



Building a Foundation for Career Success

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access

**“Destiny is not a matter of chance;
it is a matter of choice;
it is not a thing to be waited for,
it is a thing to be achieved.”**
—William Jennings Bryan¹

Career planning is a lifelong process that involves much more than choosing a profession and obtaining a position. Just as your patients need regular dental hygiene appointments to help maintain their oral health, you must make the time for tasks that will ensure the optimal health of your career.

To reach your potential in the dental hygiene profession, determine what success means to you, assess your skills and interests, devise a professional career plan, and put that plan into action by taking advantage of all the tools available to you.

Everyone has their own definition of career success. For example, some might place greater emphasis on accomplishments and salary, while others may feel that professional growth and personal satisfaction are primary.

For Stephanie Gianakas, RDH, AS, success means “treating patients with the optimal care they deserve.” Gianakas recently made a career move after 19 years with the same practice. Though she said she felt respected as a professional and a dental hygienist by the staff, patients, colleagues and her employer, she found that the goals of the practice were diverging from her own and that her employer did not value her input in decision-making. “My wings had been clipped,” she recalled. “I knew it was time to move on.”

Just weeks after leaving that job, she found a position with a dentist who offered her an opportunity to take her skills and experience to a new level. “She values my opinions and respects me as a professional,” enthused Gianakas. “She has placed the hygiene department in my hands and is excited about the new changes that are taking place.”

Gianakas found success by taking charge of her career, and you can, too. As part of my consulting business, Professional Savvy, LLC, I assist dental hygienists, student dental hygienists, dentists, specialists, and dental assistants with career planning and job-search skills. I also assist professional organizations in presenting continuing education courses, leadership and membership workshops and seminars; some related to career planning. In my experience, I have found that two components of a successful career plan are the creation of a career vision and the setting of specific goals and the objectives required to achieve that vision.

Clarify Your Vision

“He who cherishes a beautiful vision, a lofty ideal in his heart, will one day realize it.” These words, written by James

Allen (1864-1912) nearly a century ago in his bestseller *As a Man Thinketh*, still ring true today. Allen, considered by many to be the forefather of today’s personal development industry, knew that envisioning goals is the first step toward achieving them.²

Thus, your first move in developing a career plan is to determine your vision for yourself as a dental hygienist. Jack Canfield, co-creator of the Chicken Soup for the Soul series with Janet Switzer and author of *The Success Principles: How to Get from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be*, defines vision as “a detailed description of where you want to get to. It describes what your destination looks like and feels like.”³

As designated by ADHA, there are five dental hygiene professional roles, with public health a component of each. Which one is the best fit for you? Do you see yourself as a clinician? Conducting research? Teaching? Working as an administrator or manager? Being an advocate for oral health? Consider these roles in terms of where you are now and where you might like to be in the future.

Cathy Price, RDH, BS, founder of Dentalworkers.com, an Internet-based company linking employers and workers in the dental field, advises drafting a written plan, including a list of roles you are interested in as well as the setting—private office, group practice, specialty office, mobile dental unit, educational institution, corporation, etc.—that would provide your ideal working environment. Next, she said, “Write down where you are now personally, financially and professionally, and where you would strive to be in one year, three years and five years from now.”

Determining your vision is like picking a destination for a trip—once you know where you want to go, you need to figure out how you’ll get there. That’s where the career plan comes into play. Before you begin to determine your goals and objectives, however, you must examine your current skills and background.

Assessing Your Skills and Image

Begin your self-assessment by taking an inventory of your professional skills, training, educational background and experience as well as your role on the team in your current practice. Make note of your hours, salary and benefits and the information contained in performance reviews.

If your current employer doesn’t have one in place already, consider requesting a written employment agreement that outlines when you will have a performance review, your salary, hourly or commission rate, medical/dental insurance, benefits, bonuses, uniform allowance, professional membership, retirement, the number of patients you are expected to see each day, professional services administered, etc.

