

Association of
Optometrists

Creating healthy, low-stress optical practices

ADVICE & WORKBOOK FOR
OPTOMETRISTS & MANAGERS

www.aop.org.uk

Creating healthy, low-stress optical practices

Introduction

In the AOP's 2017 health and wellbeing survey, we uncovered several factors that contribute to workplace stress for optometrists. These include working under time and commercial pressures, an increasingly complex workload, and a fear of litigation. Many optometrists also feel undervalued as health professionals, both within the workplace and outside it. While the issues raised were seen across a broad range of employers, they were most prevalent in the larger groups.

We have been working with several employers to create this best-practice guide, but would like to express our particular thanks to Boots Opticians, Specsavers and Vision Express for their collaboration and input. It is clear that we share the same goals — to ensure we create workplace environments in which optometrists can thrive.

This short guide summarises our conclusions from the research and from our collaborations with employers, highlighting the five key factors that contribute to a healthy workplace with the minimum levels of stress. The guide includes useful checklists, spaces to write notes and best-practice examples.

The guide is suitable for all optometrists and those who manage optometrists, to help address problems and open conversations with managers and colleagues.

WITH THANKS TO



vision ~~express~~

Five key factors for a healthy workplace

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Association of
Optometrists

For advice and information about any of the issues tackled in this guide, members can contact the AOP

 020 7549 2000

 postbox@aop.org.uk

 www.aop.org.uk

Members and non-members can also contact the AOP's Peer Support Line on 0800 870 8401 for confidential support for themselves or an optical colleague

1 The importance of the optometrist's role is recognised

While for most optical businesses profits come from retail sales, the core duty of the business is to provide a high standard of eye care to patients. And, of course, the responsibility for providing eye care rests with the optometrist/s working in the practice.

It is, therefore, important that all staff and managers in the practice understand the professional responsibilities of the optometrist/s. The main role of an optometrist is to provide eye care and screening for underlying diseases, and it is important that this is clear to all members of the store/practice team so that they can support the optometrist/s in providing this service to the public.

Business key performance indicators (KPIs) should recognise this and not focus too heavily on sales and profit.

BEST PRACTICE

- All staff are educated on the roles and responsibilities of optometrists
- All staff recognise the fundamental importance of the optometrist to their business. This could be achieved through a short presentation from the optometrist/s at staff meetings, or some form of work shadowing
- Cases where crucial early detections of underlying disease were made as a result of a sight test are widely shared throughout the company
- The role of the optometrist as the guardian of the nation's eye health is now being actively promoted to the public by the profession, with an emphasis on the importance of regular sight tests for all people
- Optometrists are represented at senior levels in the company. Ideally, every practice is led by an optometrist, or an optometrist is involved in the decision making
- There is a lead clinician role that allows optometrists the opportunity to discuss clinical matters and any potential conflicts with someone who fully understands their issues
- Optometrists are supported to build professional networks and learn from their peers, either face to face or online

2 Workloads and work patterns are well-managed

The caseload for the optometrist/s should take into consideration the types of patients that they will be seeing and also the level of delegated functions that are in place in the clinic. There is no single right answer for the time allowed per appointment or the number of cases per day.

Administration and record keeping are important aspects of optometrists' roles and adequate time should be built into the schedule to allow for this.

All staff should be familiar with the equipment used in the practice and sufficient time should be allocated for adequate training to enable the safe and efficient use of practice equipment. This is of particular importance for locums and new staff.

BEST PRACTICE

- Wherever possible, the reception staff are aware that certain patients, such as older people, require more time in the consulting room and they adjust the length of appointment times accordingly
- All optometrists should have regular, 10-minute (minimum) catch-up meetings on a fortnightly basis with their line manager, to discuss any issues. These should then be acted upon by the manager and discussed at the following meeting. These meetings can be arranged formally or kept more informal. The important point is that they are held regularly, the conversation is open and honest, and that any points raised are effectively followed up
- Opportunities to free up optometrists' time by delegating functions to suitably trained and accredited colleagues are actively considered
- Ensure the patient journey is regularly re-evaluated to provide the optimal level of service and care
- Team meetings that discuss how the delegated functions are working and ideas for improvement are considered

✓ CHECKLIST – APPLYING THIS TO YOUR PRACTICE

- Do optometrists and other staff have a regular opportunity to discuss any issues on workload with management?
- Do optometrists work together with line managers and other team members to resolve them?

What do we do well?

What can we improve?

Next steps

3 A comfortable working environment with adequate rest breaks

There should be rest breaks scheduled throughout the day, including an adequate lunch break. On some occasions, appointments and other work may overrun into breaks but this should be the exception and not the rule.

