter and PECAA Classifieds, which is open to both PECAA members and non-members and connects people through open jobs at private practices, as well as equipment and practices for sale across the country," stated Kathy Long, operations advisor, Professional Eye Care Associations of America (PECAA). "However, I also recommend asking your patients for referrals and posting on your practice's website and social media pages. Reaching out to state colleges and junior colleges that offer medical assis-

tant programs can be effective as well. The goal is to attract as many qualified candidates as possible via multiple avenues."

Long continued, "Since younger generations are more tech-savvy, recruitment practices need to adapt. Your presence on online review sites, as well as your website and social media pages, are now more critical than ever. These platforms form the first impression for candidates, not just your patients."

Fraser C. Horn, OD, president of the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO), noted that "there is often an individual at optometry programs who can forward advertisements for openings. There are also some programs that have job fairs where recruiters can be present and interact with optometry students and plant the seed of why their practice should be their next clinic. The job fairs have been fruitful for many colleagues and industry partners."

"With demand for eyecare from doctors of optometry well recognized, it's critical that efforts be made to ensure that all Americans have access to the eyecare they need now and into the future, and recruitment methods are rising to meet the challenges," said Steven T. Reed, OD, president of the American Optometric Association (AOA).

"Each career path is different. Many talent recruiters are looking for optometrists with business knowledge and leadership skills, as well as social and networking capabilities to connect, advocate or affect the larger industry and profession. Potential ways to recruit include alumni placement offices, profession-focused publications and journals, continuing education events and networking events," he said.

Dr. Reed continued, "The optometrist recruiter plays an important role in actively identifying doctors who will fit the specific skills that one is seeking, from clinical expertise to someone interested in purchasing the practice in the future. A recruit-



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er can provide a full range of services to help practices find their right fit, including marketing to source candidates; screening candidates; interviewing; offering a position; and onboarding. Recruiters can work with practices to create and manage an onboarding process for newly hired doctors, acclimating them to the practice and work expectations."

Speaking of candidates' expectations, Long stated that in the current job market now it's more important than ever to emphasize your practice values and team dynamics, which promote a strong office culture to candidates. "Your job posting should highlight these elements, along with all benefits, pay range with possible incentives, any flexibility with work schedules, and your vision for providing patients with the best possible experience and care. In short, it's no longer enough to simply list the qualifications you're looking for from potential employees."

The experts agree that when entertaining any potential candidate, it's important to remember not to hire too quickly; you first have to ensure the person will work well with your existing team and can offer a level of patient care consistent with what patients expect from your practice. Holding multiple phone calls and bringing candidates into the office for at least one physical interview can help you get a better feel for their personality and demeanor, as well as how they interact with the other staff. ■