TACKLING FRONT DESK BOTTLE NECKS

Introduction

The front desk is the critical hub, or heart center, of any medical practice, but unfortunately, it is the area that often gets the least focus and attention.

Bottlenecks and errors made at the front desk can have severe repercussions to numerous other inter-office departments, employees and clinicians, and can also negatively impact revenue, collections and cash flow.

And, let's not forget that your front desk and its employees are the first point of contact and connection with patients, which makes it critical to ensure you have the right personnel with the right personality and skills for each job.

But the challenges run even deeper. The front desk also interfaces with clinical providers, billing and those who manage collections and revenue, and marketing and reputation management in addition to registration and scheduling. Because the front desk personnel impact nearly every other department and function in a medical practice – internal and external – it is deserving of extra attention.

Addressing your front desk bottlenecks will streamline your operations, make your practice more efficient and profitable, and result in happier and more satisfied patients, employees and clinicians.

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What Happens When the Front Desk Falters

Bottlenecks at the front desk can cause a cascading effect of problems in many areas of the practice.

THE DOMINO EFFECT

Let's start at the beginning of the patient's journey to understand their experience, as well as the effects of the operational problems bottlenecks and poor practices, can create:

- **Overburdened with phone calls.** This often happens when the front desk is not properly resourced with the right people or sufficient personnel.

- **Rudeness, rushing, lack of empathy.** Stressed workers can rarely put their best foot forward with patients and co-workers. This can create a hostile work environment and a negative and unpleasant experience for patients.

- **Administrative, registration and scheduling errors.** The gathering of wrong or incomplete patient information creates bottlenecks elsewhere during the patient's visit and can bog down physicians and other clinical practitioners who need to correct the information during the patient visit. Meanwhile, poor scheduling can create long patient wait times, result in a high no-show rate or frustrated patient walkouts.

- **Revenue cycle management is negatively impacted.** Errors at the front desk can result in unnecessary credentialing and insurance authorization mistakes and claim rejections, which seriously impede cash flow and increase revenue aging. Not collecting payments and co-pays at the front desk during the patient visit also negatively affects cash-flow and can be costly to collect afterwards.
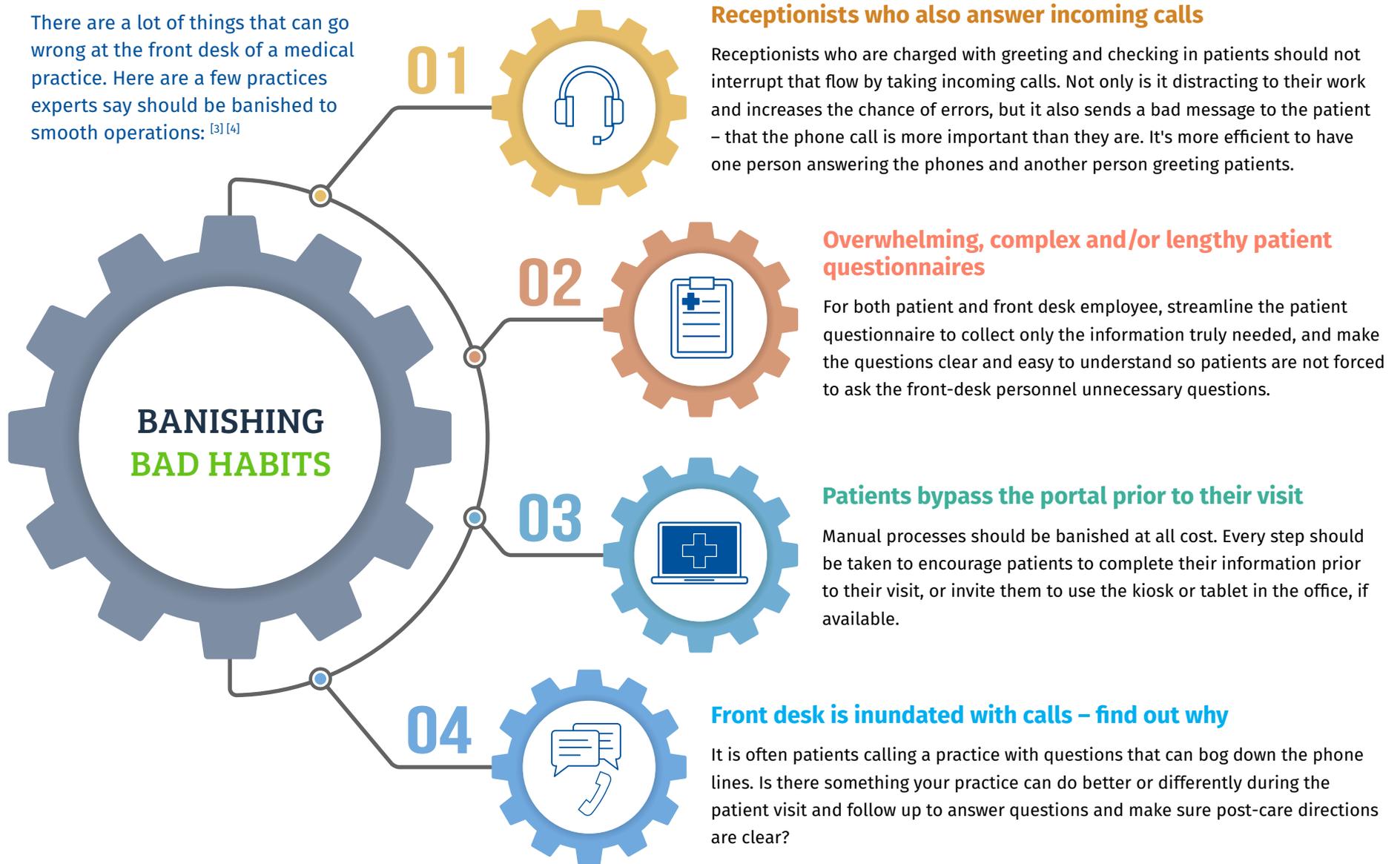
- **Physician time is not well spent.** It's an extremely poor use of a doctor's or nurse's time to be constantly correcting errors from the front desk or waiting on information they need to proceed with patient care. These administrative burdens take valuable clinical time away from the doctor and patient, which is the main reason for a medical practice's existence.