The physical conditions in the consulting room should be well planned. The heating and ventilation should be at a comfortable level and all equipment should be positioned so that the optometrist/s can work without undue physical stresses and strains.

BEST PRACTICE

- All management and staff are aware of the importance of optometrists taking adequate rest breaks
- Any issues on the working environment are raised and followed up at the regular one-to-one meetings with managers
- Where there are serious concerns about working conditions, a review is carried out by an independent occupational health advisor
- Where relevant, use surveys for insight into how optometrists feel about their working conditions, and act on any issues that are identified



✓ CHECKLIST – APPLYING THIS TO YOUR PRACTICE

- Is the wellbeing of staff one of the top priorities for management?
- Are there regular reviews of the working environment with all staff being consulted and any identified improvements made?
- Is there a process to ensure that any new issues that arise are brought to the attention of the management?

What do we do well?

What can we improve?

Next steps

4

Fostering good team relationships

All staff should work together to promote a positive working environment. There should be a clear set of values about the right way to work together as a team. These include helping and supporting others, politeness and respect. Unacceptable behaviour should be dealt with quickly and firmly. Any individual who is having problems should feel that they are supported by the team.

BEST PRACTICE

- Harassment and bullying in any form is not tolerated
- Emphasis is placed on the importance of mutual respect in the workplace. Colleagues understand that while fun at work is important, a level of professionalism should be maintained at all times
- Optometrists are included in all staff meetings and there is an open discussion on what is working well and what is not working
- For new employees, there is a mentor or a buddy they can turn to for support, who is not their direct manager
- Reverse mentoring, where younger members of staff coach the older ones, can identify differences in attitudes between different generations in the workplace, which can be positive for all
- Self-awareness training to understand how your actions can have an impact on others is introduced
- There are confidential helplines or peer to peer support for individuals who are having problems. If not provided by the company then explaining where this support can be found elsewhere
- Provide a range of opportunities for colleagues to give feedback on team relationships, which could include confidential surveys
- Practices and staff should be encouraged to arrange and attend social events outside work, so staff get to know each other on a personal, as well as a professional, level

✓ CHECKLIST – APPLYING THIS TO YOUR PRACTICE

- Do you discuss as a team how you work together?
- Are all the voices in the team heard?
- If there are any problem areas, do they get sorted out?
- Is there an open culture for sharing feelings, views and ideas, honestly and without fear of consequences?
- Do you look out for signs of stress in yourself and other members of the team?

What do we do well?

What can we improve?

Next steps

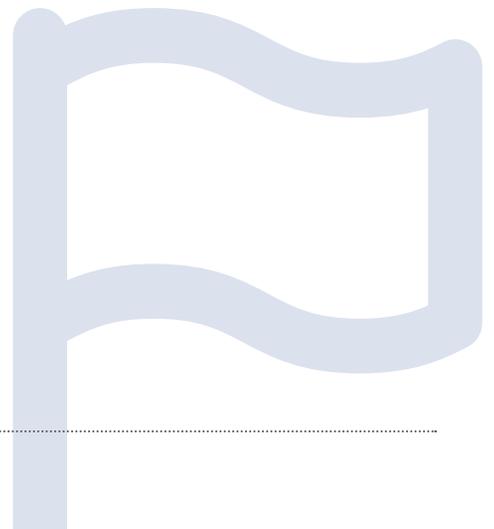
5 Openness about change and the need to change

It is recognised that the prospect of any change can cause anxiety and stress. Any change to working practices should be explained to staff in advance, allowing them to discuss how they will be affected.

With potentially a lot of change about to affect the roles of optometrists, such as the impact of technology, companies should be open with staff about the potential impact and should be preparing them for the future.

BEST PRACTICE

- Training is provided for optometrists on all of the options available in their career, including clinical and business aspects
- Training and development programmes are future-focused, looking at the qualifications and experience that optometrists will need over the next five to 10 years
- A clear vision of the future of optometry is shared by leaders of the company on a regular basis
- Optometrists are encouraged to look at the whole range of career opportunities and educated on how to achieve them
- Optometrists are encouraged to build a portfolio of roles, including time for voluntary work or working in hospitals



✓ CHECKLIST – APPLYING THIS TO YOUR PRACTICE

- Is change discussed as part of regular staff meetings?
- Does the company support staff in developing a range of skills, both clinical and interpersonal, to equip them for any changes to their roles in the future?
- Are career opportunities discussed by the company?

What do we do well?

What can we improve?

Next steps

General advice for employees

Don't be afraid to speak out

It is often the case that managers and colleagues are not aware of issues and are both able and willing to help when they find out. Do not suffer in silence.

