

# Dental Hygienists: In Demand and Indispensable

*How hygienists can maximize their value in a job market that's hotter than ever.*



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**Matt Penny, Senior Manager of Clinical Recruitment, Henry Schein**

"Hygienists are the backbone of every dental practice because they own the ongoing relationship with patients."

For Matt Penny, Henry Schein's senior manager of clinical recruitment, it's that relationship component that makes dental hygienists unique.

"A lot of people who go to the dentist twice a year spend 2 to 4 times more time with their hygienist than their doctor," he noted. "That relationship with the hygienist is the most important thing, because when they're at the point of deciding whether to do a procedure, it is about trust."

No wonder, then, that the American Dental Association (ADA) Health Policy Institute found that at the end of 2025, roughly a third of practices had recently recruited for hygienists. Adding staff was the top action practices planned for 2026, even as low reimbursements and increasing expenses dominated economic concerns.

"The value-added component of the hygienist really is the glue that keeps everything in the practice together," noted Penny.

## THE JOB MARKET FOR HYGIENISTS

Since 2020, that glue has been spread thin. About 3,000 hygienists retired during the COVID-19 pandemic, and fewer than half of those who left without retiring returned, according to the ADA. Add in the fact that about a third of hygienists surveyed in 2022 planned to retire within five years, and it's no surprise that dentists have rated recruiting hygienists as "very" or "extremely" challenging for the past three years.

"Our average time to fill for a doctor is 72 days. For the first time ever, it's 81 days to recruit for a hygienist right now. So it's harder to find a hygienist than a doctor," he explained. Part of the challenge comes from the fact that the number of hygiene graduates lags the number of hygienists leaving the profession.

This reality gives hygienists more choice in where they work and leverage to negotiate salary and benefits. "Hygienists want financial freedom and flexibility," Penny said. "They want stable hours rather than schedules that fall apart, and they don't want drama in the practice. They want safe, modern working conditions with up-to-date equipment—that makes a world of difference."

An allowance for continuing education has also become a bigger priority, particularly as new technologies impact workflows and patient engagement.

"But what I think hygienists really look for more than anything else," Penny said, "is respect and support as a clinical partner, not just a producer. If they're codiagnosing, they're a partner."

Many hygienists are also exploring gig work for compensation and schedule flexibility. “It can be more advantageous for a hygienist to work multiple practices. They’re in the driver’s seat when it comes to talent acquisition, for sure,” he said.

## THE PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

For practices, a rotating pool of hygienists has mixed effects. Recall appointments are critical, but inconsistent staffing can slow trust-building and affect case acceptance. Continuity of care tied to provider-patient relationships becomes harder to maintain.

“When you have allegiance to a hygienist, it becomes really important in terms of patient retention,” Penny said. If a patient is considering changing practices, it often comes down to the hygienist’s role. “Because your hygienist is your biggest advocate. People see the dentist as...scary, because that’s where the procedures come in, that’s where the pain comes in, that’s where the money comes in,” he said. “The anxiety of going to the dentist has to do with the dentist. The comfort part has to do with the hygienist.”

## COMPETITIVE POSITIONING

Although it is a hygienist’s market, practices still look for top qualifications in candidates. Penny has some recommendations for hygienists seeking to showcase themselves to their best advantage.

“It starts with that CE component,” he said. “Having strong perio protocols and keeping up with the latest trends.”

Clear communication is also key. “They have to have sharp communication and patient education skills and be able to talk about everything with their patients in plain language, being empathetic and understanding from

# Hygienists in the Driver’s Seat

Hygienists play a key role in patient care—and with the right tools and knowledge, they can also drive practice efficiency and retention. Modern technologies such as those within Dentrix and Dentrix Ascend help streamline workflows so hygienists can focus on patients while supporting the practice.

Key tools and skills include:

- **Dentrix Voice:** Hands-free perio and restorative charting during exams.

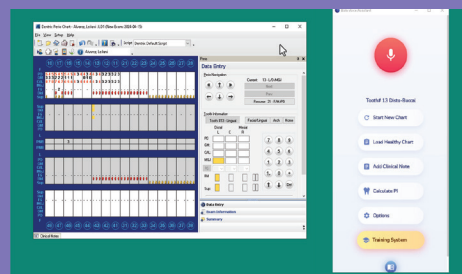
- **Integrated patient communication & recall tools:** Keep appointments on schedule and patients engaged.

- **Practice analytics dashboards:**

Track retention trends, appointment gaps, and productivity metrics.

- **Business knowledge:** Understanding practice finances, marketing, and customer retention strategies enhances their role as clinical partners.

By combining tech and business insight, hygienists strengthen patient trust and support practice success.



the perspective of the patient,” Penny added.

Handling stress well is another major asset. “Unfortunately, drama does find its way into dental practices,” Penny said. “Schedules do break down. You want to be the type of hygienist who is going to be a solution person.”

## TIPS FOR THE INTERVIEW

Hygienists should evaluate practices for more than salary. “What type of schedule do you want?” he asked. “What pace is good for you? How do you feel safe and respected? Make sure that any practice checks all the boxes in terms of culture and values for you.”

Use the interview as a two-way evaluation, he advised. “Don’t just sit there and say, ‘What’s the practice looking

for?’ You want to know things like: How long are hygiene appointments? How is perio diagnosed here? What support do I have in terms of room turnover and instruments? Ask about their expectations and if they have metrics.”

Observe the environment carefully—look for stress levels, team chemistry, equipment, ergonomics, and infection control.

“I always tell every person to trust your gut when you go in to get a feel for the practice,” he concluded. “When you’re a hygienist and you’re in demand like this, take your time and trust your gut and go with the right choice. Don’t feel pressured, because there are so many opportunities out there. Otherwise, it wouldn’t take 81 days to fill a hygienist position!”