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What New Dentists Should Look for in an Associate Position After Residency

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Preface

I didn't apply for my first associate job – at least, not knowingly.

It was late April of 2004, and I was racing through the halls of Columbia University Dental School when I got an unexpected phone call from an unknown office manager asking if I could come in for an interview. Confused, I asked for what position.

"The associate dentist position you applied for," she said.

This was news to me!

As it turns out, my wife had seen an ad in the New York Times for an associate dentist in Saratoga Springs, NY. She realized I was so buried in my residency that I hadn't noticed we were just weeks away from unemployment, and drowning in student debt. So, she applied on my behalf. Apparently, she figured that while I was managing patients, she'd manage our future.

And thank God she did, because I had no clue what I was doing.

Stepping out of dental residency and into the working world can be both exhilarating and overwhelming. You've completed years of rigorous education and clinical training, navigated national boards, passed licensure exams, residency and now face one of your most impactful career decisions: selecting your first associate position. Unfortunately, while school has prepared you well clinically, you may feel completely unprepared to evaluate job opportunities, understand contracts or recognize the difference between a supportive practice and a short-term stepping-stone. The transition from residency to real-world practice isn't just about doing dentistry, it's about doing it in the right environment. That's why it's so important to know what to look for before you sign on the dotted line.

Remember that your first associate position will shape more than just your daily schedule. It influences your clinical growth, financial trajectory, work-life balance and even your career satisfaction in dentistry.

Here, I'm attempting to put together a comprehensive guide for new dentists looking to evaluate associate opportunities with clarity and confidence. I'll share everything I wish I had known when I started this journey over 20 years ago. Please keep in mind, these are suggestions and guidelines, not hard rules or deal breakers. Use them to start meaningful conversations with potential employers. In fact, the way a practice responds to your thoughtful questions can tell you just as much as the answers themselves. A good, honest

practice will welcome the dialogue and provide open, respectful feedback. If you're met with defensiveness, vague answers or even dismissed, that may be all you need to know.

1. Know What You Want Out of Your First Associateship

This is often the first and possibly the hardest step; understanding what you want to do with everything you've worked so hard to achieve. There's no single right answer and no path that fits everyone. I certainly didn't know 20 years ago. Honestly, I was so nervous and unsure of myself that I didn't feel prepared for private practice. I lacked the confidence to see it as my choice; I was just hoping someone would take a chance on me. But I'm here to tell you: *don't think that way*. You deserve to choose a practice that will support the kind of dentist you want to become.

So, ask yourself: what are you really looking for in your first job? Are you hoping to find your forever dental home with the potential to buy-in and build a long-term career? If so, you'll need to think about bigger questions, like where you want to live and grow roots. Or maybe you're looking for a stepping-stone practice, one with high patient volume, exposure to a variety of procedures and strong mentorship. Perhaps your goal is financial- to earn aggressively and pay down student debt or join a program that offers loan repayment, knowing it's a short-term move. Are you looking to work alone, maybe alongside an owner dentist or in a group setting?

These are the types of questions you want to answer before you apply to your first position. Giving these questions forethought will help point you in the right direction.

2. Is the Practice Ready for An Associate?

At first glance, this might seem like a ridiculous question. If a practice is advertising for an associate, they must have the patient load to support one, right? Not always.

Too often, I've spoken with young dentists who joined a practice only to spend their days handling emergencies and one-off toothaches, with unproductive schedules that frustrate both the associate and the owner. These situations rarely end well.

Don't be shy in asking questions and digging deeper. Ask *why* the practice is hiring:

- Are they replacing a departing doctor, or is this a brand-new position?
- Have they ever had an associate before?

- Will the owner be cutting back their own hours or patient load, or are you simply adding more doctor days?
- How many hygienists will be working with the associate dentist?
- How many rooms will be available to the associate doctor? Will there be an overflow room?
- How many assistants will be working when providers are working? And will the associate dentist have their own dedicated assistant?
- Is the associate dentist expected to do hygiene if there are openings in their schedule?

A full-time associate typically requires **25–35 new patients per month** to stay busy. Additionally, you would ideally like **1.5 – 2 hygienists working per dentist**.

Just because a practice is "busy" doesn't automatically mean they're ready to bring on another full-time provider. Do your own due diligence.

Caution for New Grads

Some practices hire associates specifically to perform procedures they typically refer out, like third molar extractions, molar endodontics, periodontal surgery or implant placement. This can put new graduates in uncomfortable situations, expected to handle advanced cases they're not yet ready for.

Be honest during the interview process. Don't overstate your skills to land the job and don't be afraid to ask:
"What procedures are usually referred out?" and "Will I be expected to take those on?"