Two components of a successful career plan are the creation of a career vision and the setting of specific goals and the objectives required to achieve that vision.

At the Weymouth, Massachusetts, practice of Ronald Perry, DMD, MS, FACD, FAGD, FICD, FADI, an office manual and employment agreements help ensure that he and his staff are on the same page. Employees are evaluated annually. “Each employee has a written employment agreement to help make sure both sides understand the expectations,” Perry said.

In addition to examining your job-related skills, you should assess your interpersonal skills, including your communication style and professional image. “A professional image is extremely important,” said Pamela Quinones, RDH, BS, ADHA District III trustee and owner of dental placement agency Hygiene Associates, Inc. in Rockville, Maryland. “It sends the message that you view your profession as a career, not a job.”

Janice Hurley, who has been a professional imaging consultant for 19 years, said, “I believe your image is so much more than the way you look or dress, which is what a lot of people assume I’m talking about. Instead, it’s the way you speak, listen, sometimes even the way you stand.”

The way you communicate is a key part of your image. Hurley encourages dental hygienists to take time to review a patient’s chart and history before greeting him or her in the reception area. This helps eliminate unnecessary questions and conveys professionalism and interest. Maintaining eye contact and putting a patient at ease before treatment can make it easier to gather more information about the patient’s current dental needs. Keeping a neutral, positive tone of voice can encourage compliance, said Hurley, while lecturing and using phrases like “you need to” or “you should” imply judgment.

When it comes to dress and grooming, Hurley recommends a “crisp and clean” look, featuring polished shoes, an ironed and spotless uniform, hair up off the shoulders, short nails with neutral polish, and minimal jewelry. Maintaining a healthy weight is also a plus.

As part of your self-assessment, take a critical look at casual photos of yourself and tape-record some of your interactions in the office to get an accurate picture of your appearance and verbal skills. Enlist the help of your colleagues as well. “Let others give you some feedback on your hair, your glasses, etc.,” said Hurley. “Getting old school is not a good thing in our profession because dentistry is so much about cutting edge and clinical competency.”

Cultivating a positive professional image can go a long way toward furthering your career. As Hurley said, “Professional image should be an accurate portrayal of all the skills and capabilities that you have, and by taking the time to portray that on the outside with all the tools you have available to you, you give your patients the gift of confidence that they’re in the right place with the right hygienist.”

Moving Ahead on Your Career Path

For continued success in your current position, make a point to keep abreast of trends, technology and legislation and update your skills through continuing education.

Teresa M. Graham, RDH, who started central New Jersey-based Garden State Dental Temps in 2005, is quick to point out the importance of continuing education. “Professional image, defined as character values, skills and experience, does play a role in securing a job,” said Graham, adding, “Image without substance will not secure a job for very long.”

For Sparta, New Jersey, dentist Analisa Guarnieri, DMD, PA, education is important, but so is a willingness to learn and the motivation to excel. In her practice, employees are offered training and continuing education courses to help them on their path to career success. “The dental hygienist is one of the biggest practice builders on the dental team,” she said.

Perry also expects the dental hygienists in his practice to stay on top of trends. “We are constantly seeking out new products and instrumentations to make things better for

the patient and easier on the staff,” he said. “[Staff members] have to like change and be able to think outside the box.”

Becoming a member of your professional organization, ADHA, can help you increase your knowledge with up-to-date information on the latest scientific and technological advances critical to your profession, delivered via print and online publications. Discounts on and access to certified continuing education courses are another membership benefit, and the opportunity to network with others in the profession on the national, state and local levels can be invaluable.

Working well with others on the team toward achieving goals for your practice or work establishment is another way to advance your career. Guarnieri calls teamwork “a must,” “Everyone’s job in the office is equally important,” she said. “We are all co-workers. I like to make the team members feel like they work with me, not for me.”

