TIME MANAGEMENT IN THE MEDICAL OFFICE

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Introduction

Time management in the medical office is essential if the practice is to achieve any level of success and survive in today’s healthcare market. With the ongoing changes occurring in healthcare, efficient time management is more important today than ever before. Time is money. The medical office is being forced to do more with less. Simply stated, the medical office is being asked to do more work with less revenue and less resources.

Medical offices are experiencing cuts in reimbursements (and the ongoing threat of additional cuts) along with rising costs of doing business. The federal government has required medical offices to purchase and implement an electronic medical records (EMR) system or face future cuts in Medicare payments. Some of the costs associated with the purchase and implementation of the EMR system can be recouped from the government if the purchased EMR system meets the meaningful use (MU) criteria. Currently the MU Stage 2 criteria require that the medical office implement Direct Messaging and a Patient Portal; both services come with an additional cost to the practice. A recurring monthly cost when coupled with the original purchase price of the actual EMR system, will exceed the stipend the government is offering to those offices meeting the meaningful use criteria. The time to implement each of these services and train the physicians and staff accordingly must be considered when calculating the true cost.

The cost of health insurance offered by a medical practice to its employees, in most cases, increased considerably in 2014 due to the Affordable Care Act. This dramatic increase was felt by both the employer and the employee in many cases. Some medical
offices were able to sustain some of the increase in premiums while others simply could not absorb the additional cost and passed it on to their employees.

These are just some examples of the increased expenses that now must be factored into a practice’s budget that just a few short years ago, were not even thought of let alone a reality affecting the bottom line of a medical practice. Where does the revenue to pay these additional and or increased expenses come from? Working smarter, increasing productivity, and using time more efficiently (time management) can offer some relief with the additional financial burdens placed on the medical office.

This paper will explore foundational deficiencies in time management, suspected causes, impact on, and possible solutions to these deficiencies in the medical office. Time management affects every aspect of an organization in one way or another.

**Background**

Time management – exactly what is it? According to *Wikipedia, the online free encyclopedia*,

“Time management is the act or process of planning and exercising conscious control over the amount of time spent on specific activities, especially to increase effectiveness, efficiency or productivity.” (Wikipedia, the online free encyclopedia)

Wikipedia further goes on to define time management to include a range of skills, tools, and techniques used to manage time when accomplishing specific tasks, projects, and goals complying with a due date. Per Wikipedia, the major themes arising from the literature on time management include the following:
1. Creating an environment conducive to effectiveness
2. Setting of priorities
3. Carrying out activity around those priorities
4. The related process of reduction of time spent on non-priorities

When looking at each of these points from Wikipedia individually, it is clear most medical offices currently subscribe, at least to some degree, to some form of time management in their daily operations:

1. Setting appointment schedules in the medical office is an effort to provide an organized, structured, and effective environment to see patients.
2. Priorities are set daily regarding patients needing to be seen on an emergency basis or other changes that might need to be accommodated in a doctor’s schedule.
3. Steps are taken to adjust schedules as necessary to accommodate emergency situations and other interruptions to the previously planned activities of the day.
4. As more time is spent on actual priorities, there is less time to spend on non-priorities.

Even though it would seem time management is being utilized in the medical office now, if the definition of time management is as Wikipedia defines it, most medical offices would agree, there is room for improvement in the area of time management in their practices.

**Time Management Deficiencies to Consider**

As with any organization, the medical office must have proper leadership. Unfortunately, some medical offices lack effective leadership for various reasons. One reason could be
associated with the lack of an effective office manager. Perhaps the office manager on board is inexperienced and does not have outside resources from which to network or the office manager is micromanaged by the physician(s). Perhaps there are personality conflicts between the manager and the physician(s) leading to a serious lack of communication and sense of direction in the practice. These types of inefficiencies cause medical offices to perform sub-optimally which affects the practice’s bottom line, staff morale, and can ultimately negatively impact patient care.

The leadership in a medical office, depending on its size and culture, can actually be comprised of different levels of management. Leadership must provide clear direction for the daily operations of the practice through effective communication with written policies and procedures and verbal interaction. The message shared with all staff by the leadership in the practice must be one of cohesiveness and uniformity. Physicians, administrator, and supervisors can each provide leadership in a practice with the essential requirement that they are all communicating the same message. The common denominator between all leaders must be one of the same message being shared with all staff members. When staff is not provided clear direction of what is required of them their productivity suffers which ultimately affects the organization’s ability to grow.