You should never feel pressured to perform treatment beyond your comfort or training *but* at the same time, it's equally important to be transparent about your capabilities from the start.

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3. Understand the Compensation Model

While it's tempting to zero in on salary, it's the structure of compensation that often determines both your income and how you're expected to perform.

Common Compensation Models

Understanding how you'll be paid is just as important as understanding your clinical role. Don't shy away from asking detailed questions. This is your livelihood.

1. Flat Salary

A guaranteed salary provides predictable income and can be ideal for new grads looking for stability, building confidence or relocating to a new area.

However, if you begin producing at a high level, this model may undervalue your contributions, which can lead to frustration, especially if there's no pathway to renegotiate based on performance.

2. Percentage of Production or Collections

This is one of the most common models, typically ranging from 25% to 35% of production or collections. The details matter. Make sure to clarify:

- *Is it based on production or collections?*
  Collections lag behind production, especially early on. If it's collections-based, ask what percentage the office typically collects. Is it 98% or 75%? That makes a huge difference.

- *Are they in-network with insurances?*
  Insurance write-offs will significantly reduce your salary if you're paid on collections.

- *Will you have access to office-wide production and collection reports?*
  Transparency matters and is essential.

- *Are lab fees or other costs deducted from your pay?*
  If so, how are they calculated? Beware! The associate shouldn't be paying 100% of the lab bill.

- *Who gets credit for hygiene exams?*
  It's not always you.

- *What are the average production numbers and take-home pay for current or past associates?*
  This gives you a realistic benchmark.

3. Daily or Monthly Guarantees ("Draws")

Many practices offer a daily or monthly minimum to help you build your schedule and provide you with a reliable baseline. These models blend the security of a salary with the opportunity to be fairly compensated as your production grows.

But be clear on this:

- Is it a guarantee that you get paid a minimum per day until collections outpace the base?

- Or is it a recoverable draw, an advance deducted from future earnings? If so, it is critical that you, as the provider, understand exactly where you stand financially at all times. If you consistently underproduce relative to the draw, the amount owed back to the practice can become a significant burden, particularly if you decide to leave the practice while still carrying a negative balance and the practice seeks repayment of the "overpayment." A recoverable draw can be a mutually beneficial arrangement, providing financial security to a new dentist while offering protection to the practice, but I have also heard concerning stories of young dentists finding themselves significantly underwater with these arrangements.

Also, beware of that practice that offers unusually high guarantees or minimums. Sometimes, they're not generous- **they're *salary caps* in disguise**. That really high daily minimum can actually be a really low daily maximum.

Pro Tip:

Ask to see a sample pay stub or compensation projection based on real numbers. Vague promises aren't good enough. If the practice seems uncomfortable answering these questions, it's a red flag.

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4. Lab Fees and Clinical Autonomy

Lab fees, especially in practices that use high quality labs or offer complex cosmetics and prosthetics, can eat significantly into your take-home pay. Some practices deduct these fees directly from the associate's compensation so it's important to understand exactly how that works before you sign on.

Key Questions to Ask:

- Who selects the labs the office uses? Do associates have any say?
- Are lab fees deducted from my pay? If so, how?
- Are the lab fees capped, shared or negotiable?
- Will I have autonomy over material selection and lab choice for my cases?
- Can I review a list of labs currently used by the practice?
- Will I be using the same lab across all cases or do I have flexibility for complex or cosmetically demanding work?

Remember that in group practices, it's often unrealistic for every dentist to use a different lab. Standardization allows the practice to negotiate better pricing, which ideally benefits everyone. The key is finding a balance between operational efficiency and clinical autonomy. As a provider, you need to feel confident in the labs you're using and the quality of the work you're delivering.

Example for New Grads:
If you're being paid 33% of your collections and the practice deducts lab fees before calculating your pay, you'll effectively be responsible for one-third of the total lab bill, because you're earning one-third of the revenue. The remaining two-thirds are absorbed by the practice. This is a common arrangement but it's important to confirm the details upfront so there are no surprises in your paycheck.

5. Evaluate the Practice Type

The type of practice you join will shape your daily experiences, mentorship opportunities, autonomy and even long-term ownership prospects.

Types of Practices:

- **Private Practice**
  Often offers the most autonomy and a close mentoring relationship. These practices may provide a clearer path to ownership and are more likely to align with a "relationship-driven" style of care. However, depending on the type of practice, may limit your exposure to certain case types.

