

The times they are a changing



David Westgarth

Editor, *BDJ in Practice*

I absolutely love a meme, and one of my favourites kicking around at the moment is a photo of two people sat next to each other on a bed with a thousand-yard stare, drinking a bottle of whisky with the caption ‘millennials living through their fourth once in a lifetime crisis’. You could probably file it away under ‘funny but sad’, given how true that particular sentiment is.

What isn’t funny is the current recruitment and retention landscape in the profession; think dental deserts and their oasis counterparts, the increase in a part time workforce, the move from NHS to private, the lack of funding available to adequately remunerate the workforce, years of inaction followed by sub-standard recovery plans. It’s *such* a cliché, but ‘perfect storm’ couldn’t be more accurate.

And so, to the first recruitment and retention themed edition of *BDJ In Practice*. It’s a seismic landscape to cover, so think of this as an *amuse-bouche*. How does a corporate see the recruitment market? What about BDA and GDPC representatives – those tasked with making change a reality? Could amending the Overseas Registration Exam (ORE) be a way to improve the supply of dentists, hygienists and therapists? How much of an impact is the migration from

NHS provisions to private having? Who holds the upper hand in the recruitment market – the job seeker or the recruiter?

So many questions – probably too many questions – and certainly not enough answers. In the researching of this issue I mused whether this was part of a natural life cycle and the market would (eventually) correct itself. It is the classic ‘well sonny, things were better in my day’ theory. I have no problem saying this theory was laughed out of the conversation at the first possible opportunity. That the recruitment market has never been so challenging is a sentiment stamped throughout this issue like a watermark. But has it always been like this? There are some low-hanging fruit; Katrin Forster-van Aerssen and Tajda Spital writing in the ECB Economic Bulletin observed that ‘The UK labour market has become increasingly tight since the post-pandemic reopening, which also coincided with a fall in the number of EU migrants working in the United Kingdom. Following the post-pandemic recovery in demand in the second quarter of 2021, UK employers faced an unusually tight labour market, with a historically high number of vacancies and a low unemployment rate. Labour market tightness, measured as vacancies per unemployed person, has shown limited signs of easing, while companies have continued to struggle with recruitment difficulties.’¹

Numerous editorials, written evidence submissions and papers have postulated over what effects the UK’s departure from the EU would have, has had and will have. Like the wider recruitment and retention landscape,

there are more questions than answers; it is proving to be difficult to unpick Brexit and COVID-19’s impact(s) on the dental profession.

Consider this not the endgame, but a starting point. Jobseekers can feel comfortable and confident coming forward to discuss their experiences of the jobs market – knowing others are in the same boat could be reassuring. Recruitment agencies should also feel like they can be candid – the market is tough, and it’s OK to say so. To say otherwise would fly in the face of all available evidence. Let’s start a conversation, get behind those trying to affect and deliver change. ‘Golden hellos’ feel like a plaster on an infection – pointless but serves a purpose for a while. Of course, one leading solution is root and branch reform of NHS dentistry, which will trickle down into all other areas of the profession. A more appealing place to work? Reduces the talent drain. Remunerated fairly? Reduces the talent drain, enables practices to survive. Address recruitment difficulties in rural and coastal areas – trickier, with financial incentives falling on largely deaf ears, but necessary to flip the ‘dental desert’ narrative and deliver much-needed access to patients.

While we collectively wait for change – and let’s be fair, it is long overdue – we collectively stare into the abyss of a profession in trouble. ♦

References

1. European Central Bank. Economic Bulletin. Issue 3, 2023. Available online at: www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/economic-bulletin/html/eb202303.en.html (accessed March 2024).

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