- **Reputation damage.** When patients have poor experiences at a medical practice, they rarely keep it to themselves. Online ratings and reviews are commonplace today, and bad news travels fast digitally. Poor patient reviews can cost a practice time, money and loss of existing and future patients.

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Why Bottlenecks Happen

Front desk bottlenecks often occur when a practice has flawed systems and workflows in place. Before you analyze and assess your workflows, however, it's important to understand why bottlenecks happen in the first place.

- **The wrong people in the wrong roles.** Those hired for front-desk positions are truly critical to a practice's operations and customer service interaction with patients, vendors, payers, and more. They are the eyes and ears and the "traffic cops" of the practice. For that reason, care must be taken to hire empathetic staff with strong people and communication skills who also are able to quickly assess and solve problems. Bottlenecks at the front desk are often created by placing people with inadequate skills and experience in these critical positions.

- **Haphazard workflows.** Many medical practices evolve their workflows over time, which can be haphazard and lead to not just bottlenecks, but errors and missed opportunities to correct them quickly. Running a medical practice is extremely complex and requires thoughtful workflow design and process engineering. More about this in the next section.

- **Management, leadership and vision.** Medical practitioners tend to think of themselves primarily as clinicians, which is understandable given the years of education and training. But when you open and operate a medical practice you also thrust yourself into the role of business leader, manager and visionary of the practice. While these skills may not come naturally, they are critical to running a successful and profitable practice.

There are a lot of things that can go wrong at the front desk of a medical practice. Here are a few practices experts say should be banished to smooth operations: [3] [4]

BANISHING
BAD HABITS

01

Receptionists who also answer incoming calls

Receptionists who are charged with greeting and checking in patients should not interrupt that flow by taking incoming calls. Not only is it distracting to their work and increases the chance of errors, but it also sends a bad message to the patient – that the phone call is more important than they are. It's more efficient to have one person answering the phones and another person greeting patients.

02

Overwhelming, complex and/or lengthy patient questionnaires

For both patient and front desk employee, streamline the patient questionnaire to collect only the information truly needed, and make the questions clear and easy to understand so patients are not forced to ask the front-desk personnel unnecessary questions.

03

Patients bypass the portal prior to their visit

Manual processes should be banished at all cost. Every step should be taken to encourage patients to complete their information prior to their visit, or invite them to use the kiosk or tablet in the office, if available.

04

Front desk is inundated with calls – find out why

It is often patients calling a practice with questions that can bog down the phone lines. Is there something your practice can do better or differently during the patient visit and follow up to answer questions and make sure post-care directions are clear?

How to Optimize the Front Desk

The solution is a combination of optimized processes, the right people, the correct management and leadership vision and style, and the best-suited EHR software overlay. Let's delve more deeply into each critical component for success.