- **DSOs (Dental Service Organizations)**
  DSOs offer structured systems, centralized HR and often robust starting salaries, CE opportunities, perks and onboarding. However, production pressures can be higher and clinical autonomy may vary. Ask about quotas, procedure mix, lab choices and how decisions are made within the practice.

- **Group Practices**
  These may blend the best of both worlds. Some group practices are privately owned solely by dentists while others operate like small DSOs. They can offer mentorship and camaraderie along with some of the structure, salary and CE opportunities of bigger DSOs while maintaining the autonomy and feel of a small practice. Be sure to clarify who owns the practice, how decision-making works within the group as well as long term plans for future growth and exit plans for the most senior providers.

Pro Tip:

Keep an open mind. When I graduated, DSOs weren't widely respected in private practice or academic circles. But that perception has shifted and the landscape has changed. As of 2023, over 13% of all dentists in the U.S. work in DSOs and that number rises to nearly 30% among dentists under age 35, according to the ADA Health Policy Institute. Today, many DSOs have shifted their focus to more patient-centered care with increased provider autonomy. In my career, I've had the pleasure of working with amazing, talented, caring dentists across the scope of the profession from DSOs to

private practice. Keep an open mind and make decisions based on what's best for you as an individual and what you can ascertain about a practice during the interview.

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6. Assess Culture and Clinical Philosophy

Alignment between the associate, the employer, and the overall practice culture may be the **single most important factor** in launching a successful career. Yet, despite its significance, culture is often the least discussed and least understood aspect of a job search, largely because it's difficult to define and even harder to measure.

It's far more straightforward to ask about salary, daily production or how patients are assigned than to ask, "What kind of environment makes me feel fulfilled?" or "Does this practice's philosophy align with my values?" But these are the questions that can shape not only your job satisfaction, but your long-term professional growth.

There is no *one-size-fits-all* culture. Some practices are quiet and structured; others thrive on fast-paced energy and loud laughter. Some place heavy emphasis on metrics and productivity, while others focus more on patient relationships and ethical restraint. Some practices may start their day with a daily prayer or a morning huddle, some prefer to build comradery with group case study while others bond over happy hour. None of these are inherently better, but some will feel more natural to you than others.

Which environment energizes you? Which culture brings out your best? That's the real challenge when choosing your first associateship.

As the owner of multiple offices, I can tell you firsthand: no two of my practices share the same culture. A doctor who thrives in one location might struggle in another with a different team dynamic. As a new dentist, your professional success and satisfaction may depend on taking the time to reflect on your values, your personality, and the type of environment in which you do your best work and then learning how to assess those qualities in the practices you're considering.

Assessing Culture and Clinical Philosophy

- Does the practice have a written Mission Statement or Core Values? Is it posted?

- What is the staff turnover like? Ask about employee tenure and whether associate dentists tend to stay.
- Does the practice encourage continuing education for both dentists and team members?
- Ask if you can speak with an associate provider or other team members during your visit.
- Read online reviews. Look for patterns in how patients and staff describe the environment; are dentists or hygienists mentioned by name?
- Check the practice's social media presence. Is it generic or does it highlight real clinical cases, team celebrations, staff appreciation or community involvement?
- Is the practice focused on comprehensive care or high patient volume?
- Ask to see real, *not stock*, before-and-after photos from cases completed by current providers in the office.
- Inquire about the practice's charitable outreach, community events or local fundraising efforts.
- Are assistants and hygienists empowered and utilized to their full scope?
- Talk to local supply reps or specialists, they often have valuable insight into a practice's reputation.

These questions help you look beyond surface-level perks to assess whether a practice's values, culture and clinical philosophy truly align with your own. A great clinical opportunity can still be the wrong fit if the culture doesn't support who you are or how you want to practice.

Pro Tip:

Ask to shadow or participate in a working interview. Spending time in the office, interacting with the owner, team, and patients, is often the best indicator of a practice's culture and clinical philosophy.

Personally, if given the choice between a working interview and shadowing, I would recommend shadowing the office first. A working interview can be stressful, especially for a new graduate. It may be the first time you are functioning in a true professional setting, and much of your focus will naturally be on the procedures, your clinical performance, and whether management is evaluating your skills and technique. As a result, you may have little mental freedom left to objectively assess the practice itself.

Shadowing, on the other hand, allows you to observe the day-to-day interactions within the office. Watch how the doctors interact with the hygienists and assistants, how the team communicates with patients, and how staff members speak to one another when things become busy or stressful. You will also have more opportunities to speak casually with team members and get a genuine sense of the office environment.

Either way, the best way to evaluate practice culture is to spend meaningful time in the office with the team before making a decision.