Employees, for the most part, want to do a good job. They simply need to know what is expected of them, what their specific responsibilities are; what they are to do and how they are to do it. Without clear direction, they are in a state of confusion and feel less engaged in their position and are more prone to seeking employment elsewhere. When there is no clear direction from the management/leadership of an organization, there is an absence of time management as well. Chaos prevails.
A lack of physician and or staff engagement in the organization and its goals is another cause of deficiency in time management plaguing some medical offices.

Physicians care about clinical quality, practice efficiency, the quality and training of the nurses they work with, profitability, their reputation among patients, staff, and colleagues, their input on issues, appreciation for what they do, and responsiveness to practice concerns. Leadership communication of vision and goals to physicians must be done with awareness and appreciation of what is important to physicians. (Beeson, 2009, p. 11)

An effective leader understands the necessity of obtaining each physician's support in the vision and direction of the practice. Unfortunately, not all ideas and opinions of each physician in a practice with multiple physicians can be adopted into policy. With careful thought, respectful conversation, rationale given for the decisions made, physicians can maintain their engagement in the practice and move forward in a team spirit even though their ideas were not adopted.

A disengaged physician or staff member will lead to many time management issues as they simply do not care. Wait times for patients will increase; patient outcomes and patient satisfaction may suffer if the patient feels the physician or staff member does not care about them personally. A patient may feel their time is not being respected as they are being asked to wait longer to see the physician. Then when they finally see the physician, they feel the physician may not have spent enough time in the exam room with them to justify their longer than desired wait time. The patient may feel they were not given enough time to ask questions and get appropriate answers due to the doctor being rushed as a result of the schedule running so far behind. Most patients are not afraid to share their personal experiences with their friends and family, subsequently, the
reputation of the practice could ultimately be compromised by a disengaged physician or staff member. A bad experience in a medical office could lead to a lack of patient retention. Patients have options and are mobile enough that they are willing to drive further if they feel a higher standard of care is offered at a competitor’s office and that they will realize a higher level of personal satisfaction from the services provided in another office.

Dale Carnegie teamed with MSW Research to study the functional and emotional elements that affect employee engagement. A national sample representative of 1,500 employees was surveyed which revealed these three key drivers that impact employee engagement:

1. Relationship with immediate supervisor
2. Belief in senior leadership
3. Pride in working for the company

When it comes to people, research has shown, time and again, that employees who are engaged significantly outperform work groups that are not engaged. (Dale Carnegie Training White Paper, 2012, p. 2)

The immediate supervisor influences their subordinates on a daily basis by their negativity or their positive can-do attitude. The supervisor can enhance employee engagement or they can create an atmosphere where an employee becomes disengaged and basically “quits” but stays on in the practice.

Also, employees surveyed felt their trust and belief in the ability of the senior leadership to take their input, lead the company in the right direction, and openly communicate the
state of the organization is key in driving employee engagement. (Dale Carnegie Training White Paper, 2012, p. 2)

Employees also felt when they are treated with respect and the organization cares about how they feel, their engagement is heightened. Based on the research done by Dale Carnegie and MSW Research, of the 1,500 employees sampled, only 29% are fully engaged, 26% were disengaged, and 45% were partially engaged. (Dale Carnegie White Paper, 2012, p. 3)

Just as an engaged employee is vital to the success of a medical office and conducive to efficient time management, so is hiring the right employee with consideration given for the organization’s immediate needs as well as its long term needs.

When managers are under extreme pressure to produce, they can become less than patient in completing the hiring process fully. They begin to pressure human resources (HR) professionals to “find a replacement now”. Exerting this type of pressure creates a situation in which HR may find it expedient to circumvent some critical steps in the interest of time. This is another example of short-range necessity taking priority over long-range planning, resulting in a less than thorough candidate selection. The profitability impact results from poor performance, poor productivity, and increased replacement costs associated with hiring the wrong candidate. (Sensenig, 2009, p. 46)

Hiring the wrong candidate is truly an ineffective use of everyone’s time and can degrade the overall performance of the medical practice.

