

Optimizing Clinical Teams in Dermatology: A Strategic Framework for Recruitment, Onboarding, and Retention

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PRACTICE POINTS

- Dermatology requires a unique workforce that can balance clinical knowledge, customer service, technology use, and adaptability across medical and cosmetic settings.
- Effective hiring is a strategic process that relies on clearly defined candidate profiles, structured recruitment, and thoughtful onboarding.
- Practice success depends on retention and growth, with strong workplace culture, professional development, and readiness for AI-driven changes playing key roles.

Effective staffing is critical to the success of modern dermatology practices, where teams must support medical, surgical, and aesthetic services while navigating increasing operational demands. In this article, we discuss strategies for identifying and recruiting dermatology-specific talent, implementing structured hiring and onboarding processes, and fostering long-term staff retention through professional development and a positive workplace culture. We also explore the growing influence of AI and automation on staffing needs and workforce development.

Effective staffing is central to delivering high-quality, efficient dermatologic care. In the current landscape of American medicine, dermatologists manage complex medical conditions, perform surgical procedures, and in some cases expand into elective aesthetic services.

The ability to offer advanced clinical services is dependent on the performance of those who operate equipment and sustain daily operations.

The “perfect” hire is therefore not a luxury but a necessity for practice survival: with shrinking reimbursements and rising administrative burden, staff capability influences clinic efficiency, medicolegal risk, and patient experience and outcomes. A dysfunctional team can contribute to physician burnout, whereas a high-functioning one enables dermatologists to practice at the top of their license by focusing on diagnosis and complex interventions while the office functions efficiently. In this article, we examine the anatomy of modern dermatology hiring and highlight the benefits of shifting from reactive staffing to proactive talent acquisition.

PHASE 1: THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE DERMATOLOGY-SPECIFIC PROFILE

Before drafting a job description, it is important to have an idea of what the ideal candidate embodies. A medical assistant in a high-volume Mohs surgery suite requires a vastly different temperament and skill set than an aesthetic coordinator in a boutique cosmetic practice. Here are some factors to consider when approaching your ideal hire.

The Hybridity of the Specialty

Dermatology is unique in that the same patient can be treated for a life-threatening melanoma and a bothersome wrinkle within the same afternoon. This requires staff who can pivot emotionally and technically. When

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looking for a new employee, prioritize the 4 pillars of the ideal dermatology assistant: clinical competency, a hospitality mindset, digital agility, and a “get it done” mindset.

Clinical Competency—A basic understanding of skin anatomy and common pathologies is vital, even for non-clinical roles. A front-desk employee who understands the urgency of a changing mole in a patient with melanoma vs a new acne cyst is a vital triage asset.

Hospitality Mindset—When operating a dermatology clinic with offerings in the elective space (ie, aesthetics), be aware that patients increasingly are viewing themselves as consumers in these spaces. Dermatologists should look for candidates who have experience in high-end service industries such as retail, hospitality, or concierge services. These individuals understand that the patient experience begins in the parking lot and ends with the follow-up call.

Digital Agility—We are in the midst of a technological revolution. Between AI-driven diagnostic assistance, tele-dermatology platforms, and integrated electronic medical record/billing systems, the modern employee has to be more than just computer literate—they must be digitally native (eg, able to troubleshoot a tablet-based consent form or explain a patient portal with ease).

“Get It Done” Mindset—In a fast-paced dermatology clinic, it is important to find someone who looks for work instead of waiting for orders; otherwise, you might find yourself spending more time directing your employees than getting your actual work done.

The Culture Fit vs Culture Add

Traditionally, practices have prioritized hiring for “culture fit”—that is, looking for individuals who think and behave like existing staff. Contemporary management theory, however, favors hiring for “culture add,” recruiting candidates who contribute perspectives and skills absent from the current team. For practices expanding into aesthetics or focusing on a specific aspect of dermatology, the practice needs employees who bring perspectives it lacks. Perhaps the candidate has a background in hospitality, or they are involved in community health initiatives. These “adds” broaden the practice’s reach and depth.

PHASE 2: THE STRATEGIC RECRUITMENT PROCESS

The days of putting up “Help Wanted” signs are over. To find elite talent, dermatologists must treat recruitment like a diagnostic workup: thorough, methodical, and evidence based. Follow these steps for a thoughtful progression in finding the right candidate for your practice.

Step 1: Crafting a Magnetic Job Description

Most job postings read like a dry list of tasks: *Take vitals, room patients, call in prescriptions.* These descriptions attract clock-punchers. To attract careerists, the vision must be sold. An effective job description should

include 2 main components: the vision statement and the growth path.

The Vision Statement—Start by stating your practice’s mission. If you’re focused on building a practice that values concierge-style care with long visit times, say so: “Join a team dedicated to patient care, slowing down, and personalized services.”

The Growth Path—High-quality candidates want to focus on their career trajectory. During the interview, mention opportunities for laser certification, scribe training, or management tracks. For those on a path toward higher education, describe the breadth of clinical training and experience.

Step 2: The Tiered Interview Protocol

We recommend a 3-tiered approach to the interview process to ensure multiple data points are collected before an offer is made: a behavior screen, a “shadow day,” and a “no doctor” zone.