Caution for New Grads

If you're asked to do a working interview that involves treating patients, be aware: **you must have an active dental license in that state and malpractice coverage**. There are no exceptions for "just an interview." If you don't yet have your license, you can still observe or shadow, but you cannot legally perform any clinical care. Always confirm these details with the practice beforehand to avoid legal or licensing issues.

7. Mentorship and CE Support

Mentorship and CE support is tied closely to the last section, 'Assessing Culture and Clinical Philosophy' and unfortunately, it can be just as ambiguous to define and difficult to evaluate. Nearly every practice will promise mentorship to a new graduate, but those promises often fall short. It's not always intentional; time constraints, lack of formal systems or unclear expectations between mentor and mentee can limit its effectiveness. Some senior dentists are simply too busy to give meaningful support or they're unsure how

to structure the relationship. In other cases, mentorship may feel more like oversight or problem-solving rather than professional development. While the desire for mentorship is high among new graduates, real accessibility is often limited and the difference between what's promised and what's delivered can significantly affect your early career experience.

Mentorship Considerations:

- Will you shadow the owner or senior associate initially?
- Are there regular case reviews or coaching sessions?
- Is feedback encouraged and structured?
- Is continuing education (CE) supported financially or logistically?
- Are there local study clubs?
- Is there a good network of other dentists or specialists in the area?
- Is the practice associated with any structured continuing education institutes, like Dawson, Pankey, Kois, Spear, etc.

Some practices may offer a CE stipend or allow time off for courses. Even if no formal mentorship is in place, the senior dentist should be approachable and willing to help you navigate tough cases or new procedures.

Pro Tip:

Mentorship is NOT a one-way street. To benefit from a mentor, new dentists must be willing to ask questions, be open to criticism and critique and be willing to take time and money to invest in continuing education.

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8. Payer Mix: Fee-for-Service vs. PPO vs. Medicaid

The way a practice is paid may directly influence your patient volume, scheduling, patient expectations and the types of procedures you perform most commonly. Remember, this is a general guide to common pay structures, not a strict rule.

Breakdown of Common Models:

- **Fee-for-Service (FFS)**
  Fewer patients per day, more time per procedure, higher reimbursements. Often associated with more comprehensive and aesthetic treatment planning. Challenges include high patient expectations; lower patient volume and strong senior dentist leaderships with patients may make it hard to establish a dedicated client base to a new provider.

- **PPO**
  Most common model. Lower fees than FFS but greater patient volume which may translate into greater opportunity to perform more varied and complex procedures. Watch out for aggressive insurance write-offs. Additionally, yearly insurance maximums and contract stipulations can complicate treatment planning and phasing cases, especially larger prosthetic cases.

- **Medicaid/Capitation**
  High volume and limited fees. While it may offer clinical exposure to certain procedures, it can also limit your ability to practice 'ideal' dentistry.

Always ask for a payer mix breakdown. If most patients are covered by low-reimbursement plans, this will impact your compensation and clinical experience.

9. Understand Restrictive Covenants (Non-Competes)

Contracts often include restrictive covenants, also known as non-compete clauses, that limit where and how you can practice after leaving the job. While restrictive covenants were ubiquitous in dental contracts years ago, increasingly these clauses have come under scrutiny for limiting provider autonomy and reducing patient's access to care. Despite these challenges, as a new provider you're likely to get offered a contract with a derivation of a non-compete stipulation.

What to Watch For:

- **Distance**: 5–10 miles is typical; 50+ miles is often unreasonable. In general, a reasonable distance is much lower in a populated city and higher in rural areas.
- **Duration**: 1–2 years is common.
- **Scope**: Should be specific to dental services—not "any healthcare" role.
- **Deterrent**: A monetary penalty for violations cannot be unreasonable.

Caution for New Grads

Always have a dental-specific attorney review your contract. Even in states where non-competes are difficult to enforce, they can still be used as leverage in disputes.

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10. Benefits and Perks

Over the course of my career, one of the most significant shifts I've observed in associate recruitment is the increasing importance of benefits and perks. When I applied for my first associateship, offers *never* included paid vacation or paid time off; it simply wasn't expected. Fast forward to a 2024 Dental Salary Survey showing that approximately 25% of all associates in private practice and over 30% in DSOs received paid vacations and holidays. This evolution is driven by two major forces; the rise of DSOs competing aggressively for young talent and the shift in priorities among new dentists, who now value quality of life and work-life balance as much as compensation. The same 2024 Dental Salary Survey found that 90% of employees cited paid time off among their top job priorities. As a result, practices can no longer attract top candidates with salary alone. Today, offering a well-rounded benefits package, one that supports an associate not just financially but personally and professionally has become essential for recruiting and retaining the best providers.