Poor job performance, including errors and low productivity, must be addressed as soon as it is identified to avoid repeated mistakes and potential harm to patients and the
overall organization. Yet many times, managers and others in leadership positions are uncomfortable in addressing these types of problems.

Rebecca L. Johnson, CPOT, COT, COE states when you have an employee who repeatedly makes mistakes, failure to discuss the “elephant in the room” can be harmful to the health of your business. She lists four tips to help prepare for the dreadful, yet important, conversation with an underperforming employee:

1. Remove negative emotions – avoid having the conversation when you are feeling frustrated with the employee.
2. Examine the impact – employees react better if they understand the consequences of their actions.
3. Determine the source – in reality most employees want to do a good job, check to see what other influences could be causing the less than desirable action.
4. Be positive – remind yourself of the employee’s strong points, are you better off trying to find a solution and keeping this employee. (Johnson, 2014, p. 80)

All employees must be held to the same standard of accountability. If the perception of the staff members is that some employees are “getting away” with repeated errors, lack of an acceptable job performance, the overall morale of the staff as a whole will decline. Depending how obvious and intense this perception is, employee retention could become a factor. Employees who are (on an ongoing basis) underperforming must be addressed to resolve their performance issues to improve the efficiency and time management of the practice. When one employee must correct the errors of another employee, valuable time is wasted. The work is being done twice which is not an efficient use of resources.
“Time is the scarcest resource of managers. If it is not managed, nothing else can be managed.” (Drucker, 2011, online resource)

The reality of today’s world is that we have to do more, better, faster, and with less. Time, quality, and cost are in constant tension, especially during hard economic times and the speed in which the world is changing. Often times, one or two of these factors takes priority and plays a prominent role in our planning, setting priorities, decision-making, and other time management issues. (Dale Carnegie Training, Time Management, 2011, p. 1)

The effective time management and prioritizing of daily tasks applies to physicians, managers, and staff alike. Regardless of one’s position and responsibilities, each must prioritize throughout the day the order of the work they are to accomplish. The ability of some employees to properly prioritize is not always evident. When employees fail to effectively prioritize their tasks, the impact on others manifests itself in many ways. Patient wait times increase, physicians may become frustrated, and there can be an obvious lack of communication between the staff and physicians causing needless commotion.

The lack of current technology in a medical office such as a computerized practice management system (PM), electronic medical records (EMR), electronic claims processing, scanners, utilization of a patient portal, not to mention newer diagnostic equipment certainly can hinder a medical office in effective time management. An office left behind in the technology world will find new challenges and difficulties in trying to communicate (and perhaps compete) with other practices and medical facilities that have embraced and implemented the newer technology available in today’s market. Patients are very savvy regarding the technology available even if they do not work in a
medical office; the lack of current technology in their personal physician’s office may leave a bad impression in the minds of some patients.

Technology certainly has the ability to improve and enhance time management in the medical office. Newer technology is designed to do more, at a faster pace, and at a higher level of efficiency. There are many considerations and decisions to be made to determine what technology is best for each office. April Jasper, O.D., offers the following seven steps to consider when purchasing new technology:

1. **Evaluate what you have.** Take an inventory of what technology you have, what is new and going to be around for a while and what is likely to get replaced in the coming years.

2. **Determine what you want.** It is imperative to remember what the vision/mission for your practice is, then create a five-year to 10-year plan for your practice, including the technology that fits within this plan.

3. **Document what you actually need.** Have a checklist of the “must-have”, “would like to have” and the “optional” categories. Based on your needs, continue to develop the list using your vision/mission as a guide to understanding the essential purchases for your office.

4. **Investigate your options.** Take time to shop around at the various industry meetings’ exhibit halls. Make certain the new technology can be integrated with your current technologies in your practice.

5. **Assess financial obligations/terms.** Many times we forget that a technology-focused practice can and will be able to justify greater fees by creating value in the minds of the patient. Insurance reimbursements should never be the only factor when evaluating return on investment. Reimbursement rates are not predictable and often drop.
6. **Remember a plan for implementation.** Any equipment purchase is risky if you have no plan for implementation. Do your homework, and evaluate how your new technology will fit into your patient flow. Also, make certain you have a plan for training the staff on the new technology.

