

Goodbye front desk; Hello data center

For efficiency, make the computer your data center



BY DR. LARRY EMMOTT

Dr. Emmott's overriding message in this month's column is to put all your schedules, financial records, and charts into electronic files so that a computer — not a paper-based front desk — becomes your data center. To drive the point home, he takes a look at:

Downsides of front desks (page 34)

- Only one person at a time can access paper schedules, financial records, and charts
- Staff gets bogged down with scheduling, patients' requests

Benefits of chairside data centers (page 36)

- Hygienists make patient appointments, eliminating front-desk trips
- Patients more motivated to pursue care while at chairside

Steps to a data center (page 38)

- Start with practice management software
- Add treatment room computers
- Go fully digital with radiography and photography.

—The Editors

By Dr. Larry Emmott

A sure way to get a group of otherwise sensible dental-office administrators to go berserk is to mention the dreaded concept of “front-desk-less-ness.”

“What!” they say with a half-mad leer. “Who’s going to do the thousand and one things I do every day? No front desk? (Mumble, mumble, expletive). That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard of.”

When people hear the term “front-desk-less-ness,” they often envision an office with no greeters, no windows in the reception room, no people. They see just a bare room with chairs around the walls—like a holding cell.

Other people think front-desk-less-ness is just a way for stingy dentists to scrimp on staff.

Front-desk-less-ness isn’t any of these things. It is simply a different way of doing the business of the dental office, and it is all technology driven.

Dr. Omer Reed, a Phoenix dentist who first coined the term front-desk-less-ness, is one of the more innovative thinkers in dentistry. If you visit his Phoenix office, he essentially has no front desk. He does, however, have a complete, computerized, practice management system with treatment room computers.

Some dentists who are proponents of front-desk-less-ness have gone so far as to actually take a chain saw to the front desk. Then, they assign all business/administrative duties to clinical assistants or hygienists. In addition, each assistant is assigned specific patients whom the assistant will then take through the entire dental experience from greetings to collections. Further, the clinical assistants actually take payments and swipe credit cards in treatment rooms. They even carry cordless phones on their hips to answer the telephone from wherever they are.

This ultimate form of front-desk-less-ness will work; after all, there are dental offices readily embracing it. Taken to extremes, though, the concept probably isn’t for everybody. Most dentists will opt for a more moderate form of front-desk-less-ness. (For tips on how to get started, see “4 steps to a ‘computer-based’ office data center” on page 38).

Downsides of ‘paper-based’ front desks

To understand front-desk-less-ness, you must first look at the human systems we are now using. Why do we even have a front desk? The answer is that the front desk is the office’s data center. Problems occur, though, when an administrative person at the front desk tries to deal with a myriad of questions about data from patients on the phone and in the office.

Administrative front-desk staff members answer the phone *a lot*. If not talking on the telephone, a staff member is speaking face to face with the most important person in the office: the patient. Whether a staff member is talking on the phone or face to face with a patient, patient needs are the same; that is, patients have questions about scheduling, finances, or treatment.

To help patients with these needs, the front-desk person needs access to data: that is, to the schedule, financial records, and charts. Here’s what can go wrong when these records are all kept on paper:

- If the schedule is a paper book, the book only can be in one place at one time, and only one person can access it at a time.
- If the financial records are paper insurance forms and ledger cards, they also only can be in one place at a time.
- And, finally, if the treatment or chart information is on a paper chart, it, too, can only be in one place at a time.

In the past we managed all this paper data by grouping it in one place, the front desk.

How does this paper-based human system work, and what problems can occur? Here’s a typical scenario involving four patients and a front-desk person:

Patient 1. The front-desk person starts by checking out a patient. She and the patient are having a pleasant conversation and discussing fees. She takes a payment and then starts to make an appointment when ... the phone rings.

Patient 2. The front-desk person then breaks off the one-on-one conversation with Patient 1 and starts dealing with the person on the phone (Patient 2).

Patient 3. This phone call is about half done when ... another patient (Patient

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3) comes strolling up from the back. An office assistant accompanies Patient 3 to the front to hand the patient off, or to tell the front desk what to schedule for the patient. (The patient is ready to start a comprehensive full-mouth treatment plan and wants to arrange financing.)

The assistant, who's about to hand off Patient 3, sees Patients 1 and 2 lined up two deep at the desk and the front-desk person on the phone. The assistant doesn't have time for this, so she's 'outta there,' abandoning the comprehensive care patient.

Patient 3 then waits at the desk behind

Patient 1. Patient 3 starts rocking back and forth, and glancing at the time. Patient 1, meanwhile, is listening to the phone conversation with Patient 2, when... the other line rings.

Patient 4. "Hold please," the front-desk person says to Patient 2. "Hello, dental office; hold please," the person at the front

desk says to the patient (Patient 4) now ringing the phone.

Now four people—all patients—are caught in a logjam at the front desk, and nothing is getting done. The staff member is stressed out, and the four patients are frustrated.

Make the computer your data center

As long as all of the office's data is on paper, there is no other way to run the front desk and to avoid such logjams. Transferring all the data to a digital (electronic) form, though, changes everything. **With electronic data, the data center is the computer, not the front desk.** You can now conduct the duties of the front desk from anywhere there is a networked computer.

For example, why do you answer phones at the front desk? You do it because that's where the information is. If all you really need is access to data, you could answer phones anywhere you have a computer: at the front desk, in the back of the office, or even in a different building.

Answering the phone at the front desk takes that team member away from the important person who may be waiting at the desk: the patient with whom the team member is speaking—one-on-one, face-to-face.