Typical Benefits to Ask About:

- **Malpractice insurance**: Is it occurrence-based or claims-made?

    - If your malpractice policy is claims-made you may need to purchase tail coverage when you leave a job. This is especially important if you change jobs. **Tail coverage can be expensive, often 1.5 to 2 times your annual premium**. It is critical to clarify who is responsible for this cost before signing a contract.

- **Vacation and sick time**: Is it paid or unpaid?
- **Health insurance**: Is coverage offered for medical, dental or vision? Who is paying?
- **Retirement contributions**: Does the practice offer a 401(k) or profit-sharing?
- **CE Reimbursement**: Is there a stipend or budget for continuing education and associated travel expenses?
- **License and DEA Reimbursement**: Will they cover these recurring expenses?

Remember while benefits and perks are becoming more popular, *they still are not the norm*. Not all practices offer a comprehensive benefits package, especially in private settings, so ask early and negotiate, if necessary. Remember, it never hurts to ask.

11. Partnership Potential

My views on discussing ownership during the initial interview may run counter to the standard advice given by consultants and recruitment professionals. Many recommend that candidates ask about partnership potential right away and if there isn't a clearly defined, time-bound path to ownership, they consider it a red flag. I understand the logic behind that advice but I respectfully disagree.

A personal example illustrates why. Years ago, I interviewed a highly qualified and personable candidate. Within the first 30 minutes, before we had even finished the interview, he was pressing for a detailed timeline for partnership. I found myself in the awkward position of having to defend why I wasn't ready to offer a path to ownership to a provider I just met. Ultimately, he took another job because I wasn't willing to commit to a partnership agreement upfront. **I stand by that decision**. In fact, I'd be more concerned about a practice that offers a guaranteed path to partnership before there's been any opportunity to assess whether the associate is truly a good fit.

If ownership is important to you, you should absolutely ask if it's a possibility. If the answer is a firm no and that's a dealbreaker, it's better to know early. But if the answer is yes, even if it's loosely defined, I don't think that's inherently a red flag. In fact, it may be realistic. I have associates I consider partners in every way and who I expect will one day purchase my practice but for a variety of real-life reasons, the timing hasn't been right.

Some may argue that an undefined path suggests a lack of commitment or transparency, but here's the truth; I can not possibly know in an initial interview whether someone is truly a good fit as a partner. How could I commit to a timeline without first understanding how we work together, how they handle patient care, how we align ethically and philosophically and whether we share the same vision for the future?

So yes, ask about partnership. Be honest about your goals but also recognize that ownership, like any long-term relationship, takes time to earn and evaluate. The right opportunity may start with a handshake, not a signed succession plan.

Questions to Ask if you Plan on Asking About Partnership:

- Is there a path to buy-in or equity?
- What's the expected timeline?
- Has any associate bought in before? If so, how did that work?
- Will financials be shared during the partnership process?

12. Finding the Right Job

As I mentioned earlier, my wife found my first job in the pages of the *New York Times*. Two decades ago, we didn't have the same access to nationwide opportunities that new dentists enjoy today. Take advantage of every available resource and don't limit yourself to positions that are actively advertised. If there's a practice you admire and believe you'd be a good fit, don't hesitate to reach out directly. Where you look also matters. Some job boards are dominated by corporate listings while others cater to smaller private practices, residency programs or alumni networks.

Where to Look:

- **Residency programs and alumni networks**: Word-of-mouth recommendations are gold.
- **ADA CareerCenter and state dental association websites**
- **Facebook groups**:
    - Dental Nachos
    - Dental Success Network (DSN)
    - New Dentist Boost
- **Recruiters**: Use those who work independently, not just for DSOs.
- **Dental Vendors**: Dental supply representatives for distribution companies like Schein, Patterson, Benco, etc., often have their finger on the pulse of local practices. These vendors also offer dedicated recruitment services.
- **Be Proactive**: Don't be afraid to contact dental offices directly in the area where you would like to live. Reverse engineer the situation. Decide on the best area for you, research the practices in that area that appear to be a good fit and directly contact those dental offices.

Treat your search like any other major investment. Don't rush. Interview widely. Learn the landscape.

Pro Tip:

When I was in dental school, I used to think that being a highly respected, successful dentist meant practicing in a major city somewhere like New York or Los Angeles. But over time, I realized that high density urban markets often come with intense competition, longer hours, lower-reimbursing insurance plans and pressure to take on procedures you may not be ready for. What I've learned is this, excellence in dentistry isn't defined by your ZIP code. Some of the most talented cosmetic and restorative dentists I've met are based in smaller towns, where patients happily travel long distances for their care. Don't overlook the personal and professional benefits of practicing in a less saturated, more supportive

environment. You can build a rewarding, high-level career in any setting- urban, suburban, or rural.