Paula DeMarco-Mullins, CDA, RDH, a dental hygienist from Amherst, Ohio, with 20 years of experience, echoes that. “I truly believe that all of the employees in our office have a partnership with each other. While the doctor’s name is on the shingle out front, it requires all the different skills and tasks that each and every one of us performs to make our practice successful. The doctor and I have a partnership to provide the highest standard of dental care for our patients, while the assistants and front desk staff partner with us to provide this level of service.”

Good communication and mutual respect help strengthen the team. Jerry Acuff, author of *The Relationship Edge in Business: Connecting with Customers and Colleagues When It Counts*, says that “the quality and richness of our

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relationships in many ways determine the quality and richness of our lives, both professionally and personally.”⁴

Exploring a New Direction

If you'd like to take your career in a new direction, there are several ways to get started. To help you investigate your options, turn to your professional network and your professional organization.

DeMarco-Mullins, for one, can attest that networking can be a powerful tool. She was referred to the practice where she currently works at by a fellow dental hygienist who also worked there. “The doctor evaluated my credentials, experience, and personality when making her selection,” she said. “Of particular importance was the very positive referral from a colleague whom the doctor trusted and respected.”

Another way to gain knowledge in a new area and find help with achieving professional goals and objectives is to seek a mentor. A more-experienced mentor can act as a guide, teacher, role model and sponsor for a less-experienced mentee. Mentoring relationships can be formal or informal. Informal mentoring occurs with family and friends, while formal mentoring occurs in work environments where mentor and mentee relationships are assigned and may utilize a curriculum and process design.⁵

As you establish yourself in your dental hygiene career, you may not know the answer to every question, but you can learn from what you don't know and be mentored by someone whom you feel is an expert in a particular area of dental hygiene, dentistry and/or business. A mentorship can help you to achieve knowledge, value and worth in an area where you may not have experience. You can return the favor by becoming a mentor for someone else to help grow the dental hygiene profession.

Mentoring helped me to establish myself early in my career as a research dental hygienist and clinical investigator due to my mentorship by Jeffrey Gordon, DMD. Likewise, DeMarco-Mullins credits some of her success to the support of two dentists who mentored her early in her career. “Dr. Pegg Vanek is a general dentist who taught me to always be compassionate and have a gentle touch, and Dr. Howard J. Williams is a periodontist who spurred my interest in dental hygiene and taught me to always strive for the highest standards.”

Taking a temporary position can be another way for you to explore a new career path, whether that might be a different role, specialty or environment. “Temporary assignments provide flexibility and opportunities to learn new skills,” said Graham, of Garden State Dental Temps, noting that they can sometimes lead to a permanent position.

Quinones said that working with an agency can help you find a job quickly. “If you are affiliated with an agency, you can literally be unemployed one day and have work the next,” she said. Another advantage is that the agency prescreens positions, so many questions about a position can be answered up front. Agencies also provide a good introduction to the local

job market if you have recently relocated to an area or are re-entering the workforce after some time away.

In addition to working with an agency and networking, you can also find dental hygiene positions listed in professional publications such as ADHA's *Access* and *Journal of Dental Hygiene*, as well through your constituent and component organizations. There are many other online resources targeted for dental careers, including www.dentalworkers.com and www.dentalhygienistjobs.com, as well as sites that list positions for all professions, including dental hygiene. Some of these include www.careerbuilder.com and www.hotjobs.com.

Preparing Your Toolkit

Whether or not you're planning to strike out in a new direction, you should maintain your job-search tools. In particular, update your resume or curriculum vitae annually, if possible. This not only ensures it will be ready when you need it, but also that you are recording your skills and accomplishments in a timely manner, while they are still fresh in your mind.

