

Managing Rising Labor Costs and Workforce Shortages in Eye Care

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Rising labor costs and workforce shortages are putting significant pressure on ophthalmologists and optometrists, making attracting and retaining skilled professionals increasingly difficult. Economic factors, demographic shifts, and compensation challenges are driving these issues, forcing eye care practices to rethink their staffing strategies. This article explores the key challenges impacting labor costs and outlines practical solutions to help practices remain competitive while delivering high-quality patient care.

Challenges and Economic Factors Impacting Labor Costs

The convergence of industry trends and economic pressures is driving up labor costs and worsening the eye care workforce shortage. What follows are some of the most significant challenges eye care professionals face today.

- **Aging Population:** Our aging population puts additional stress on the eye care infrastructure. According to the [American Academy of Ophthalmology](#) (AAO), the U.S. population is projected to grow by approximately 10% between 2017 and 2032, with a 48% increase in individuals aged 65 and older. This demographic shift leads to a higher demand for eye care services, as [older adults typically require more vision-related healthcare](#). A higher demand for eye care services increases the need for eye care professionals, which puts more stress on the eye care infrastructure.
- **Workforce Shortages:** It's not a secret that many industries are facing a workforce shortage, and eye care is no exception. Projections reported by the [AAO Journal](#) indicate that by 2035, ophthalmology will have one of the lowest rates of workforce adequacy among medical specialties, with only 70% of the needed workforce available. This shortage intensifies competition for qualified professionals, giving them the upper hand when selecting what practice to work for.
- **Declining Educational Pipeline:** As if the current workforce shortage wasn't enough, the number of students graduating with degrees or certifications relevant to the ophthalmic technician field is relatively low. Several factors contribute to declining enrollment, such as a lack of industry awareness, competing healthcare career options, and financial and educational barriers.

- **Economic and Geographic Disparities.** The [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) reported that the median annual wage for ophthalmic medical technicians in the United States was \$41,780. The lowest 10% earned less than \$31,200, while the highest 10% earned more than \$59,930. Variations in healthcare access and utilization across different regions and economic disparities affect the availability and cost of eye care services. Areas with limited access may experience higher labor costs due to the scarcity of professionals.
- **Compensation Misalignment.** There is a compensation misalignment between practices and technicians. The disparity between what practices are willing to pay and the compensation technicians expect can be attributed to supply vs. demand.

For example, the growing elderly population necessitates more eye care services, while the limited supply of trained technicians increases competition among employers and drives up expected wages. Additionally, technicians often feel they contribute significantly to [patient care and practice efficiency](#) and want their pay to reflect that value. They also seek compensation that acknowledges their skills, experience, and the cost they've incurred to enter the field.

These economic challenges make technicians hard to find and even harder to attract. However, as technicians demand higher wages, practice owners feel the squeeze. Increasing salaries can strain tight budgets, especially for smaller practices.

Other industry pressures, such as operating costs and insurance rates, are also at play. Although operating costs are rising, reimbursement rates from insurance and government programs aren't always keeping pace, limiting the financial flexibility of practices to offer higher salaries.

Strategies for Addressing Labor Cost Issues

Addressing labor costs isn't just about cutting expenses but [optimizing eye care practice operations](#). You can turn these challenges into growth by investing in technology, nurturing new talent, and offering compelling reasons for technicians to choose and stay with your practice.

1. Implement advanced technology

[Incorporating advanced technology](#) can help ophthalmologists manage rising labor costs while maintaining high-quality patient care. Diagnostic tools, such as [virtual visual field devices](#), streamline testing and reduce the need for extensive staff involvement in manual assessments. Adopting electronic health records (EHR), for example enhances workflow efficiency by minimizing paperwork and simplifying patient data management.

Telehealth services also present an opportunity to optimize staffing. By offering virtual consultations, eye care professionals can expand access to care without significantly increasing in-office personnel. This model allows practices to serve more patients while reducing operational overhead.

Leveraging AI-driven medical transcription tools can ease documentation burdens. Automating clinical notes and patient records enables ophthalmologists to focus more on direct patient care rather than administrative tasks. This increased [efficiency can lead to improved patient experiences](#) and potentially higher revenue, making technology integration a strategic solution for addressing labor challenges.



"The increasing reliance on advanced technologies and telehealth has the potential to alleviate some labor shortages, but it also requires investment in training and infrastructure.

Practices could consider flexible work arrangements and competitive compensation packages to attract and retain top talent in the eye care industry."

Kristen Lemond

Former Ophthalmic Technician,
Virtual Field Customer Success Manager

2. Enhance technician compensation packages

Ophthalmologists and optometrists must offer compelling compensation packages to attract and [retain skilled eye care professionals](#) in a competitive labor market. Competitive salaries remain essential, despite budget constraints, as lower wages can lead to high turnover and staffing shortages. Beyond salary, comprehensive benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, flexible scheduling, and paid time off enhance job satisfaction and loyalty.

To motivate talented technicians to stay with you long-term, you must offer ongoing training and development opportunities. Investing in professional development, such as certification programs, continuing education, and career advancement pathways, can improve staff retention while ensuring that employees remain engaged and up to date with industry advancements.

3. Optimize practice operations

Optimizing practice operations is essential for managing labor costs. Start by streamlining workflows to eliminate inefficiencies, reducing the need for additional staff. Cross-train employees to handle multiple roles, ensuring flexibility and continuity in daily operations. For administrative tasks that can be performed remotely, consider offering remote work options to expand your talent pool and improve retention. Implementing these strategies can enhance productivity and financial stability in your practice.

Supporting Career Growth and Workforce Stimulation

Investing in training is the best way to support career growth and workforce stimulation. While there are a few training routes you can go, here are some popular options:

- **In-House Training Programs:** If you have the time and resources, you can develop in-house programs to train assistants or less specialized staff. This approach will help you cultivate your needed talent without relying on external faculties.
- **Educational Institution Partnerships:** Collaborate with educational institutions to support ophthalmic technician programs. Scholarships, internships, and hands-on training can help build a pipeline of qualified professionals. For instance, [Central Piedmont Community College](#) reported a 100% job placement rate for its ophthalmic medical personnel program graduates in the 2021-2022 academic year.
- **Regional Training Centers:** Collaborate with other practices to create regional training centers. This practice helps standardize staff education, improve skill development, and reduce individual training costs. These centers provide a shared resource for ongoing professional development, ensuring a well-trained workforce equipped to meet the evolving demands of eye care practices.
- **Scholarships and Internships:** Offer financial support or practical experience opportunities to students pursuing relevant degrees.
- **Mentorship Programs:** Create a mentorship program where you and other senior staff mentor newcomers. Such commitments foster a supportive learning environment.

If you want to see the eye care industry grow, advocate for the profession at every opportunity and lobby for more educational funding to support these careers. You can also increase awareness about careers in eye care through school visits, career fairs, and social media.

Investing in training, mentorship, and advocacy, you help strengthen the eye care workforce, ensuring a skilled and sustainable talent pool for the future.

About the Author Virtual Field

Virtual Field is a leader in exceptional eye care solutions, offering a suite of diagnostic exams designed to improve patient care, streamline workflows, and provide actionable insights for eye care professionals. With a focus on innovation, Virtual Field empowers practices to deliver better care while keeping operations efficient and seamless.

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