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13. Interview Like a Professional

You're not just trying to get the job, you're evaluating whether the practice is a place where you can grow, belong and succeed. The best interviews are not interrogations, they're conversations. And if you're serious about finding the right fit, you need to come prepared to engage on both sides of the table.

Do Your Homework Beforehand

It sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised how many candidates I've interviewed who clearly hadn't even looked at our website or social media prior to the interview. They show up knowing nothing about the practice, the community, or even the basics of what we offer. That lack of effort is a huge red flag. When a new grad doesn't bother to Google the office, it reads as a lack of respect for the opportunity. The same goes for showing up late, in sneakers or in a wrinkled T-shirt.

You don't need a three-piece suit and a leather briefcase like we wore in 2004, but you should still show up like the opportunity matters. A clean, professional appearance signals effort and respect. And remember you're probably interviewing with someone from my generation, not yours.

Now, if you're wondering, because you're racing from your residency or current position, can you wear scrubs? I'd say absolutely. Some might disagree, but there's something about working right up to the last minute that, to me, screams work ethic. Just my opinion but I respect the hustle.

Be Present With Everyone in the Room

I rarely interview candidates alone. Whether it's my chief operating officer or an office manager, someone from my leadership team is always there. One of my biggest pet peeves is when the candidate only directs their answers and attention to me, as the owner and completely ignores the other person. That tells me a lot about how they view staff, hierarchy and whether they'll be a respectful member of the team. If I trust someone

enough to include them in the interview, their opinion carries weight. Treat them like it does.

It's a Two-Way Street

Yes, the practice is evaluating you, but you should also be evaluating the owner and the office. What's the vibe? Is the owner someone you could learn from? How do they talk about their staff or patients? Do they sound burned out or energized by the work? These are things you'll never learn if you just sit quietly answering questions. Build rapport. Make it a dialogue.

And here's a tip: most senior dentists love to talk about their journey. They're proud of what they've built. If you ask thoughtful, sincere questions, especially ones connected to what you learned about the practice during your prep, you'll stand out immediately.

Suggested Questions to Ask the Owner/Dentist:

- "How did you discover dentistry as a career path?"
- "You must be proud of what you've built- what was the biggest challenge?"
- "What do you think has contributed most to your success here?"
- "Is there a case or patient story that stands out in your career and why?"
- "What's one piece of advice you'd give your younger self sitting in my shoes?"
- "What's your greatest challenge day to day in running this practice?"

Suggested Interview Questions to Ask About the Practice:

- "What's your typical new patient flow?"
- "How do you support new associates clinically, especially during their first few months?"
- "What technology do you currently use and are there plans to upgrade?"
- "How long do most associates stay with the practice?"

- "How is clinical autonomy managed here?"
- "What does a typical day look like for an associate in your office?"

These questions show curiosity, initiative, and maturity and they open the door for real insight into how the practice actually functions.

Ask to Shadow

Always ask to shadow if possible. Even an hour or two observing the workflow, staff interactions and patient care will tell you more than a formal interview ever could. Watch how the team communicates. Do people seem stressed or supported? Do they smile? Are they short with one another behind closed doors? This is the reality of your potential day-to-day.

Show Confidence, Not Arrogance

Interviewing straight out of residency can be a delicate balance. You want to project confidence but not at the expense of humility. Experienced dentists generally have a clear sense of what new graduates know and where they still need to grow. Confidence is important but when it tips into arrogance, it can undermine your credibility.

I've had interviews where I shared complex cosmetic or full-mouth rehab cases to spark conversation, only to be met with blank stares or vague nods, as if these cases were routine for the candidate. That's a missed opportunity. Thoughtful questions and curiosity go much further than pretending to have all the answers.

You don't have to downplay your skills but do show that you're eager to learn. Practices aren't looking for someone who already thinks they're the best. They're looking for someone ready to become the best, with the right mentorship and mindset.

Final Tip: Everyone's Watching

The interview starts the moment you walk through the door. Some of the best feedback I get about a candidate comes from my front desk team or assistants. If you're rude to the receptionist, dismissive to a hygienist or short with the team while you think you're "off the record"; it gets back to me. Great practices trust their staff and how you treat them reflects how you'll treat the entire team once hired.

14. Hire the Right Professionals

This may be the best advice I can offer at any stage of your career: hire experienced, specialized professionals. The money you invest in a knowledgeable team will save you far more in costly mistakes, stress and sleepless nights.