“I am constantly amazed at the number of hygienists who have been practicing for a while who do not have an updated

Winning Ways with Words

Teresa Graham, RDH, owner of Garden State Dental Temps, recommends the following when it comes to cover letters and resumes:

- **Neatness counts. Use crisp white or ivory paper, with no fold lines or wrinkles. Steer clear of smudges and stains and don't make changes with correction fluid or pen.**
- **Think outside of the template. Put some effort into the preparation and organization of your document layout so it stands out from the crowd.**
- **Keep it concise, but include all relevant information. Highlight your objective, educational background, licensure/board exams, clinical/technical skills, relevant job experiences, accomplishments and professional affiliations.**
- **Draw attention to your strengths. Include a summary that reflects your values, motivation, character and willingness to be part of a team.**
- **Be truthful. Make sure these documents provide an accurate representation of who you are and what you can do.**

	Dana Feltworth, RDH 7 Morris Drive Dover, New Jersey 07801 (973) 328-4141 dfeltworth@yahoo.com	
OBJECTIVE	To obtain a dental hygiene position in a periodontal practice using state-of-the-art technology to treat periodontal disease and provide the highest standards in quality patient care.	
EDUCATION	Bachelor of Science in Dental Hygiene	2003
	Associate of Science in Dental Hygiene	2001
	University of Medicine & Dentistry School of Dental Medicine, Newark, NJ	
PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE	Dental Hygienist	2001-Present
	Dr. Jim Dordoff, Periodontal Practice, Chester, NJ Perform oral health assessments, record patients' health histories, perform dental cancer screenings, take and interpret digital X-rays, provide preventative services, conduct fluoride treatments, apply sealants and fluoride varnish, teach proper oral hygiene techniques to maintain optimal oral health, and assist in periodontal surgery.	
VOLUNTEER	Dental Hygiene Educator	2003-Present
	Glenora Nursing Home, Chester, NJ Conduct oral health screening exams and provide oral hygiene techniques to improve dental health.	
	Dental Hygiene Educator	2004-Present
	Starbrook DayCare Center, Chester, NJ Conduct oral health education with 4- and 5-year-old children and teach oral hygiene techniques.	
LICENSURE	National Board State Licensure, New Jersey	2001
AWARDS & HONORS	Sigma Phi Alpha	2001
PRESENTATIONS	Dental Hygiene Aids for Patients with Disabilities	2001
	Greater New York Dental Meeting	
PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS	American Dental Hygienists' Association, New Jersey Dental Hygienists' Association	
REFERENCES	Available upon request	

Figure 1. Sample chronological resume.

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resume,” said Quinones, who has been placing dental hygienists, assistants, receptionists, office managers and dentists in temporary and permanent positions since founding her business in 1983. Her company also offers board-approved dental assisting courses, OSHA courses and consulting and employment workshops.

Your resume, along with the cover letter, is the most vital document you'll need to secure a job. As Susan Britton Whitcomb writes in the third edition of *Resume Magic*,

Writing a resume is an opportunity to write our future. This is your preordained appointment to update, advance, and 're-image' who you are. It's a time to ponder your passions, values and hard-wired skills. It's cause to contemplate your life-work and your distinctive destiny—what is meaningful to you and how you will bring significance and value to your corner of the world.⁶

There are two main types of resumes: reverse chronological, which lists your most current position first, and functional, which focuses on skills rather than when you used them. There are numerous variations of the two, examples of which can be found in the many resume-writing books on the market. (For an example of a chronological resume, see Figure 1.)

You may need to create both a paper resume and an electronic resume to use when applying for jobs online. An electronic resume, for example, might need to contain certain keywords so it generates hits during a search of an applicant database.

At Dentalworkers.com, job seekers use a free online tool to write dental-specific resumes. Staffing agencies work with the company to create job listings. The resumes and listings are cross-matched by geographic area and job title, and Dentalworkers.com delivers the information to each party within their target market(s). In addition, workers can search job ads and staffing agencies can search resumes.

When sending out your resume, it should be accompanied by a cover letter that introduces you to a prospective employer and explains why you are submitting your resume. It should be short and to the point while highlighting your qualifications, requesting an interview and providing contact information. (For an example of a cover letter, see Figure 2.)

