

How Dental Practices Can Start Thinking 'Lean'



When you hear "lean" referred to in business, you might think of finely tuned systems and machinery in automotive plants, or streamlined processes that allow businesses to run more efficiently. Lean principles also can help dental practices adapt to today's challenges, such as declining PPO reimbursements, rising education debt, increasing technology capital expense, and a consumer base with more and more options for dental services. By implementing lean, dentists can reduce wasteful elements of the practice while increasing the focus on value-added processes. This, in turn, increases efficiency, productivity, and profitability, all of which allows you to continually provide a superior patient experience.

Lean is about refining your business processes down to exactly what is needed to provide customers the best possible services. In a series of blogs posted on DentalProductShopper.com and accessible via the QR code below, I describe the lean principles that would most apply to the dental industry—sound business practices such as refining processes, reducing waste, making informed business decisions, and putting patients first—as well as lean application in practice management. Here, I'll focus on 4 clinical areas where lean methodologies are best applied.

Offer More In-House Services: The ability to deliver the treatments the patient needs and wants in a timely, convenient, and efficient manner can have an enormous impact on your practice. When you provide more procedures in-house, you eliminate nonproductive steps, such as the patient needing to schedule with other doctors. At the same time, it allows you to add value for your patients and to your bottom line through increased procedures.

Digital Dentistry: Digital technology is allowing dentists to deliver faster, better, and more accurate services. For example, digital impressions are faster and more predictable than the traditional method and can be adjusted on the fly. Digital x-rays have the added benefit of immediate, high-

resolution image capture while eliminating wasteful activities like waiting for film to develop. And digital caries detection systems allow clinicians to find decay earlier and with more ease, allowing them to be more proactive with prevention.

Single-Visit Restorations: The ability to offer single-visit crowns is the perfect example of lean application in dentistry. CAD/CAM creates the ultimate value stream for a fixed restoration procedure by eliminating all of the nonvalue activities, such as extra visits, an uncomfortable impression process, the need for a temporary, and higher potential for adjustments to fix inaccuracies. You're eliminating the cost for a lab, reducing the likelihood of an inaccurate impression, and saving time.

Guided Implant Surgery: A key principle for lean is putting systems and processes in place that help avoid mistakes. In dentistry, a great example is the mistake-proofing offered by guided implant surgery. This leads to better outcomes. For the doctor, there's accurate placement with reduced potential for mistakes and surprises, leading to a more efficient procedure. For the patient, it can lead to an overall better experience such as quicker healing times.

Whether you're implementing the business practices associated with lean, the clinical areas, or the practice management strategies, it is important to remember that lean application is a gradual process that needs continual evaluating. But the bottom line is that lean has a track record of success across many industries, and there's no reason to believe it can't bear the same fruit for dental practices.

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Scan the QR code to read Alex Sadusky's blog series, "How Dental Can Start Thinking Lean."