Be flexible

There are conflicting priorities in business, as there are in life generally. In optometry, these often include the tension between your professional clinical responsibilities, commercial targets and customer service. In addition, not everything goes to plan all the time. Sometimes you must show flexibility to accommodate this and help the team. This should be possible without compromising your professional standards.

Be assertive

If your concerns are not being addressed, escalate the issues to higher levels of management. If they are still not addressed, or if there is a genuine difference between your values and those of the company, you may need to look for a role in a company that shares your values.

General advice for employers

Encourage an open and supportive workplace

Often the best suggestions for improving performance will come from your employees. However, they may not feel able to speak out if there is an atmosphere of repression and defensiveness. Be open to all ideas.

Be firm on how people behave at work

The ideal is that the team works harmoniously together to achieve the goals and objectives of the business. Keep an eye on the team dynamic to spot any examples of bullying, obstruction or shirking responsibility. These should be challenged and discussed – either with the individuals concerned, or with the team in general.

Show that you care about people as people

All staff should feel valued, regardless of their role. After all, happy staff are motivated staff that are more likely to provide a positive contribution to the business. Your employees should know they are much more than just cogs in the machine.

How to manage your stress drivers

If you identify with any of the stress drivers listed below, there are ways to combat them to help manage your stress levels. Try to consider them in a new light. Challenge the thought patterns that are your stress drivers, for example:

1

**Stress driver: I have to be perfect —
'I can't... until...'**

Instead: Identify what you can't change and accept that reality before you start the task. Manage your expectations and create a more realistic response

2

**Stress driver: I have to work quickly —
'I'll squeeze that in too'**

Instead: Identify your 'last responsible minute' threshold — the last time you can do something well before quality is lost

3

**Stress driver: I have to please others —
'I wish I hadn't said 'yes''**

Instead: Deal with overload by clarifying or compromising your terms 'I would do that but/if/when...'. Create parameters

4

**Stress driver: I have to be strong —
'I must do this on my own'**

Instead: Share your strengths by looking for opportunities to collaborate with others to share the burden of tasks

5

**Stress driver: I have to try hard —
'I will make a real effort to...'**

Instead: Think about your energy management. Are you putting in the right amount of effort to the right tasks? What do you need to prioritise your energy for?

The 'five ways to wellbeing'

In 2008, the New Economics Foundation (NEF) was commissioned by the UK government to undertake the Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, to consider how to achieve the best possible mental development and wellbeing for everyone in the future.

The project recommended five evidence-based actions, which contribute to improved personal wellbeing. You may wish to incorporate some of these into your day-to-day life.

1

Connect

Talk and listen, be there, feel connected to others

2

Be active

Do what you can, enjoy what you do, move your mood

3

Take notice

Remember the simple things that give you joy

4

Keep learning

Embrace new experiences, see opportunities, surprise yourself

5

Give

Your time, your words, your presence

Support for the guide



Opticians

At Boots Opticians, we welcome the publication of this report and agree with its findings which highlight best practice to improve the wellbeing of optometrists in the UK. As a responsible employer the health and wellbeing of all our colleagues, including optometrists, is our priority, and we continue to put our people at the heart of everything we do.



This is an important and timely piece of work from the AOP. We are very pleased to have been involved and to have had the opportunity to make a meaningful and sincere contribution to the best practice recommendations. Our partners, many of whom are themselves optometrists, absolutely respect the vital role of optometrists and are committed to creating healthy and rewarding workplaces for them.

vision *express*

Thank you for involving Vision Express in this project and allowing us the opportunity to contribute. We really believe the guide will be a useful document which we can use practically and for reference. One of our key priorities is to ensure we have the correct foundation within the organisation to offer the best support to all our clinicians.

Putting it into practice

The Clinicians Partnership Panel has already influenced some positive changes within our business, to improve the understanding of the importance of the optometrists' role across the whole of Boots Opticians.

Optometrist, Boots Opticians

In these rapidly changing times, it is important to help optometrists build resilience and be future-ready, which is why my colleagues and I have developed workshops on the diverse future of optometry with its expanded career development opportunities.

Optometrist, Specsavers

I am able to spend time away from the testing room, contributing with peers and management, as well as playing an active role in training and recruitment.

Optometrist, Vision Express

FEELING PRESSURED, ANXIOUS, OR WORRIED?

Talking things through can bring clarity, relief and a sense of control over the issues affecting you.

The AOP Peer Support Line is a confidential, free-phone helpline for individuals at any stage of their optical career.

Calls will be answered 24 hours a day, by an external answering service, with trained volunteers on duty to return calls between 8am and 8pm.

CALL OUR PEER SUPPORT LINE ON

0800 870 8401



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www.aop.org.uk/peersupport



**PROMOTING THE
PROFESSION**

**PROTECTING THE
PROFESSIONAL**