- **Map your current processes.** Before you can fix what's broken, you have to chart your current front-desk processes with a flow map so you can more easily identify problem areas and streamline operations. This will help you identify bottlenecks and eliminate waste -- wasted calls, wasted steps, wasted time, wasted energy, wasted and repeated work, etc. Include the entire team in this exercise so everyone understands the mission, that the goal is to fix the problems and not lay blame, and that you need all hands on deck to create the solution.

- **Design an optimized workflow.** Now that you see the flaws of your processes, design what you and the team believe would be an ideal and streamlined flow using the same mapping as you did above. In the new and optimized workflow, be sure to address each bottleneck or flawed process identified in the mapping process.

- **Determine staffing levels and job descriptions.** Given the new process flow, how many people do you really need at the front desk? Do you need more or fewer people? What are the distinct roles and job descriptions for each front-desk position? What type of experience and skills does each position require? It's important to eliminate overlapping activities and redundancies in workflow, though in a smaller practice you may need to cross-train people in all front desk duties in case a colleague is out sick or on vacation, for example.

  Work is optimized when all understand their role in the practice within a clearly defined organizational structure. If you lack the proper number and caliber of employees, make the changes in a way that is least disruptive to your operations, and solve the biggest human resource issue first. Finding the right talent and placing them in the correct position is one of the fastest ways to eliminate bottlenecks.

  As you embark on this front-desk process improvement journey, consider using a virtual front desk (VFD) assistant to give you ample time and space to make the right people and process decisions. VFD assistants can help with both short-term and longer-term human talent needs.

- **Compensate employees fairly and show appreciation.** Interfacing with the public is a difficult job that can often leave employees feeling undervalued, underpaid and/or unappreciated, the trifecta for losing good employees.

2017 A poll by Gallup of more than one million workers in the U.S.

found that the number-one reason employees quit jobs is due to a bad manager or management, not the job itself.

67% of U.S. employees are disengaged at work.

51% say they're actively looking for a new job or are open to one.

41% say now is a good time to find a quality job. [1]

This high turnover in the post-pandemic economy makes it more important than ever to engage with your employees and make them part of the front-desk solution by asking them the tough questions, such as what the biggest problem in this office is, how could they do their jobs better and more efficiently, and what can management/staff do to improve? Your team has many of the answers you seek about your front desk bottlenecks, so be sure to tap into their knowledge.
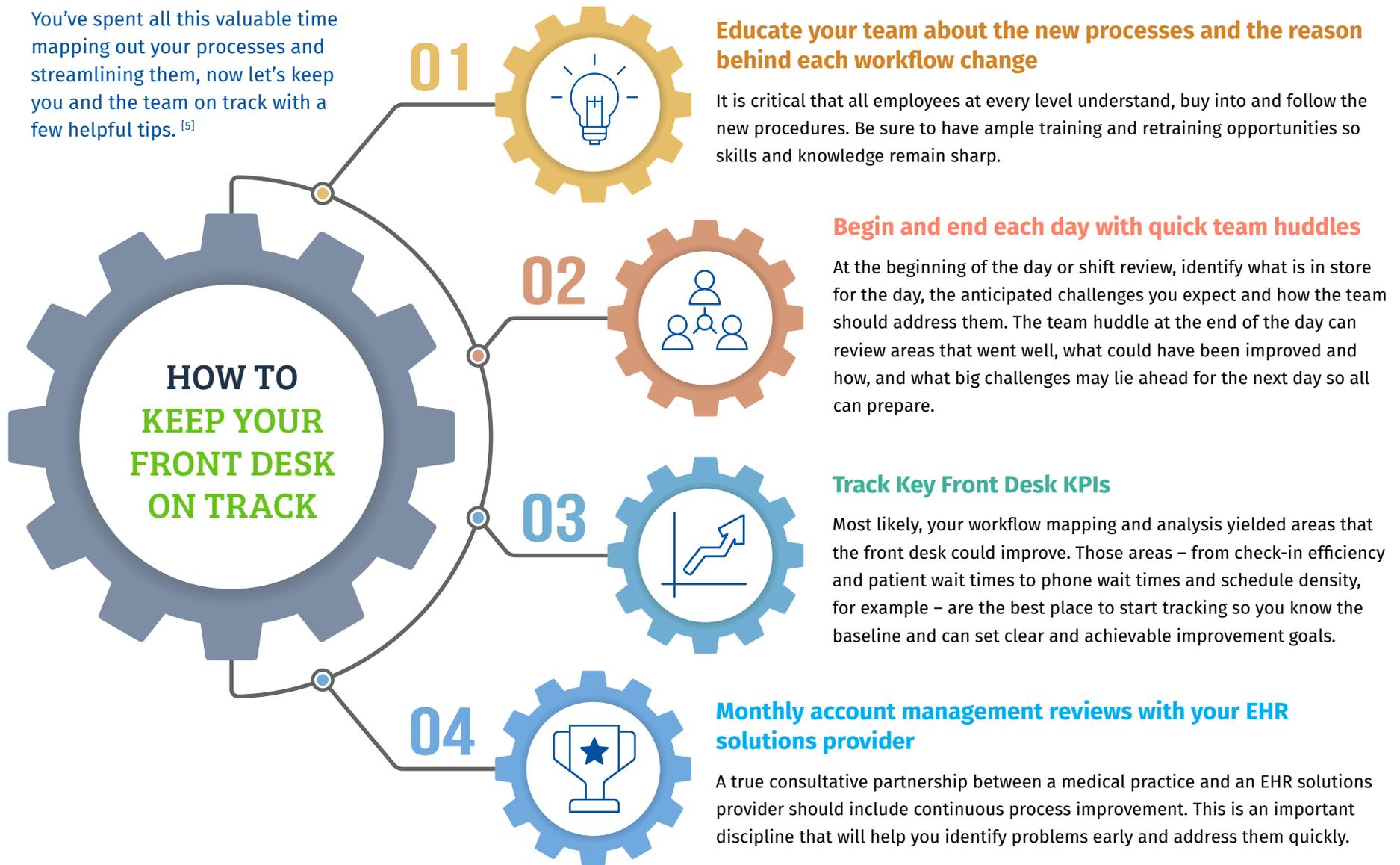
And remember, high employee turnover is very costly – upwards of $40,000 per employee, according to estimates – so it is really important to make the best and most deliberate hiring decisions possible. [2]

