

Going digital



**Dental
Economics**

Creating a digital plan to ensure success.

by Pam Hemmen

The majority of dentists agree that they want to be practicing in a digital office in which software, hardware, and digital devices all work together effortlessly. The question is: Do you have to close your eyes and leap to attain that goal?

As a leading provider of practice-management and clinical software, we work every day with dentists who are making the transition to the digital office. This gives us the opportunity to gather information from our customers and share what we've learned from other dentists who are going through the same process.

Although practices make different decisions about the best way to successfully implement digital technology, the one common factor among all of these offices is the digital plan. By creating a digital plan specific to the

needs of your practice, you will maximize your success in the leap to digital technology.

Starting off on the right foot

Dr. Greg Liberatore has been in practice for more than eight years. Nearly all of that time was spent in an office with three other dentists who weren't utilizing digital technology. He faced a challenging decision when he decided to build a new office: Should he avoid change and continue using the same system he was accustomed to, or should he "leap" into digital technology?

"Consult your staff when you make this decision," Dr. Liberatore recommends. "You really can integrate digital technology one piece at a time or all at once, depending on what your staff thinks. Our staff wanted to switch 'cold turkey,' so that is what we did. It made

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sense since we were starting off fresh in a new office. In the end, proper training was the key for us.”

In May 2003, he made the decision to open his new office with a complete digital package, including practice-management and clinical software, ADEC equipment, and digital X-ray and intraoral-camera devices. One month later, Dr. Liberatore and his staff were practicing in their new office, which encourages utilizing digital tools.

“We created a new, state-of-the-art office that gives patients a feeling that they are getting the best dental care possible, using the best equipment available today. From our digital-radiography equipment and computer hardware and software, to the tinted exterior black glass, we wanted our patients to expect a high-tech practice.”

Digital X-ray equipment and intraoral cameras offer the staff opportunities to provide better patient education, and the clinical software allows the dentist to digitally store patient charts for easy accessibility at any time.

“In addition to the high-tech feeling we give our patients, we feel the digitization of our records is important for continuity of information,” Dr. Liberatore comments. “We wanted more accurate information that is easy to store or transfer.”

Once the hardware and software systems were selected, other digital devices were added based on the integration capabilities of the software. In Dr. Liberatore’s case, he decided to add digital X-ray equipment. After the software and digital equipment were selected and installed in the office, the need for proper training on how to use all of this technology was obvious.

“Training from your technology partner is essential. We needed four full days of training on the software and technology systems before we started up the office. Our local technology representatives trained us on the software system, X-ray equipment, and digital photography system.”

Dr. Liberatore and his staff have been working in their new office for just over six months now and have no regrets.

“I don’t know anyone who is successful who didn’t take a few risks to get where they are in life. When considering going digital, I found it best to have the philosophy that you need to spend money to make money. Our new office — including the hardware and software — cost a lot of money, but we’re more efficient in our practice, the staff couldn’t be happier, and our patients are completely satisfied.”

Going digital — six months at a time

Dr. Joe Wommack also wanted to create a new dental office, but he decided to incorporate digital technology

over time. The new workspace was designed with a vision for the future. All of the appropriate digital hook-ups were installed before Dr. Wommack even made his final decisions on the type of digital technology to use.

In Dr. Wommack’s 21 years as a dentist, he has introduced his practice to a plethora of digital equipment, including CAESY patient education, the Diagnodent, an intraoral camera, the CompuDent digital-injection machine, the Air Techniques ScanX machine, and a CEREC 3D, in addition to Patterson EagleSoft software. Dr. Wommack notes that all of this digital technology didn’t happen overnight and that he wasn’t alone in deciding to incorporate it into the practice.

“It wasn’t me who had to be sold on digital technology — it was my staff! Initially, we only installed the front-office portion of our software. Then, six months later, we put computers in the operatories and added the clinical capabilities. Six months after that, we added the digital X-ray equipment. After just over a year of having all of our equipment, I think this phase-in approach worked well for us. We basically decided to buy all the software and equipment, but we waited about six to nine months in between each step to allow for the ‘learning curve’ time.”

During this learning period, Dr. Wommack and his staff completed training on each piece of equipment or software as it became part of the office.

“We basically decided we had to dive in and start incorporating the digital equipment. We sat down with a trainer and spent two days in fairly intense training. You feel a little awkward at first, but you have to crawl before you walk, and you have to walk before you run.”

Understanding what you want — and getting it!

When Dr. Joe Gatti and his staff decided to add digital technology to their office, the goal was to scale back his current practice to achieve a more intimate atmosphere. He envisioned an environment built for first-rate patient education, where he and his staff could show patients the exact conditions in their mouths and provide solutions for those problems. Support for the hardware and software was the biggest issue for Dr. Gatti as he and his staff prepared to make this important decision.

“Our software is basically a superior communication tool. The combination of the software and our digital devices allows us to communicate with our patients better, faster, and easier, and that was the driving force behind our digital plans. In addition, after 19 years, I finally found a way to reduce radiation in my practice. Patients demand better education and less radiation, and we provide those solutions for them.”

The first step in implementing digital technology in the office was selecting the software. Dr. Gatti had soft-

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ware manufacturers visit the office and make a presentation to his staff. After staff members saw the product offerings of several top manufacturers, they sat down to make a decision. The staff members each had their own concerns about what was important and what wasn't. After the features and benefits of each system were reviewed and analyzed, the staff chose a software system that had the backing of a large dental supply company with a reputation for customer support.