7. **Develop a practice of distinction.** Technology can be the key to developing a practice of distinction. Never be satisfied with the status quo. (Jasper, 2014)

A visitor to a newly constructed office building recently made the statement that they would certainly choose that clinic for their personal care based solely on the aesthetics of the waiting room and the use of the advanced technology placed in each exam room. This office purchased the latest technology available for their particular specialty; they truly have developed a practice of distinction for their new location. A new, crisp, attractive, well-appointed, and technologically equipped practice can make a difference to patients and staff alike.

There are several considerations to explore while each influences time management when determining equipment and work flow in the medical office:

1. **How much time is necessary to complete a task?** Especially considering the equipment available to perform the task. Is it current technology or is it old and obsolete technology?

2. **How much time is actually available to perform a task?** How much time does the schedule allow to be spent on doing this task?

3. **How is the available time actually being spent performing the task?** Is the staff spending more time trying to compensate for defective and obsolete equipment versus having newer reliable (current technology) to work with?
4. Who is the best person(s) to perform the task? Even with the latest and most technologically advanced equipment, an inefficient employee will impede the performance of the newer equipment. An office will not realize the true value of the new equipment if it is not used to its full potential.

A key component in time management is the “right sizing” of the job duties to be in line with reality. With ongoing changes, new requirements, being asked to do more work with less resources, it is vital that job descriptions and duties be re-evaluated and updated along with inefficiencies purged. Are there unnecessary steps involved in performing a task that should be eliminated? Determinations must be made if the employee assigned to the task is the “right” employee to be doing the task. Is this person the most skilled, efficient and proficient at performing the task? Does this employee need additional training to bring them up to an acceptable performance level?

Cross training is extremely valuable in maximizing time management. A cross trained employee is an asset in any medical office. Their flexibility in helping where needed allows the practice to work more efficiently and to keep wait times to a minimum; the flow in the practice is enhanced considerably.

Sometimes the most productive employees feel they get more and more responsibilities placed on them because management knows they will do the job on time and accurately. While other less productive employees are asked to do less because management does not have the confidence in them that the work will get done adequately. This leads to low employee morale and disparity amongst the staff. The higher producing employees almost feel they are being punished for demonstrating efficiency in time management. This can lead to employee turnover if left unchecked.
Employee turnover has a negative effect on the bottom line of a medical practice. Per the Bureau of National Affairs, “United States businesses lose $11 billion annually as a result of employee turnover.” (Dale Carnegie Training White Paper, 2012, p. 4)

The cost and time spent in searching for potential applicants to interview, actually conducting the interviews with the selected candidates, doing background checks or reference checks, presenting/negotiating the job offer, and actually training the new employee is staggering. A practice is wise in hiring the right candidate the first time to minimize the necessity of going through this process. Recognizing the value in top notch employees and taking measures to create a work environment where employees want to stay is so beneficial to a medical practice.

An employer is wise in annually reviewing its ability to offer competitive wages and benefits; respecting and managing its employees in such a way that they know they are appreciated and respected. Over achievers are properly recognized and under achievers are coached and mentored or replaced as appropriate. The overall effect is employee retention and proper time management. Depending on the dynamics of the practice, the hiring process could totally be the responsibility of the manager; due to all the demands already placed on the manager, employee retention is paramount when considering time management from the manager's personal perspective.

Healthcare is in a constant state of change. Trying to keep up with these ongoing changes is an enormous challenge and requires a significant amount of time. Time management in the medical office is tested each time the government announces another onerous change. Depending on the size of the practice, many if not all of the administrative changes fall to the office manager or administrator. First, the manager must be keenly aware of the changes; they then must understand how these changes
will impact their specific office. Training of the office staff and the physicians regarding the changes must be done in a timely manner along with determining the impact on the workflow in the practice. Adapting to the necessary governmental changes is a massive undertaking at times, depending on the magnitude of the specific change. ICD 10, EMR, MU 2, Direct Messaging, Patient Portal, Affordable Care Act, are just a few of the main changes affecting medical offices today and influencing time management in each and every medical office. These issues are in addition to the normal daily operations that the manager or administrator handles on an ongoing basis. Where is the extra time to manage these additional tasks going to come from?

