Remember how excited you were on your first day of your job? You worked hard to find the perfect job and it paid off. What’s happened since that day? Are you still giving it your all? It is easy to become unmotivated after a long period of time doing the same job. Don’t let complacency take over. People who enjoy their job are those who do more than “show up” and do what it is expected of them; rather, exceed expectations by routinely learning new skills and working hard to provide excellent results.

Your efforts can help to secure the financial health of the practice and secure your position as an indispensable employee. The more value an employee adds to an optometric practice, the more indispensable that employee becomes. And, if you choose to leave the practice, you are making yourself more marketable for other positions.

Want to be indispensable? Read the following suggestions:

1. **Promote the practice.** Nothing will get the attention of your employer more than personally referring patients to the practice. When you talk to friends, acquaintances, neighbors and relatives, try to find ways to bring up the features of your practice that might appeal to the person you are talking to. Know why your practice is better than your competitor.

2. **View your practice through the eyes of the patients.** Don’t wait for the cleaning crew to take care of a finger smudged window or gum wrapper on the carpet. Take down those unsightly sticky notes that have been hanging on the counter for the past five years. Clean up spills around the coffee pot. Bring in a vase of flowers from your garden for your patients to enjoy. Discuss items that need repair or replaced with the practice manager or owner at a convenient time. Keep in mind that you have guests arriving every day who only get one chance at a first impression—make it a great one!
3. **Stay current.** Just because you know your job today does not mean that you will know it tomorrow. Advancements in eye care happen daily. Make it a habit to read articles in professional journals and in the AOA Paraoptometric Resource Center’s Article Archive. Share ideas from these articles with co-workers during staff meetings. Don’t be afraid to ask for clarity when you are unsure about how to do something. Use this information to improve your ability to educate patients. Educated employees are a valuable resource to both the doctor and patients.

4. **Handle patient complaints with grace and diplomacy.** Remember that even the patients who seem to have unjustifiable complaints are generally at least partially right. First, allow the patient to describe the problem without interruption. Next, repeat what the patient said by stating, “Let me make certain I understand your concern, you feel that (restate the problem)” and do what you can to solve the problem. Thank the patient for giving you an opportunity to make them happy and let the patient know that you will be accountable to them for a solution. If you cannot readily solve a patient complaint, let the office manager or doctor know so that they have an opportunity to “go outside the box” to solve the complaint. Better yet, bring your “outside the box” idea to the office manager or doctor.

5. **Avoid negative comments and gossip.** Speaking negatively or gossiping about co-workers, doctors or patients creates a toxic environment. Follow the old rule: “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.”

6. **Consider the office a stage.** There are times when you may not be happy or in good mood. But your “role as an actor” is to be positive and upbeat, even when you don’t feel that way. Gloomy employees are contagious to both patients and other staff members. Upbeat, enthusiastic employees are vital for practice growth.

7. **Earn five stars with every patient.** Today’s technology makes it quite easy for a patient to let the world know when they are unhappy with you or the practice. Don’t be the person who is the cause of a negative review on the Internet. Picturing every patient as a potential author who is putting your report card in public view may inspire you to find creative ways to exceed your patient’s expectations.

8. **Promote others.** Whenever possible, point out the expertise of doctors and co-workers. This might involve saying things like,

   “Meredith is the insurance queen! I am certain she can help you.”
   “Sergio has a knack for picking out frames that compliment your face.”
   “Dr. Raines fits more bifocal contacts than anyone in the area.”
   “Is it okay if I transfer you to Donna? I am certain she can find an appointment time that meets your schedule.”
These types of comments set patients at ease and will reflect well on the entire practice. You look good when you make the people around you look good.

9. **Set personal goals.** Each quarter, consider at least one new initiative that you would like to achieve by the end of that quarter. This might include adding a certification, signing up for continuing education courses, suggesting new office programs. Valuable employees should never let a quarter go by without adding value to the practice.

10. **Keep your phone away from patient care.** Only check your cell phone during official breaks. Even top-notch employees look really bad when they are continually scanning for emails or texts on their mobile device. Let your friends and family know that you are not available during working hours except for extreme emergencies.

11. **Volunteer.** Ask a stressed co-worker what you can do to help. Pick up the slack, even when tasks fall outside your schedule or job description. Request to be cross-trained in areas where you can be of the most assistance.

12. **Develop an owner’s mentality.** An invaluable employee takes responsibility for the overall success of the practice. Look for ways to save the practice money. Office supplies are expensive and should not be wasted. Minimize use of the printer and don’t take home office pens and sticky notes. Review your lab bill to make certain that you are getting the best pricing. Track frame inventory to keep down under stock. Make sure that you are being productive when you are on the clock. Give your employer a full day’s work for the full day’s pay that is given to you.