Benefits of chairside scheduling and payment

Why do we schedule appointments at the front desk? We do it because that's where the paper book is. If you use an electronic schedule with treatment-room based computers, though, you can easily sched-

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ule appointments from the treatment room.

And who better to make the appointment than the chairside assistant? She has just heard the dentist and the patient discussing treatment. She knows exactly what needs to be done next. She knows if there is lab work involved or other clinical considerations that would affect the length of time needed for the next appointment. For example, she knows if

the patient is a gagger and needs special attention. She knows if the patient is the dentist's golfing buddy and likes to chat in great detail about each hole. The point is, some patients take more clinical or social time than others. If you don't plan for the extra time, you either will cut the patient's chair time off rudely or run late.

Appointments also can be lost or mismanaged when the hand-off of a patient from back to front is rushed or non-existent and when that patient, who may need financial information, is kept waiting or, even worse, ignored.

Why do we arrange financing at the front desk anyway? We do it because

that's where financial records and forms are kept. If the financial records, insurance forms, and payment histories were kept on a computer, though, we could discuss finances from anywhere, including chairside. Plus, advanced online systems now can allow us to arrange financing online in seconds.

4 steps to a 'computer-based' office data center

Here are Dr. Emmott's suggestions for the steps you can take to move away from a paper-based front desk toward a computer-based office data center, accessible by all staff, especially those in the operator:

1. Develop a technology infrastructure

Start with a complete, integrated, practice management software program. At a minimum, the software must include patient data, finances, scheduling, and charting. These features also must be integrated. In other words, the information or data you input into one computer file (as a patient's name and telephone number) will automatically pass from that program to another file where it is required.

2. Network the system throughout the office with treatment-room-based computers

Having treatment room computers allows for the seamless electronic transfer of information. Each computer station now is a data center and can do all the functions of the front desk.

3. Train every one on the team

Every team member, including the dentist, must become a "mouse master." You will never get full value from your technology investment without training. One of the biggest technology mistakes dentists often make is to take off and go golfing on the computer training day. Or worse yet, they don't get any training for the office at all.

4. Explore other high-tech options

Once the technology infrastructure is in place and the office knows how to use the system, this naturally leads to the use of many other advanced high-tech options we see in dentistry. This includes digital radiography, digital photography, cosmetic imaging, and digital patient education.

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In summary, with chairside scheduling, the dental hygienist's role changes, resulting in many benefits for both patients and a practice, including the following:

Easy patient scheduling. As I mentioned before, operatory computers make it easy for a hygienist to make an appointment at chairside. She then avoids the need to

walk up to the front with the patient, where the patient may then have to wait in line to schedule.

Better patient care. The best part of front-desk-less-ness-based hygiene, however, is improved patient care. Who better, and what better time and place to schedule the next continuing-care appointment, than

with the hygienist chairside, while the patient is motivated to improve his or her dental health?

The hygienist at chairside knows exactly when the patient needs to come back and how much treatment time he or she will need. She knows that if the person is a perio patient or a smoker, he or she



might need extra time. In contrast, if the patient is a healthy 21-year-old, the hygienist knows he or she will need less time.

Enhanced patient motivation. Another great plus of chairside scheduling is that it motivates patients. While chairside, patients are most acutely aware of any problems the doctor or hygienist may have found. In addition, while chairside, patients usually are sincerely anxious to take proper care of themselves. As a result, there will never be a better time to schedule the next appointment than at chairside.

Compare the motivation of a chairside patient with that of a patient at home six months later when the little happy-tooth recall postcard shows up.

The at-home patient still must believe there is a need for further treatment; after all, nothing is bothering him or her. The patient also must find time in a busy life to schedule an appointment time, and then to make the effort to call for the appointment. The old "send a card and hope" system will never be as effective as scheduling chairside, when the patient is anxious to make the appointment.

Instant access to data. The ability of the hygienist or a chairside assistant to access patient data instantly at chairside also allows staff to provide another great patient service: scheduling appointments for other members of a chairside patient's family.

For example, suppose a patient (at the front desk or chairside) asks, "When is my husband due?" and "What do my kids need done next?"

With a traditional front-desk, paper-based, data center, you can't really give an answer to this patient at chairside. Your only choice is to have the patient go up front and wait for a staff member to go through all the family charts, looking for the answers.

With electronic data and chairside computers acting as your data center, though, you can answer a chairside patient's questions about treatment for other family members easily and instantaneously. The result is better communication, better service, and, ultimately, better dental health for our patients.

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Expanded roles for front-desk staff. Front-desk-less-ness doesn't mean the office staff doesn't perform the duties of the front desk, and it doesn't necessarily mean there are no front-desk team members. It just means you do things differently and whatever you do is all technol-

ogy driven.

With technology, the duties of the front-desk staff change. Instead of being phone answerers and money collectors, they become greeters. They become office concierges, smoothly guiding people through the dental experience.

Most dental offices still will want at

least one administrative team member. That person could be an office manager, a treatment coordinator, or a business assistant. The person's duties could include the greeting or concierge function. The person also could be the new patient coordinator. He or she could be a financial coordinator setting up financial

arrangements—that is, arranging online financing—on major cases.

More staff cross-training. One of the biggest advantages of a computerized data center is cross-training. The computer data eliminates the artificial barrier between clinical and administrative teams, and it ensures that anyone can do the tasks necessary to keep the office running.

Front-desk-less-ness itself is not a goal. The concept is a natural result of using technology effectively. Like all high-tech advances, the goal should not be the technology itself; the goal is to treat the patients we serve more effectively.

Using a complete, integrated, patient-based, practice management system with chairside entry of patient data and front-desk-less-ness is an effective way to use technology and to improve the services we provide to our patients now and in the future—for the future is coming, and it will be amazing! **DPR**

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