**Suggestions to Maximize Time Management in the Medical Office**

First and foremost, a medical office must have a solid leader/manager/leadership team to enjoy efficient time management. Based on the corporate structure and the size of the practice, the leadership of the practice may vary in its actual design. Anything short of solid leadership will result in the practice floundering and struggling to survive. A superior leader must demonstrate credibility, honesty, integrity, full accountability and transparency. If the people around the leader do not trust them nor respect them, the leader will be ineffective.

“Good leaders create a vision, articulate the vision, passionately own the vision, and relentlessly drive it to completion.” Jack Welch

Three highly effective leaders associated with the Michigan Medical Group Management Association were interviewed via an email regarding time management in their medical office or department. For sake of anonymity, their names are not listed in this paper. It is curious to note, for each question asked, there was one common response listed for
that question by each of the three responders. The questions presented to each of the leaders are listed below with their responses summarized immediately below the questions:

1. What are the top three barriers to effective time management in your practice?

Interestingly, each of the three leaders responded frequent interruptions as being one of the top three barriers in their medical office or department; interruptions from employees or other staff members. Some other barriers were constant follow up on emails or other tasks that were not completed by others; completion of one project before starting another; adequate time between the identification of a problem and the expected resolution; occasional barriers initiated by leading physicians and or managers; too many meetings; and too many initiatives going on at the same time.

2. What are the causes of these barriers? Why do these barriers exist?

The common response to this question by the three leaders was a lack of knowledge (to some degree) on behalf of the staff members. Lack of time, sometimes a lack of resources, lack of follow through by other people, and trying to implement items quickly to meet all the governmental standards were listed as well.

3. How do these barriers impact your office on a daily basis?

Each leader listed efficiency/productivity as being negatively impacted due to the barriers they listed in the previous two questions. Other responses included that patient care could be impeded in some instances; the manager puts in long work days partially due to the interruptions from others and the staff’s lack of appropriate knowledge; too
much time spent in meetings, not enough time to complete tasks assigned during meetings; sometimes hard to get things rolled out to all the offices in a timely manner.

4. Do you feel you have the resources and or authority to remove these barriers?

The response shared by the three leaders was they felt they had the authority but either the staff did not have the motivation or the leader would need to arrange additional training for the staff to bring them up to a higher level of problem solving and decision making. Setting clear expectations and setting goals that the staff understands was listed as well.

5. What works well in your office to allow/provide effective time management?

The consensus shared was ongoing collaboration/communication between manager and staff and delegating tasks to others. Additional comments were communication between the manager and physicians; using defined times to perform and complete everyday tasks before moving on to specific one time projects; coaching others to find solutions themselves.

The leader or manager provides and promotes structure; develops effective policies and procedures adhered to by the staff and physicians alike. These policies and procedures should be written and not left to selective memorization. Written policies and procedures hold all physicians, staff and supervisors accountable to the same standard; these written policies can actually support or defend a practice in an audit.

Leaders should be able to influence a group of people to achieve a common goal. They are able to do so because of their ability to first determine and then define the goal. Leader’s actions have greater impact on the organization and as such they are
tasked with creating the kind of impact that drives the organization to success. To have that kind of impact leaders must be able to strategically embrace change and to communicate effectively. They also must have credibility. (St. Clair, 2014, p. 22)

Employees need to know and understand the hierarchy in a medical practice. Depending on the size of the practice, sometimes this is not always clear. Sometimes those not in a supervisory position will try to overstep their bounds and cause disruption either intentionally or unintentionally. The staff must know to whom they report, to whom they should go to for questions. The more clearly defined these roles are, the more able the staff is to use their time efficiently as they go about their daily responsibilities.

When the leader, physicians, and staff work in harmony, effective time management occurs by default due to the fact everyone is working together for the good of the patient and the organization. The organization realizes less redundancy in processes, work is done more expeditiously the first time. Physician and staff engagement is at a higher level along with adherence to established policy and procedures.

Per Dr. Stephen Beeson, everyone working in a medical office should be of the thought that the patient is first, the organization is second, and I am third.