"When we began purchasing our digital software and equipment, my main concern was support," Dr. Gatti emphasizes. "The company we chose is in it for the long-term. Plus, I was able to buy all the hardware and software from them. Now, if I need support relating to any of my equipment or the software, I make one phone call."

With a little help from our friends

The decision to incorporate digital technology can sometimes be simplified by consulting with others who are using similar technology. Dr. Curt Ringhofer consulted with a colleague who was already using digital technology in his practice.

"I would recommend that you talk to a few other dentist friends about going digital," he says. "One of my friends felt very strongly about the software he used," Dr. Ringhofer recalls, "and he recommended that I try it out. I trusted his advice, and now I'm very happy with our system. It's so user-friendly."

The friend's advice gave Dr. Ringhofer the confidence to leave his position as a part-time associate to focus on his solo practice. For more than two years, he has grown his practice using digital technology. Recently, he added two more operatories. He credits much of the health of his practice to the use of digital technology.

"In the past, I didn't really have a rapport with patients," Dr. Ringhofer comments. "Now, the digital equipment and software help me to better explain information to my patients. Case-acceptance rates have never been higher."

Research = no regrets

For two years, Dr. William Beasley and his associates debated the decision to integrate digital technology into their offices. This prolonged debate gave him ample time to research the latest software and equipment, and the features and benefits of each. Based on this extensive research, he focused on what he wanted from digital technology.

"I would go to some offices that utilized various digital technologies and observe what they were doing and what their systems were capable of doing," Dr. Beasley recalls. "There is a bit of a paradigm shift in the paper-

A guide to making decisions about digital technology

Dr. Joe Gatti stresses the importance of putting a great deal of thought into determining what your office wants to accomplish with the transition to digital technology. He offers the following advice as a guide to starting the decision-making process:

1 What do you want to accomplish with the change? I wanted to find a better way to communicate with my patients.

2 Obtain feedback from your team. Make sure staff members are intimately involved in the entire process. When deciding what X-ray system to use, I had all the vendors come in and present to the team, so they could make an informed decision. If the doctor makes the decision on his or her own, the staff could revolt.

3 Understand the cost, but more importantly, understand the return-on-investment.

4 If you have the technology, patients perceive you're also up on the educational part of dentistry. We don't have to say that out loud because it comes across through the hardware, software, and digital devices that are utilized.

5 What do you want to integrate first from an economic standpoint? How does it all have to come together? Once I established my digital hub with the practice-management and clinical software, it made it easy to select the Schick intraoral camera and the Air Techniques ScanX machine. Both are directly integrated with our software. I don't have to buy any software to bridge the gap. We were very clear about what we wanted to accomplish, so it was easy to ask our technology representative what had to happen to reach that result.

to-computer switch, but it really isn't a problem. Go to an office that actually is using what you're interested in and ask questions.

"We made the switch to digital in stages," he continues. "First, we allowed the front-desk personnel time to get used to the new software. After that happened, we brought in the digital X-ray equipment. A month later, we instituted computerized charting and became a 'paperless' office. I'd say the most difficult part was switching to the digital X-ray. Our assistants weren't very computer literate, but the learning curve was easy, and they picked it up quickly."

As an endodontist, Dr. Beasley had been searching

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for an all-encompassing, practice-management and digital-radiography system for several years.

“Previously, we used another practice-management software program,” he explains, “but we switched because we wanted to use Schick sensors and not have a problem with ‘bridging’ software. When you have two different types of software, they don’t speak the same language. Then, you have to use bridging software that helps the two systems talk to each other. The bridge is the weakest point. We can’t afford for the digital X-rays to be down at all. We can’t work without X-rays. With our new system, we have total integration with no bridging. I would recommend that you spend a little extra money to have it all be compatible if you’re going digital. We’ve never had a system crash or not been able to take X-rays in over two years.”

The digital switch has been nothing but positive for Dr. Beasley and his associates.

“We debated the issue of going digital for about two years before we decided to do it, because it’s a large investment,” Dr. Beasley says. “Now, three years later, the staff and I discuss it, and there is no way we’d ever go back.”

Plan for success

Making the digital office a reality involves research, planning, and decision-making. You’re not alone in

making the digital transition. Every day, more dentists are making the decision to go digital and each practice makes the transition in its own way. Based on your preferences, the decision process may involve taking tours of several offices that use digital technology, discussing and setting goals for the technology with associates, and/or speaking to local technology sales representatives. In all instances, however, a successful “leap” to technology must include a digital plan. With a digital plan, you will be able to make the leap to where you want to be — a fully-integrated digital office — with your eyes wide open

Pam Hemmen brings 10 years of experience in the dental industry to her position as co-director of the Patterson Technology Center (PTC), a division of Patterson Dental Supply, Inc. The PTC is the service, development, and distribution area for Patterson’s technology products, many of which are centered around Patterson EagleSoft, a leading practice management and clinical software company in the dental industry. The Patterson Technology Center can be reached at (800) 294-8504 or at www.eaglesoft.net. You may email Hemmen directly at pam.hemmen@pattersondental.com.



Hemmen