

Fearless Negotiation

by Elaine McKay, RDA

How should a dental assistant prepare for a negotiation session that will result in equitable pay and a quality benefit package?

What is the first emotion you have going into a negotiation session? You, like most people, are probably feeling scared with your stomach in knots. Negotiating for equitable pay or a quality benefit package is a learned skill capable of changing your life. Agnvall (2007) stated, “Decisions not to negotiate first salaries cost women a lot of money and status during their careers” (p.69).

The purpose of this report is to provide negotiation and communication strategies capable of increasing your confidence level, which in turn will, alleviate your fear of negotiating. To provide personal and professional learning opportunities for you I have outlined a step-by-step guide of a negotiation session. This guide could change your earning potential for years to come. As a 25 year veteran of dental assisting, I have been an active participant in many negotiation sessions. I experienced the process as an employee and an employer. I am an instructor and an educational technologist for the dental assisting pro-gram at Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT). I have worked as a general practice dental assistant for 20 years. I have served as a board member of the Canadian Dental Assistants Association (CDAA) for the past nine years. I understand the needs of the profession from my personal, professional and volunteer experiences.

Background

I remember feeling ecstatic when I graduated from NAIT as a dental assistant. At my first interview, I was 20 years old and my prospective employer was a gentleman of about 50. Looking back, the negotiation process went rather well for the employer; he told me what I would earn and that there was no benefit package. My financial situation was not unlike most graduating students who had to repay a student loan. I accepted the position as offered.

The more things change the more they stay the same. When I meet recent dental assisting graduates, across Canada, I ask about their job interviews. It is amazing how many will tell a story similar to mine.

My experiences and those of my younger peers bring me to understand that there is a need for further training in the area of negotiating. Dolan (2004) stated that “By understanding negotiation, you can prevent being conned into things you don’t want to do or getting less than you deserve” (p.69).

Context

The lack of training and experience is not the only factor, which leads dental assistants to refrain from negotiating. Dental assisting is predominantly a young female profession and dentistry is predominantly an older male profession. Gender, age and education levels combine to form a hierarchal working environment. This environment may cause feelings of intimidation.

Dentists, like all interviewers tend to have behavior expectations. Agnvall (2007) stated, “They expect men to be forceful, assertive and in charge, while women are expected to be agree-able,

nice and attending to the concerns of others.” (p71).

A hierarchal environment does not mean you should be afraid of negotiating. It does, however mean that you must develop strategies to achieve success.

Preparation

An interview is not a test. It is an information gathering process for both parties. A dental assistant must do research to achieve a successful interview. The idea of „winging it“ is not a good plan considering the decision made will directly impact your career for years to come. Navigating blindly is not a good strategy. You need to be prepared. You need a plan.

Be aware of the market value of your skills, experience and knowledge. Market value is important for future earning be-cause most raises are based on your starting salary. All provincial associations in Canada have researched potential value of background such as education, length of experience, certifications and region. Be aware of the personal skills you bring to the position. Other sources of information are industry contacts, fellow dental assistants and job posting boards or classified ads.

You must evaluate your personal salary requirements. Included in your evaluation are housing, transportation, leisure and living costs. Honesty is the best policy when completing this evaluation. When the evaluation is finished develop a salary range with high, low and middle ranges. Do not spread out your ranges too far.

Make a list of your accomplishments. What skills can you offer to the position? You are the best resource of information about you, you have to be willing to advocate for yourself.

Have a clear understanding of the job responsibilities and position. Will you be a chair side assistant, receptionist, treatment co-coordinator or sterilization assistant? Are you comfortable with the position being offered?

Consider your priorities, what do you want and why? What is your bottom line? Considerations of alternative benefits are parking, dental and medical coverage, flexible hours, transit expenses, education tuition refunds, professional association dues and seminars or training.

“Fringes such as life insurance, health benefits or health plans, vacation or holiday plans and retirement programs typically add anywhere from 15 to 28 percent to many workers” salaries. If an employee receives \$3,000 salary per month, the fringe benefits are worth another \$400 to \$840 per month” (Bolles, 2009, p.125).

Doing your homework is critical to achieving your salary expectations. Information is power. Know-in what you expect and what you can contribute to a job position is essential to true happiness.

Mind Set

Before entering into a negotiation session you must prepare mentally. Know what you value personally and professionally. What you are willing to compromise? Each dental office will present a dif-ferent working environment. Diversity of values and ethics is common. It is

essential to know who you are and what you believe.

Happiness is worth more than money. “Character is a set of virtues or traits that make up who or what we are as persons and goes beyond personality or charisma or even skills and encompasses, instead the foundation the very core of the person's essence” (Irvine, 2003, p.102).

Attitude

“Believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities! Without a humble but reasonable confidence in your own powers you cannot be successful or happy. But with sound self - confidence you can succeed” (Venrella, 2001, p.1).

The key to attitude is „be realistic“. Organizations respect employees who can articulate the value that they add, however if you are a recent grad you can alienate potential employers with an inappropriate approach. To keep your attitude in check, speak of how you can increase the office effectiveness, service and bottom line. I do not recommend a „take it or leave it approach. “ The dentist may presume that you are not interested in the position.