Physicians are selective and deliberate in engaging in an organizational change strategy. In the end, physicians will do for the organization what the organization has done for them. Physicians will partner with administration when trust and confidence in the leadership team are built, clinical efficiency is demonstrated, and physicians have meaningful input on organizational efforts. (Beeson, 2009, p. xiii)

The medical office must place the right people in the right job to maintain positive time management.
Are people really a company’s most valuable asset? It is quite common to hear executives say that they are, but as nice as it sounds, the comment is not quite accurate. According to Jim Collins, in his often quoted book *Good to Great*, this business axiom is seriously flawed because the emphasis should be on “the right people” rather than just people in general. However, too many companies still accept the faulty assumption that filling available positions is the key to performance and productivity. This is an outdated thought process that is likely to result in unsuccessful outcomes in hiring, team performance, and ultimately, in productivity - all of which have a negative impact on profitability. (Sensenig, 2009, p. 45)

When the right people are in the right job, the job gets done with less involvement from other staff and the manager thus allowing them to complete their tasks on time – effective time management. An effective leader will offer and arrange for additional training for an employee struggling in an area of their job. By providing the additional training and mentoring for the employee the whole organization is better able to meet its goals and move forward in a positive manner. Allowing the employee to remain in a position and continue to underperform is unfair to everyone.

Include physicians and staff in problem resolution and decisions as appropriate. Their support and buy-in are important to the implementation of the vision and mission of the organization. They could also propose new ideas that were not previously discussed which could actually provide a better solution to a problem facing the office. Depending on the culture of the practice, a manager can only facilitate change to the extent they have the support of the physicians in the practice.

“Encourage job ownership; when employees and team members feel ownership about their work, they respond with more positive motivation for the work they do.
They also respond better to change and are able to make the necessary changes and successfully adapt.” (McCatty, 2013, p. 1)

Engagement and ownership are valued resources for any leader to have on their team. Medical offices need employees to act as partners at work and as advocates for their employer away from work. Any business, including the medical office, benefits from having employees who can adapt to and embrace change. Engaged employees understand the need for change, and do not resist change. (McCatty, 2013, p. 1)

When change is more readily accepted and implemented, the time spent to realize the change can be minimal compared to an environment where the employees do not embrace change and do not engage in job ownership. The ability of the employees to accept change can often mean the difference between an organization’s success and failure.

Employees who feel personal job ownership typically are more receptive to new ideas, accept the need for change, embrace change, support continuous improvement efforts, act as partners to the organization, and take ownership and pride in the practice away from work. (McCatty, 2013, p. 1)

Once employees are fully engaged and feel ownership, organizations often see positive outcomes including improved flexibility, ongoing process improvement, high levels of motivation, less turnover, and the organization is more profitable.

Provide clear direction through written policies governing processes and procedures. It is best to document policy and procedure in the medical office even if the practice is a smaller practice. Relying on each employee to understand policies or to remember
policies that are not written may lead to misunderstandings. A good policy is applicable to the laws governing the practice, is understood by all involved physicians, staff members and administrators, and represents the preferred method of practice in that medical office. It represents the practice’s values. It helps management direct the organization according to its established goals and mission. Written policies allow each employee to better understand the culture of the practice and the necessary laws that must be followed to maintain compliance to the many governmental agencies that interact with the medical office. Written policies hold management and staff accountable.

Another tool in accomplishing efficient time management is simply open communication between physicians, management, and staff on a daily basis. This is vital and can greatly improve the work flow in the medical office which benefits everyone. Elizabeth Stewart and Barbara Johnson suggest doing a morning huddle.

A quick huddle each morning can ensure that everyone is on the same page and fully informed of any known problems. Per Stewart and Johnson, daily huddles can help address a number of critical issues. Huddles allow the practice to plan for changes in the daily workflow, manage crises before they arise and make adjustments that improve patients’ access and staff members’ quality of life. (Stewart, Johnson, 2007, p. 1)

Huddles work because they provide clear direction and immediate priorities are discussed and set at the staff level. This ongoing open communication allows the management of the practice to establish clear expectations for each employee on a daily basis.
Huddles can be implemented and adapted to in a medical office on an immediate basis with the benefits noticed instantly, that very same day. No two days are alike in a medical office so the idea of addressing the specific concerns of the day on a real time basis has a positive impact on everyone involved in the clinic including the physicians, staff, and ultimately the patients.

