High tech & indoor plumbing

by Dr. Larry Emmott

I remember hearing about a speaker who asked his audience what they considered the most significant labor-saving invention of their lifetime. Most people gave answers such as microwaves and dishwashers. Then, one old fellow stood up and said all that fancy stuff was fine, but in his opinion the most significant invention was indoor plumbing!

The point is that we often become excited about the latest, most exciting new technology and forget that the basics, the infrastructure (which may be boring but is nevertheless essential), must be in place before any of the exotic new stuff can work.

Before we jump into high tech, how about a little philosophy? What is your vision? What kind of practice are you hoping to create, and how do you see digital technology working in that practice? There are infinite answers to this question; however, what I hear most often from other dentists — and what I would want as a new dentist — is to start my practice with paperless records.

There are all kinds of reasons that paperless records are superior to paper, and all of those reasons are even more significant if you can avoid paper completely right from the start. So let’s look at the technology you will need to create a paperless office and what that will cost.

I am taking the point of view that you will be starting from scratch. Of course, many young dentists will be buying into an existing practice. In that case, you will inherit some existing technology that may not support your goals. Use this article as a guide to evaluate the existing technology in any office you are considering. Plus, I have one really great new technology for dentists who are buying into an existing practice.

Now, do some deep and serious soul searching and answer this fundamental question: Are you a nerd? Are you the person all your friends, family, neighbors, and classmates come to with their computer problems? Or are you the target audience for all those technology-for-dummies books? The terms nerd and dummy sound a bit harsh, so let’s call these two extremes H for high tech and L for low (or at least lower) tech.

It would be nice and simple, especially for the Ls, if there was one “can’t miss” magic bullet, super-wow technology that they could buy that would instantly assure them immeasurable success as new dentists. Unfortunately, that super-wow technology does not exist. The first technology they need to invest in is a plain old, boring wired network with a server and workstations in every room.

Just a few years ago, finding a reliable, local IT specialist to set up a dental office was a challenge. However, as a new graduate, you have a distinct advantage because now all the major dental vendors, including Henry Schein, Patterson, and Benco, offer IT setup and support for dentists. If you are making a budget, basic network (including hardware and labor with an Internet router, switch, wiring, a server, five workstations, and an all-in-one printer/scanner) should cost about $13,000 to $15,000.

Next, you need to get a complete practice-management system. That is the software application that will run your office and keep your records. There are many great choices, but the safest choice is to go with the big four industry leaders. After all, there are reasons they are industry leaders; these are the systems that most of your colleagues have chosen and which have proven to be useful over the years. The big four are Dentrix, SOFTDENT, EagleSoft, and PracticeWorks.

There are pros and cons to all of these systems. Features are constantly being added and improved. Keep in mind that choosing a practice-management system is likely the most significant technology decision you will make when getting started. It is a lot like getting married. You will be interacting with the system every day, and if it doesn’t work out, making a change later on (divorce) will be difficult and expensive.

Dr. Larry Emmott is one of the most entertaining speakers in dentistry and is considered the leading dental high tech authority in the country. He has addressed hundreds of professional groups and has been a featured speaker at every major U.S. dental meeting. He is a pioneer in online publishing with his blog EmmottTechnology.com. You can contact him at larryemmott@dlarryemmott.com.

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