- **Be consistent in your leadership and management approach.** People like working for leaders who are inclusive, offer clear goals and direction and are fair and consistent. Lead by example and execute the workflow plan you and the team devised to improve operations. Be sure everyone follows the optimized workflow from every physician, clinician and technician to every front desk employee and billing/accounting staff. No exceptions. Then regularly review the plan and adjust it as the practice evolves. Be sure to engage in those interim process adjustments with the same dedication you applied to the original flow plan. That will ensure you avoid haphazard "quick fixes" that typically muck up the works long term.

Once a sound front-desk workflow is utilized consistently and embraced by all, then it is time to layer on automation such as a new EHR and other supporting solutions. Remember that technology is only as good as the systems of operations it is supporting – bad processes and information inputs yield bad data outputs and results.

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You've spent all this valuable time mapping out your processes and streamlining them, now let's keep you and the team on track with a few helpful tips. [5]

HOW TO KEEP YOUR FRONT DESK ON TRACK

01

Educate your team about the new processes and the reason behind each workflow change

It is critical that all employees at every level understand, buy into and follow the new procedures. Be sure to have ample training and retraining opportunities so skills and knowledge remain sharp.

02

Begin and end each day with quick team huddles

At the beginning of the day or shift review, identify what is in store for the day, the anticipated challenges you expect and how the team should address them. The team huddle at the end of the day can review areas that went well, what could have been improved and how, and what big challenges may lie ahead for the next day so all can prepare.

03

Track Key Front Desk KPIs

Most likely, your workflow mapping and analysis yielded areas that the front desk could improve. Those areas – from check-in efficiency and patient wait times to phone wait times and schedule density, for example – are the best place to start tracking so you know the baseline and can set clear and achievable improvement goals.

04

Monthly account management reviews with your EHR solutions provider

A true consultative partnership between a medical practice and an EHR solutions provider should include continuous process improvement. This is an important discipline that will help you identify problems early and address them quickly.

WRS Health is a cloud-based certified EHR and Practice Management System and Solutions provider. Offering more than just specialty-specific workflows and note types, WRS Health can help:

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[1] https://www.gallup.com/workplace/260564/heard-quit-rate-win-war-talent.aspx

[2] https://www.workstars.com/recognition-and-engagement-blog/2020/03/19/why-employees-quit-11-evidence-based-reasons/

[3] https://www.chattmd.org/blog/2018/7/19/4-hidden-bottlenecks-in-your-practice-how-to-banish-them

[4] https://www.reviewofoptometry.com/article/7-blunders-of-front-desk-staff-44416

[5] https://www.aafp.org/fpm/2005/0400/p61.html

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