During my residency, I was introduced to a financial planner who specialized in life and disability insurance for dentists. He quickly became an invaluable resource and a friend. He introduced me to my dental malpractice provider and my attorney, who focuses exclusively on the dental industry. That attorney introduced me to my CPA firm, experts in dental accounting.

This same team has been with me for over 24 years, from reviewing my first contract as an associate to negotiating my tenth practice acquisition. Their combined expertise has protected and guided me throughout this journey. Every one of them works specifically in the dental industry. That kind of specialization may not be the cheapest option upfront, but it pays off many times over in the long run.

Even if you've found your dream job, never sign a contract without professional review. These documents are complex and almost always written to favor the employer. I understand that money is tight after residency, but this is not the place to cut corners. Start building your team early. Surround yourself with experts who understand dentistry inside and out. The right team can protect your career, guide your decisions and help you grow with confidence.

Your Professional Advisory Team:

- **Dental-Specific Attorney**
    - Reviews employment contracts and buy-in agreements
    - Protects you from non-competes, unclear compensation clauses and other common traps
- **Dental CPA (Certified Public Accountant)**
    - Understands practice finances, associate compensation models and allowable deductions

    - Helps with tax strategy, budgeting and long-term planning

- **Financial Planner (Specialized in Dentistry)**
    - Guides you on loan repayment, savings strategy, insurance needs and retirement planning
    - Can often bundle life and disability insurance tailored for new dentists
- **Dental Malpractice Insurance Provider**
    - Choose a carrier that offers more than just liability protection
    - Top-tier companies provide:
        - Risk management programs to help prevent claims
        - Access to legal consultations for day-to-day clinical and documentation questions
        - Support in case of board complaints, audits or patient disputes
    - A good provider becomes an ongoing resource not just a safety net
    - Look for malpractice carriers endorsed or suggested by your state dental association

A few hundred dollars spent on guidance now can save you from a bad deal or set you up for future success.

Pro Tip:

Most young dentists underutilize their malpractice insurance carrier because frankly, they're scared to call them. Trust me, your carrier has a vested interest in you being the best, most protected provider. They offer incredible resources, from risk management courses to legal advice regarding how to handle specific situations, to guidance regarding vicarious liability and even mentorship. Your malpractice carrier is on your side.

15. Final Thoughts

Your first associate position isn't just a job, it's the foundation for everything that comes next. The right opportunity will:

- Build your confidence and clinical skill
- Surround you with mentorship and support
- Compensate you fairly for your time and effort
- Align with the long-term goals you're just starting to define

Take your time. Ask smart questions. Do your homework. And don't be afraid to walk away from a position that doesn't feel right.

I sincerely hope this guide helps you find the job you deserve. Dentistry has been my passion for over two decades and I still feel grateful every day for where this career has taken me. The truth is, I didn't know what I was looking for when I started. I was fortunate to land in an associateship that gave me the structure I needed as a new dentist with the freedom to grow into the provider I wanted to become. I'm acutely aware of how easily I could have missed that opportunity. My entire career could have gone differently.

The most important thing I can tell you is this; find a mentor. Whether it's the owner of the practice you join, a colleague or specialist in town or even a national figure, like Dr. Frank Spear; it doesn't matter who it is, only that you have someone to guide you. Find that voice.

Stay true to your ethics and core values. Don't compromise them for financial gain. If you treat people the way you want to be treated, if you lead with charity, empathy and integrity, success will find you.

Enjoy the journey. Take a lot of continuing education. Don't be afraid to evolve. And remember, you're not alone. There's a network of professionals out here who want to see you thrive.

Good luck. You've got this.

Resource Appendix for New Dentists

Appendix: Resources for New Dentists Evaluating Associateship Positions

Researching a Practice Before the Interview

- Practice Website & Social Media – Review provider bios, technology, patient reviews, and before/after photos.
- State Dental Board License Verification – Check license status, disciplinary records.
  Find your state dental board
- Google & Yelp Reviews – Patterns matter more than isolated comments.
- Glassdoor / Indeed – Insight from past or current staff can reveal office culture.

Understanding Compensation Models

- ADA's Guide to Associate Compensation
  ADA Practice Transitions: Compensation Basics
- Charles Blair's Resources on Fees & Coding
  PracticeBooster

Practice Metrics to Ask About

- Monthly new patients
- Provider-to-hygienist ratio
- Production vs collections

- Hygiene recall rate
- Referral patterns to specialists
- Dental Intel KPIs Blog
  dentalintel.com/blog

Clinical Expectations and Scope of Practice

- Ask in the Interview:
  - "What procedures are referred out vs. kept in-house?"
  - "Will I be expected to place implants, do molar endo, or remove impacted third molars?"
  - "Is mentorship available if I want to expand my skill set?"