There are many things employers say they look for when hiring. “Although I work with many offices, it seems that they all seek similar qualities,” said Graham, who places experienced and highly qualified dental professionals in full-time or part-time permanent and temporary positions. “They are looking for an RDH who is professional, dependable, mature, has good clinical skills, is reliable, and demonstrates good communication and rapport with patients. Being a team worker is essential to keeping the practice operating smoothly as well as attention to detail and the ability to manage their time.”

Guarnieri said that when she's hiring employees for her dental practice, she focuses on several key traits. “[I look for] someone who is motivated, ambitious, loyal, takes pride in their work, can multitask, be a team player and has good communication skills.”

In addition to clinical skills, professional image and an air of confidence, Perry assesses whether an applicant's personality would be a good fit with his staff and patients. “I look to see if they are attentive to my questions and if they are enthusiastic about the job,” he said.

7 Morris Drive
Dover, NJ 07869

March 1, 2007

Dr. James Broadback
113 Devilton Road
Flanders, NJ 07836

Dear Dr. Broadback:

This letter is in response to the advertisement you placed in the Star Ledger looking for a dental hygienist for your dental practice. My name is Dana Feltworth and I am a dental hygienist whose qualifications and experience meet the professional skills you listed in the advertisement.

I have recently completed my dental hygiene education at the University of Medicine and Dentistry School of Dental Medicine. The education I received at the School of Dental Medicine focused on a team-based approach to patient care and treatment of oral diseases. I have worked with many types of patients with various diseases as well as physically and mentally challenged adult patients in rotation projects. These patients provided me the opportunity to effectively treatment plan and carry out preventative oral hygiene services to this patient population.

I have also volunteered my time in one nursing home community in northern New Jersey educating senior citizens on proper oral hygiene care and preventative treatment and in one day-care center educating children on oral health and oral hygiene techniques. You will find that my enthusiasm, motivation, and willingness to learn will make me a valuable team member for your dental practice.

I have enclosed a copy of my resume for your review and look forward to meeting you to discuss my experience. I can be reached during the day on my cell number, (973) 598-0823, or in the evening on my home number, (973) 328-5591. I look forward to your phone call and I will contact you next Friday, March 9, to answer any questions you may have about my qualifications.

Sincerely,

Dana Feltworth, RDH, BS

DF:df
Enclosure

If one is not offered, consider requesting a working interview. An opportunity to work with the team will give you a better picture of whether the job and practice suits you. When working with her clients, Quinones always recommends a working interview. "I want to make sure that the applicant feels at home in the potential new environment," she said.

As you continue on your journey in the dental hygiene profession, consider the words of career coach Robin Ryan: "If you raise the bar on your goals and dreams and make happiness the ultimate metric, you can take complete responsibility for your success. Inside you lie all the talents you need to flourish and prosper."¹ Best of luck as you take charge of your dental hygiene career pathway to success!

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Figure 1. Sample cover letter.

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As that example illustrates, when it comes to interviewing, it's best to take an active role. "Remember that you are also interviewing your potential employer as much as they are interviewing you as their employee," said Price. "Do not be afraid to ask questions in order to make the most informed decisions. Happy employees make the most productive ones."

When sending out your resume, it should be accompanied by a cover letter that introduces you to a prospective employer and explains why you are submitting your resume.

Additional Resources

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Christine Hovliaras-Delozier, RDH, BS, MBA is president of Professional Savvy, LLC, an oral care consulting company located in Flanders, New Jersey and editor-in-chief of *Access*, an official publication of the American Dental Hygienists' Association. She received her Associate of Science and Bachelor of Science Degrees in dental hygiene from Fairleigh Dickinson, Jr., College of Dental Medicine and her master's in Business Administration in pharmaceutical studies from Fairleigh Dickinson School of Business. Chris has been a

dental hygienist for 23 years and worked in a periodontal practice for 16 years. She has worked as a clinical faculty member and research dental hygienist at her alma mater and in clinical research, professional sales, professional sales training and professional marketing for Warner-Lambert, now Pfizer Inc, for 12 years.