Daily huddle conversations could include:

- Changes in provider availability for scheduling
- Defective equipment or rooms being down
- Extra time and effort needed to assist certain patients to be seen that day
- Staffing changes based on staff availability and patient volume
- Chaos due to last-minute schedule changes due to unforeseen circumstances; patients arriving at unscheduled times, staff/physicians responding to outside emergencies, equipment down
- Who is to do what and when on that particular day given the circumstances

It is suggested by Stewart and Johnson that the huddles last no more than seven minutes and that all participants stand during the huddle. This allows everyone to understand this is a short gathering and we need to get back to the patients. The huddle should be held in an area in the office away from patients. A positive “let’s go” spirit at the end of the huddle helps to set the tone of victory for the day no matter what situations may arise.

Enforcing employee accountability in the workplace can be a challenging task. Physician business owners are experts at exercising proper bedside manner and
often find themselves in a position of having to deliver life changing information to their patients. However, put them in a position that requires enforcing accountability with their staff and they often prefer to do nothing and simply hope for the best. Unfortunately, taking this position costs practices a significant amount of wasted time and money. (Lion, 2012, p. 1)

Potential areas lacking in staff accountability in the medical office are reporting to work on time, absenteeism, personal phone calls, personal email, personal texting, and other inappropriate use of company time while on the clock. When these types of misuse of time occur, it is just a matter of time until the problems escalate to increased staff turnover, internal conflict between employees, and patient satisfaction.

Per Lion, “all of these items will cause profit leaks, impact your office’s net income and productivity, and they could cause a 10% to 15% decline in net profits. For the physician-owner this particular type of profit leak is more difficult to measure in terms of dollars which is often the reason the problem is not addressed properly.” (Lion, 2012, p.1)

It is an inappropriate use of the physician owner’s time to be in charge of these types of issues. A strong manager or leader should be qualified to oversee any staff accountability offenses and reconcile or resolve any grievances. Clearly, an office must have oversight in this area. Estimated loss in revenue due to inappropriate and inefficient use of time can be easily factored by simple math.

If you have eight employees and each employee spends 15 minutes a day texting, it would add up to two hours per day of unproductive time. Do the math and now you
are looking at 10 hours per week or 520 hours per year. Now take it a step further and calculate this number using your average wage rate. For the purposes of this article let's use $18 per hour. What seems like harmless texting (only 15 minutes per day) is costing the practice over $9,000 per year. (Lion, 2012, p. 1)

The lack of effective time management is expensive and sometimes overwhelming. The cost of lost time adds up quickly.

There are two very important steps in improving employee accountability:

1. Clear Communication
2. Clear Expectations

The manager must effectively communicate the expectations of the organization. What one medical office allows and tolerates may not be the same as another. Some managers are more lax in holding employees accountable, some offices compensate for poor performers by hiring additional staff. Unfortunately, not all managers are good managers and they enable poor staff performance, especially if they are personal friends with the staff. This sometimes is evident to the physician owner(s) and sometimes it is not. Unfortunately, at times, a manager’s ineptness goes on ignored causing a decline in the overall organization.

Job descriptions further help in providing clear expectations of the duties associated with each position in the medical office. Depending on how specific the job description is, the employee may find this useful in performing the essential duties of their job.

Each employee should be encouraged to utilize steps that will personally assist them in their daily tasks. As each one learns in their own way, each employee should take responsibility to use the resources available to them to make them most successful in
their position and to utilize their time on the job most efficiently. For some employees they need to learn by doing, hands on. Others might need to take many notes, others may need to do the task for the experience of thinking it through as they performed the task and then jot down some key notes for future reference. When questions arise, they would have their resources immediately available allowing them to be more efficient.

Measurement is the key to establishing a successful system of management and helps facilitate employee accountability. The question often asked is what to measure? This can range from the obvious, such as average wait time for a patient to be seen and patient satisfaction surveys to accurately capturing current patient demographics and benefit verification information. (Lion, 2012, p.1)

When it has been communicated to employees in advance that key points of their job are being monitored and measured on a daily basis, the employee has been empowered to take control over their performance or to address with the manager problems that will prohibit efficiencies in their productivity. When work is not being monitored, performance is not as important to the staff. A disengaged employee may not be remotely concerned over their productivity even when they have been made aware of the monitoring; this will be evident in comparing their performance to that of their co-workers.