Continuing Education for Advanced Training

- Spear Education – Occlusion, esthetics, comprehensive treatment planning
  speareducation.com
- Kois Center – Evidence-based treatment and diagnostics
  koiscenter.com
- The Dawson Academy – Functional occlusion and interdisciplinary care
  thedawsonacademy.com
- The Pankey Institute – Patient-centered comprehensive dentistry with a focus on relationships, leadership, and long-term success
  pankey.org

Malpractice Insurance and Liability

MLMIC Insurance Company- The #1 Choice for New York Dentists

MLMIC is New York's most established and trusted dental malpractice insurer, offering unmatched protection, guidance, and support for dental professionals. As a company created by and for healthcare providers, MLMIC has over 50 years of experience defending dentists across all specialties.

Here's why new dentists in New York choose MLMIC:

- Comprehensive Coverage – Including both occurrence and claims-made options tailored to your stage of practice.
- 24/7 Legal Hotline – Direct access to experienced defense attorneys for urgent questions and real-time guidance.
- Unmatched Legal Defense – MLMIC's in-house legal team and deep network of dental-specialized defense firms consistently deliver superior outcomes.
- Risk Management CME – Exclusive access to risk-reduction courses that also offer premium discounts.
- Competitive Rates – MLMIC offers Occurrence and Claims Made dental liability coverage backed by the power and resources of a Berkshire Hathaway company. Learn more here.
- Partnership with Organized Dentistry – Endorsed by the New York State Dental Association (NYSDA) and numerous local societies.

mlmic.com/dentists
Contact: 1-800-ASK-MLMIC (275-6564)

For new associates in New York, MLMIC isn't just insurance- it's peace of mind.

Mentorship, Networking & Community

- Dental Town Forums dentaltown.com
- New Dentist Facebook Groups (e.g. "New Dentist Boost" or “Dental Nachos”)
- Local Study Clubs – Contact your dental society or CE provider to join.
- AGD Fellowship Path – Structured learning path for skill development agd.org/fellowship

Organized Dentistry & Advocacy

- American Dental Association (ADA) ada.org – Join the New Dentist Committee for events and resources.
- New York State Dental Association (NYSDA) nysdental.org
- ASDA Transition Resources asdanet.org/transitions

About the Author



Dr. Gregory P. Dodd, DDS, FAGD, is the owner of a group dental practice in Upstate NY. A graduate of Gettysburg College (1995) and Columbia University School of Dental and Oral Surgery (DDS, 2003), he completed an Advanced Education in General Dentistry (AEGD) and a postdoctoral implant certification at Columbia University in 2004. In 2013, he earned his Fellowship in the Academy of General Dentistry.

Early in his career, as a Senior Scientist at Block Drug Company, Dr. Dodd contributed significantly to dental innovation through his research. There, he earned multiple U.S. patents related to tooth sensitivity and remineralization, focusing on novel desensitizing agents, stabilized stannous fluoride compounds and biomimetic remineralization technologies. His research played a critical role in the launch of *'New and Improved Sensodyne'* in the U.S., and *'Sensodyne Duo'* in Europe, as well as *'Vision'* (the first prescription-strength stannous fluoride toothpaste) and the *'Pronamel'* line of toothpastes formulated to protect enamel integrity.

Dr. Dodd is the founder and sole owner of a large privately held dental practice in NY state.. With nine locations, he has built a team that delivers high-quality cosmetic, implant and reconstructive dentistry.

In 2022, Dr. Dodd earned the CDPHP/NYRA Hometown Hero award for his community engagement and support during the COVID-19 pandemic. He and his practices have frequently received accolades from both patients and peers, including 'Best Dentist' and 'Best Dental Office' from numerous local publications, "Patient Favorite" honors on Healthgrades and praise in publications like America's Top 50 Dentists.

Equally passionate about mentorship, Dr. Dodd has guided numerous interns and young dentists through clinical training. He founded and serves as president of one of the largest and longest-standing Spear Study Clubs in the U.S.; a forum for dentists dedicated to advanced education in esthetic and prosthetic dentistry.

An active lecturer, Dr. Dodd regularly returns to Columbia University School of Dental Medicine to teach on topics such as cosmetic dentistry, advanced prosthetics, practice management and career development.

Outside the office, he treasures time with his family, his wife Vicki (a writer and publisher), daughter Kelsey (an acclaimed vocalist studying at Boston Conservatory), two dogs, two cats, and a guinea pig.



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