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## **Opportunities abound: Embracing modern workforce challenges**

by William Rabourn Jr.

The U.S. labor force is undergoing a massive (and permanent) transformation, spurred to a dizzying pace by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, an average of 3.9 million U.S. workers quit their jobs each month.<sup>1</sup> What is being referred to as “The Great Resignation,” which shows no signs of slowing down in 2022, has disrupted industries and upended the employer-employee relationship.

In response to the pandemic, many (if not all) businesses were forced to switch to survival mode, leading to anyone and everyone being on the proverbial chopping block. As layoffs and furloughs impacted workers, from entry level to the C-suite, the U.S. government recognized the severity and scope of the situation and began implementing aggressive economic safety measures for both employers and employees. In response to these measures, an about-face ensued for some employers, immediately attempting to rehire those they had laid off.

The pandemic served as the catalyst to workforce reform, reform that likely had been building behind the scenes as technology has advanced and workplace culture evolved. From boomers to zoomers (Gen Z), workers across the country and from all industries were forced (or allowed, depending on perspective) to rethink how they work, where they work, when they work, and whether to work at all. The altered attitudes of this new workforce resulted in otherwise content workers reassessing their current employment and considering a new approach altogether to work and life.

Now, the country is experiencing serious labor shortages from its workforce. There simply aren't enough workers available to fill all the vacant jobs. Practices across the country are grappling with crippling staff shortages. But opportunity is often disguised as challenge. To quote Churchill: “A pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty.”

### **Educate, communicate, automate**

An incredibly variable and impactful element in improving operational efficiencies surrounds patient education. An ophthalmologist who spends all day educating patients and answering question after question will lose the battle for efficiency—not only the ophthalmologist, but the entire staff. Practices can minimize inefficiencies and conduct shorter, more productive consultations by empowering the patient through education, online portals, and the ability to complete online forms prior to appointment. Making education available 24/7 via a website or app is necessary for empowering patients and reducing confusion. For patients who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, this contactless education is safer for them than in-person.

Communicating with patients has never been faster or more accessible, but as communication becomes easier and more robust, the need to properly strategize and manage what is being said should be a priority for all practices. It is now easier than ever to customize and launch powerful, automated patient relationship programs. Customer relationship management (CRM) products not only offer solutions around scheduling and appointment reminders, but these applications are also designed to engage, educate, and empower patients. Check in at home, in the car, or on the phone. Access medical history, e-signatures, make payments, and download/upload files. These are the expectations of the modern patient, and they play a major role in their

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<sup>1</sup> <https://genesishrsolutions.com/peo-blog/why-are-people-quitting-their-jobs/>

perception of health providers. For providers, building an accessible, responsive, efficient CRM can not only automate communications, it can also impress patients.

Self-checkout and check-in kiosks have become commonplace in grocery stores and airports, and soon they will become commonplace in many more sectors. Much like corporations and airlines recognized the power and improved efficiency of replacing full-time employees with user interfaces and kiosks, practice owners may soon ask, “Do we really need multiple front desk employees dedicated to check in? Why can’t patients check in themselves?” From intake and initial appointment all the way to satisfaction survey and review, programs utilizing texts, links, QR codes, and other automated tools can dramatically reduce the need for scheduling and data entry staff.

## **IoT and 5G**

Healthcare is comparatively slower to adopt new digital technologies than other industries. Navigating the ethical, financial, regulatory, and safety considerations can inhibit and discourage integrating innovative technologies. However, these incoming technologies and automatic processes will soon be the norm. Businesses who lean into these technologies will be better positioned than those who shy away.

Innovation in the digital technologies, particularly telehealth communications and the Internet of Things (IoT), offer ophthalmic practices new abilities to establish interdependent, synchronous networks that can improve clinical workflow, daily operations, and patient/provider communication. The IoT refers to the network of smart devices in homes, cars, and pockets that are connected to the internet. Cars, smartphones, home assistants, watches—there are now more connected devices online than there are humans on earth. From a communication perspective, the IoT offers businesses multi-touchpoint relationship building opportunities with patients along their journey. “Alexa, when is my eye appointment and what is the doctor’s name?”

Digital technologies not only offer businesses more communication opportunities, but they are also making the communication itself faster than ever. The communication of data and what enables the potential of the IoT is the colossal shift in communications technology and 5G networks. As networks across the country upgrade from 4G to 5G, the speed of these networks increases a shocking 2000%.<sup>2</sup> And 6G is already “under construction.” Those practices that make 5G a priority will operate much faster than those using 4G.

## **Remote work and outsourcing**

While the supply of available “full-time” workers isn’t keeping pace with the demand for them, the number of available part-time, remote, or project-based employees is a different story. Platforms that connect remote, skilled workers with potential employers have recently exploded. Finding a candidate for task or project-based work is only a few clicks away. As industries and systems become increasingly reliant on digital technology, the need for businesses to have access to technical expertise for fixes, improvements, and cybersecurity also increases.

For ophthalmologists and practice owners, terms like CRM, IoT, and 5G can seem overwhelming, much like eye surgery would seem overwhelming to an IT manager. Awareness of these terms is important; understanding their intricacies is best left to the experts. Outsourcing has grown in popularity over the years, particularly in areas like marketing, IT, and billing. This new and evolving workforce dynamic gives practices the option to hire a “piece” of an employee. Another potential positive to consider here is if an employee was inefficient, or the role itself was inefficient or unnecessary, the pandemic might have exposed this inefficiency.

The internet is always “online.” The automated systems and technologies that businesses depend on run 24/7 and can be accessed 24/7. This global workforce shift makes employing a skilled candidate in, for example, the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.iselect.com.au/internet/5g-australia/5g-vs-4g/>

Philippines or South Africa not only possible but logical, depending on the needs of the business. Business owners are no longer confined to the skillsets, time zones, and pay rates of the U.S.

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