Goals for improving performance should be well established. Employees should understand the role they play in the medical office and that they perform very important tasks necessary in providing excellent patient care and necessary to the survival of the practice. When goals are achieved, staff should share in the benefit of the accomplishment. Likewise, under achievers disinterested in the practice should be
dealt with up to and including dismissal. An under achieving employee’s dismissal should not come as a surprise to them if the proper communication and steps have been taken along the way prior to their termination.

Technology is changing and improving healthcare. With the technologically advanced equipment available today, the medical office has the opportunity to consider the purchase of diagnostic equipment capable of more refined tests than its ancestors. With the newer equipment, in many instances, the actual time required to conduct the diagnostic tests is decreased allowing for a potential increase in productivity and improved time management in the medical office.

Time management is greatly improved for physicians in the medical office as well as outside the medical office with the inception of communication devices such as the smartphone with email, texts, and videos. How the medical office chooses to use this technology for maximum efficiency is determined by each physician and practice. Physicians able to access patient records while on call through a Virtual Private Network (VPN) set up on an EMR system have experienced more effective time management along with improved patient care.

Partnering with professional organizations such as Medical Group Management Association (MGMA) is a necessity. Each manager or administrator of a medical practice should have the privilege of becoming a member. MGMA is a superb lifeline that every manager will want in their arsenal of resources. MGMA allows its members the opportunities to be informed of the ongoing changes in healthcare and provides educational resources to learn more about those changes. Managers of medical practices can feel isolated at times due to the responsibilities they carry in their jobs. Networking through MGMA allows the manager to feel connected to their peers and to
learn from other managers’ successes and failures. It is evident when belonging to MGMA that you are not alone in this industry. Vendors representing solutions and options in all areas of medical practice management are at the disposal of the manager through their affiliation with MGMA. A manager once felt so strongly about their ability to belong to MGMA that when they interviewed for a job with a new company, they stated if their MGMA membership could not be supported by the interviewing organization, they were not interested in the open position. A manager’s affiliation and membership in MGMA improves the time management in their practice immensely when they utilize the resources available to them through MGMA.

**Conclusion**

Time management affects all aspects of a medical practice. Time management is more than the hours represented on a clock. Effective and efficient time management runs very deep within the foundation of a medical office. It is a continuum of the physical layout of the building, use of current technology, hiring the right staff for the right positions, holding all staff members accountable to the same standards, encouraging employee/physician engagement and job ownership, providing clear expectations, ongoing and open communication, and written policies and procedures. When these features and functions align, the positive effect on the practice is patient satisfaction and retention, physician/employee satisfaction and retention, and a positive bottom line on the corporation’s balance sheet.
Summary

Each one in the medical office plays a very valuable role in the time management of the practice. The manager or the respective leadership of the practice sets the stage for how the practice will function. If the leadership is knowledgeable and provides clear expectations of what each staff member is to do, the standard by which the practice operates, and then holds the staff accountable to those standards, an engaged staff will work within those parameters to the success of the organization. Disengaged employees are toxic to an organization and must be dealt with.

Looking Forward

The pressure to improve time management and efficiency, along with performance, in the medical office will only increase going forward. Taking measures now to improve in these areas will only enhance the sustainability and viability of the practice in the future.

Choosing the right technology for the practice, partnering with the right vendors based on a practice’s specific needs, staying current on healthcare changes (MGMA), embracing appropriate change even if we do not personally agree with it, creating an environment of staff engagement and retention, and addressing deficiencies as they are identified are important steps necessary for effective time management in the medical office.

Effective time management in the medical office is a priority in delivering excellent patient care. When we deliver excellent patient care, we are able to realize physician, staff, and patient retention. When we realize patient retention, we understand why the
medical office even exists; to improve or sustain the health of the patients who have
entrusted their personal healthcare to those in “the medical office”.

“Don’t say you don’t have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Pasteur, Michelangelo, Mother Theresa, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein.” (Bates, 2014)

One might draw the conclusion from this statement that there is enough time to do what each one needs to do; it is simply the lack of effective time management that prohibits each from accomplishing their goals.
Bibliography


11. Picture retrieved from https://www.google.com/search?q=time+our+most+precious+resource+picture&tbm=isch&tbm=isch&source=univ&sa=X&ei=nBHPU5zJKoKnyASotoGwBw&ved=0CDYQ7Ak&biw=1274&bih=819