13. **Anticipate and solve problems.** Similar to everyday life, things can go wrong at work. Problems need solutions. Solve small-scale and minor problems quickly and efficiently without being asked. Offer suggestions for solving larger problems. Never complain without offering a possible solution. For example, you might say, “There is a problem with (X) which I believe could be solved if we do (Y). If you agree, I will move in this direction.” Being a problem solver could prompt your employer to move you into a leadership role as a reward for your efforts.

14. **Smile.** Nothing is more engaging or contagious than a smile. Keeping a smile on your face even when you are under pressure makes a huge difference to how others react to you.

15. **Teach others.** Being invaluable does not mean that you are the only person in the office who can do certain things. Insecure people tend to hold information back from others so that they can appear smarter. An invaluable
employee understands the importance of cultivating other invaluable employees and will happily share their knowledge with others.

16. **Be a person of respectable character.** Character is the virtue of turning from the wrong and doing what is right, even in the face of pressures and temptations. It is being honest and upright in everything you do.

17. **Be reliable.** Nothing aggravates an employer more than an unreliable employee. Make a point to keep promises, deadlines and show up on time.

18. **Actively listen.** Human nature tends to immediately speak and react, rather than patiently listen first. The largest cause of poor customer service perception is miscommunication. Avoid mistakes by actively listening without interrupting.

19. **Be proactive.** There are two types of employees—those who wait to be told what to do and those who take initiative in finding innovative ways to be productive for the benefit of their employer. Be the one who looks for ways to make things happen.

20. **Polish your communication skills.** Keep in mind that even though you may be friends with people you work with, you need to keep a professional atmosphere on the job. Slang, curse words and other inappropriate language are never acceptable in a professional setting. Speak with clarity and avoid rambling on and on in your explanations. Listen and gather your thoughts before responding to a question or accusation. Politeness goes a long way with your patients. Remember to use polite words, such as “please”, “thank you” and “my pleasure”.

You now have twenty tips on how to become an indispensable employee. Using these tips will make help you to become so valuable that your practice owner never wants you to leave -- and every other practice hopes you do so they can hire you!

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Becoming an Indispensable Employee

To receive one hour of continuing education credit, those taking the quiz must be AOA Associate members and answer seven of the ten questions correctly. This exam consists of multiple-choice questions designed to measure the level of understanding of the material covered in the continuing education article “Becoming an Indispensable Employee.”

This article is worth one hour of continuing education credit from the Commission on Paraoptometric Certification. Expiration date: Dec. 31st of this year

To receive continuing education credit, complete the information below and mail with your $10 processing fee, $10 per hour of CE before December 31st of this year to the:
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Select the option that best answers the question.

1. What is the BEST way to promote your practice?
   a. Placing coupons and special offers around town at local businesses.
   b. Personally referring family, friends, and neighbors to the practice.
   c. Writing an article for your local paper on the services that your practice offers to the area.
   d. Taking out ads on the radio or local TV stations.

2. What is the BEST action to take to increase the patient’s confidence in the vision care you are providing to them?
   a. Take mental notes on patient likes/dislikes and personality quirks for their future visits to your practice.
   b. Treat each patient like they are family.
   c. Ask if they'd like refreshments while they wait,
   d. Stay current on technology and trends in the industry so you can expand upon your knowledge and skills in order to provide accurate advice and guidance to patients when they ask questions.
3. What are two things that you can do in order to help keep patient complaints and communication issues to a minimum?
   a. Minimize their complaint and change the subject quickly.
   b. Actively listen and be diplomatic when a complaint arises.
   c. Roll your eyes and interrupt them while talking.
   d. Smile and recommend another co-worker that could help.

4. Which of the following is NOT one of the steps to handling a patient’s complaint?
   a. Thank the patient for providing feedback
   b. Restate the problem to them
   c. Smile and tactfully tell them there is not a solution to their problem
   d. Allow the patient to describe the problem without interruption

5. When/how often should goals be set for your job?
   a. Once a month
   b. At the beginning of the year
   c. Every 6 months
   d. Every quarter

6. According to this article, what are the two types of employees?
   a. Those that are energetic and those that are lazy
   b. Those that show up early and those who leave early
   c. Those that use foul language and those that are polite
   d. Those that wait to be told what to do and those that take the initiative

7. When is it appropriate to check your cell phone for messages during work hours?
   a. Only during official breaks
   b. In between patients
   c. When you take a bathroom break
   d. Early in the morning before patients arrive

8. Which is a way to show your employer that you are reliable?
   a. Inform the office manager when you know about a candidate for hire
   b. Show up to work on time
   c. Read articles to expand your knowledge
   d. Clean the waiting area of trash or clutter

9. What work attribute could prompt your employer to move you into a leadership role?
   a. Being a problem solver
   b. Being agreeable
   c. Being creative
   d. Being a peacemaker
10. According to the article, character is …?
   a. A virtue that is used everyday
   b. A virtue envied by others
   c. The virtue of turning from the wrong and doing right
   d. The virtue of standing up for your rights

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