Agnvall (2007) states that, “men were less willing to work with women who negotiated, and women penalized both men and women who asked for more” (p.71). Aggressive direct women are still labeled negatively. It is not advised to enter into the negotiation process as the tough guy. “

Enter the interview process with enthusiasm and a polite professional attitude. Be calm and approachable. A non demanding attitude is preferred along with avoidance of confrontation.

Appearance

First impressions are important. The dentist is looking for an employee to represent his office favorably. Arrive at the office in professional business attire. Dress pants or a skirt with a non revealing shirt are acceptable choices. Be careful when choosing a skirt, mini's are not acceptable. Your shoes should allow you to comfortably walk without slipping or falling.

Personal hygiene is important. Makeup should be applied conservatively using light colors, not dramatic dark shades. Hair should be neat, tidy and clean. Nails should be manicured. Be aware of strong smelling perfumes. Your breath should be fresh.

Arriving at the Office

On your prompt arrival, make eye contact with the receptionist when greeting her. Present yourself with a confident attitude. If the receptionist is willing to converse, do so. When introduced to the dentist firmly shake his/her hand. Always be polite and respectful to any staff members you meet during the interview. Be cautious of your voice volume. Do not speak to softly or loudly.

The Interview

Bolles (2009) suggested that “an interview resembles dating more than it does buying a used car. An interview is two people trying to decide if they want „to go steady“” (p.77). A dental assistant works within a three feet radius of the dentist all day. You better like one another! It is

vital to remember the dentist is not only interviewing you, you are interviewing the dentist. Personality „fit“ is very important in the dental office environment.

It is significant to remember that both parties are scared. The employer has learned to hide his fears better because he has had practice. He is worried about things such as, how long will you stay, how much training will you require, will you like him and his staff and can he afford you. With practice you could learn to hide your fears too!

Questions

Typical questions the dentist may ask you and some helpful resources to use when answering them are listed below. Practice your responses. Bolles stated, “you might want to get a good business friend of your to role-play a mock hiring-interview with you, in case they immediately see something glaringly wrong with how you’re coming across” (p.105). The dark bullets below are typical questions a dentist may ask. Beneath are suggested answers or comments you may consider.

Why are you applying for this job?

How can you benefit the offices bottom line?

Use your list of accomplishments to explain why you are unique.

What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Explain your skill level. Identify your professional and personal strengths. Mention a weakness that could be turned around to strength. A good example is: I am a very detailed person. It may take me a few minutes longer to set up, however I will not forget any instruments.

Who are you?

Identify if you are a team player, hard worker, easy to get along with, positive, caregiver, honest. Speak about your family, your likes and dislikes.

What are your work ethics?

Explain if you will stay late or come in early. Identify if you take pride in your work. Identify your work standards.

What are your needs?

Use your list of wage ranges and benefit requests to explain your needs.

Here is a list of questions that will help you to determine a good fit“.

- What skills are required for the position?
- Can you tell me a little about you and your staff?

- What makes your office unique?
- What type of treatment does this office offer?
- What type of patients do you treat in your office?

“Practice your response so that your answers are appropriate and non-defensive when questions come up” (Brown, 2008, p. 85). Role playing an interview situation with a friend could provide the practice you require.

Wages and Benefits

Salary discussions should follow the formal offer, preferably in writing. If the dentist raises the money question early, you may respond, “Until you’ve decided you definitely want me, and I’ve decided I definitely could help you with your tasks here, I feel any discussion of salary is premature” (Bolles, 2009, p.110). Another appropriate response, “I’ll gladly come to that, but could you first help me to understand what this job involves” (Bolles, 2009, p. 110).

The dentist should initiate the salary amount first. When the dentist has offered you the job, you have more negotiating power, because you know he is interested in you. If he is pushing for your answer without giving you a salary amount then you could answer, “I am sure your company pays competitive salaries and that compensation won’t be an issue if I am the right person for the job” (Brown, 2008, p.85).

When negotiating remember, the sum can be greater than the wage amount when adding in benefits. Never give an amount, always state ranges. Make sure to remind the dentist of your worth. Confidence is important. Try not to appear nervous. When stating a reason-able salary range, try using a silent strategy. State the range and then stop talking. Do not try to justify your request. Wait for the answer.

If the dentist offers a salary below your range you can reply by stating, “I am excited about being part of your team, but according to my research, the salary is below the industry standard. Would your budget permit \$45,000 instead of \$40,000?”

It is acceptable to ask for a couple of days to think about the offer. It is not acceptable to continue the negotiations on the phone. Make another appointment if necessary.

Once you have accepted the offer ask for a wage contract. You can request a wage contract from Canadian Dental Assistants Association, (CDAA). The web site information is www.cdaa.ca.

If you do your homework and practice your responses you will be able to negotiate a reasonable offer. You will understand if the „fit“ is acceptable. Do not accept the offer if you are uncomfortable doing so. Trust your research and your intuition.

Conclusion

There is no guarantee that by following the negotiation and communication strategies above you will receive equitable pay or a quality benefit package. It takes research, time and practice to become proficient at negotiating. When you become comfortable with the process your stomach knots will disappear. Knowledge, training and a new skill level in negotiating will assure you a successful experience. I wish you all the success in finding employment.

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