Tier 1: The Behavioral Screen (Remote)—Conduct a 20-minute video call focused purely on soft skills using questions from the STAR method (Situation, Task, Action, Result). For example, ask something like, “Tell me about a time you may have faced an unsatisfied client. How did you de-escalate the situation?” Pay attention to whether the candidate takes responsibility or places blame.

Tier 2: The Shadow Day (Working Interview)—This can be an important part of the hiring process. We recommend inviting top candidates for a paid half- or full-day trial to assess how they perform in a real-world clinical setting. For medical assistant candidates, evaluate their ability to remain task focused and efficient and observe how they handle situations such as the sight of blood or interactions with needle-phobic patients. For front-desk candidates, pay attention to how they prioritize competing responsibilities and their openness to learning and feedback. For all positions, observing interactions with both patients and team members can provide valuable insight into professionalism, communication skills, and overall fit within the practice.

Tier 3: The “No-Doctor” Zone (Optional)—Leave the candidate alone with the current staff, if only for a few minutes. This allows the employer to gauge not only the candidate’s behavior with a senior member of staff but also with other members of the team, allowing for demonstration of character. Ask the team to assess if this is someone they would want to spend a workday with. If the staff says no, that may affect your choice of hire as well.

PHASE 3: THE OFFER AND THE LEGAL GUARDRAILS

After finding the unicorn candidate, the closing process must be professional and legally sound. Here are the steps we have found most helpful to take once a decision for a hire is made.

The Offer Letter as a Blueprint

An offer letter is more than a salary statement; it is a document of expectations. It should include the following components:

- **Clear Compensation Structure:** Base pay plus any performance-based incentives (eg, bonuses for retail skin care sales or conversion rates on cosmetic consultations).
- **Specific Benefit Clauses:** Paid time off, benefits such as health insurance and 401(k) matching if you are offering, and professional perks such as discounted treatments or skin care stipends.
- **At-Will Statement:** Ensure your legal counsel has reviewed your at-will employment clauses to protect the practice. This allows the employer to terminate an employee without legal liability and conversely gives the employee flexibility to leave the position if it does not fit their needs.
- **Employee Manual:** Once formally hired, make sure you have an employee handbook with your expectations and regulations—ranging from dress code and safety regulations to paid time off—clearly written. Be more specific than you think is necessary, which will prevent potential discrepancies down the road.

Onboarding: The First 90 Days

The first 90 days of employment are the most volatile. Statistics show that the majority of staff turnover happens in this window.¹ To mitigate this, use the following 90-day success map:

- **The Immersion Period (Days 1-30):** The new hire should not be expected to produce. They are there to learn the culture of the clinic: the protocols for rooming, the vernacular for explaining procedures, and the standards for documentation.
- **The Guided Execution Period (Days 31-60):** They begin performing tasks under the direct supervision of a senior lead.
- **The Independent Integration Period (Days 61-90):** They take on a full load, with weekly check-ins to address friction points.

PHASE 4: RETENTION THROUGH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In dermatology practices, staff members frequently are approached by competitors, medical spas, and industry representatives to work for them. Retention is not just about the paycheck; it's about the "professional home." Staff members want to feel valued and have a responsible role in the workplace.

As dermatologists, we often are seen as the captain of the ship; however, the most successful practices operate

as high-reliability organizations. In this type of practice, everyone from the janitorial staff to the senior associate is encouraged to speak up if there is a safety issue or an efficiency gap. Here are some techniques to foster this culture.

The Weekly Huddle—For practices that are just starting to expand, this is a great way to make sure that friction points and difficulties are addressed before becoming a larger issue. Gathering the staff for just 15 minutes in the morning before clinic begins can be a great way to address housekeeping issues, encourage staff to speak up about problems they may have identified, and provide a chance for everyone to feel heard.

The Educational Bend—Encourage staff to grow their wealth of knowledge, whether from industry-sponsored educational product events to formal certifications. A front desk assistant who then moves on to get their advanced degree may return to the practice as a nurse and become a valuable partner and asset.

PHASE 5: LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

As we look toward 2027 and beyond, the employee of the future may not be entirely human. We already are seeing the integration of AI scribes and automated billing auditors. Practices should look for candidates who aren't afraid of AI but are excited by it. A medical assistant who can oversee an AI scribe while still maintaining eye contact and holding a patient's hand during a painful injection is the gold standard.

Final Thoughts

Our medical school training prepares us for the "what" of dermatology, but it rarely prepares us for the "who." As practice managers, we are thrust into the role of CEO, human resources director, and culture architect without a formal syllabus. By applying the same clinical rigor to the hiring process that we do to a complex diagnostic case, we can build teams that don't just work for us but build with us. The goal is a practice where the physician can focus on the art and science of the skin, confident that every other aspect of the patient journey is being handled by a team that is as dedicated, ethical, and clinical as they are. Hiring is one of the most difficult procedures you will likely perform in your practice; it also is the one with the highest long-term success rate if performed with thoughtfulness, precision, and above all, kindness.

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