In her consulting company, Chris currently works with various companies in marketing plan development, professional marketing/relations efforts, clinical research initiatives, professional sales, professional training, dental and dental hygiene advisory boards, and continuing education symposiums. Chris works with professional organizations on leadership workshops, membership recruitment strategies and presenting continuing education courses. Her company's other business goals are to work with dental professionals on career planning and development, cover letter, resume, and curriculum vitae writing, interviewing skills, and salary and benefit negotiation.

She has become an Honorary Member of Sigma Phi Alpha Honor Society in 2006, received the Pfizer/ADHA Excellence in Dental Hygiene Award in 2005, and the United Who's Who of Business and Professional Executives Award in 2004. Please visit Professional Savvy's Web site at www.professionalsavvychd.com.



Analisa Guarneri, DMD, PA, attended the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey for a doctorate in dental medicine and completed an advanced general dentistry residency at Columbia University School of Dental Medicine in New York. Dr. Guarneri has been in a general practice in Sparta, New Jersey, since 1998.



Stephanie Gianakas, RDH, AS, has been practicing hygiene for more than 20 years and is a member of ADHA. She resides in Commack, New York, where she is the proprietor of Progressive Hygiene Solutions, Inc., a consulting company which assists and guides dental practices and hygienists to bring them to a higher level. She can be reached at phsol@optonline.net.



Ronald D. Perry, DMD, MS, FACD, FAGD, FICD, FADI, is Director of the Gavel Center for Restorative Research and Associate Clinical Professor at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine. He owns and manages a private general dentistry practice, Meridian Dental Associates, in South Weymouth, Massachusetts. Dr. Perry also has been involved in constructing the fellowship exams for the Academy of General Dentistry and he is a key opinion leader for dental manufacturers across the industry.

He has published over 45 articles and 60 abstracts, and lectures nationally and internationally.

Janice Hurley-Trailor is known as "Dentistry's Image Expert." She uses her 20 years as a dental consultant to design programs that empower the whole team. Her goal is that everyone understands how to better use their professional energy towards success. Offices that have implemented her ideas rave about the end results. Janice's programs are offered in a keynote or workshop format. She can be contacted through www.janicehurley.com.



Paula DeMarco-Mullins CDA, RDH, began her career in dentistry in 1987 as a dental assistant, earning CDA status in 1988. She is a 1995 graduate of Cuyahoga Community College Cleveland, Ohio, with an Associate of Applied Science in Dental Hygiene. A member of ADHA, she is currently pursuing a BS in Allied Health and working full time for a dental practice in Elyria, Ohio.



Pamela L. Quinones, RDH, BS, owner of dental placement agency Hygiene Associates, Inc., has more than three decades of experience in dental hygiene. She has practiced as a clinician, educator, consultant and business owner and has been actively involved in ADHA at the component, constituent and national level. She is past president of the MDHA, and currently serves as the ADHA District III Trustee. She is a recipient of the Maryland Dental Hygienists' Association Symbol of Excellence Award and the ADHA Distinguished Service Award.



Teresa M. Graham, RDH, is placement director and owner/operator of Garden State Dental Temps, a firm that provides employment services to dental professionals in central New Jersey. Teresa has 18 years of dental office experience and currently practices clinical dental hygiene and periodontal therapy in Spring Lake, New Jersey, in a private office setting. Teresa can be reached at www.dentaltempsofnewjersey.com; 1-866-NJTEMPS.



Catherine Price, RDH, BS, is the president and founder of Dentalworkers Inc., based in Beverly Hills, California. Since its inception in 2000, the company has helped tens of thousands of dental professionals throughout the United States and Canada. The company's mission is to increase the level of communication between employers and employees and to link highly qualified candidates to employers via its Web site, www.Dentalworkers.com. The site receives an average of 80,000 hits per day.

