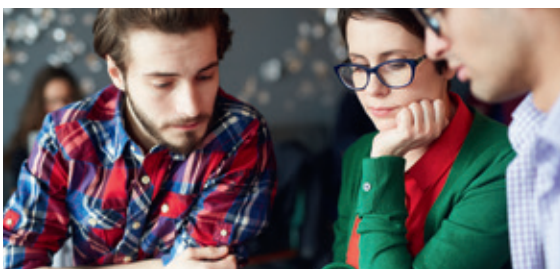




INDEPENDENT practice guide



Association of British Dispensing Opticians

INDEPENDENT PRACTICE GUIDE

www.abdo.org.uk

For advice and information about any of the topics covered in this guide, members can contact ABDO Membership Services on:

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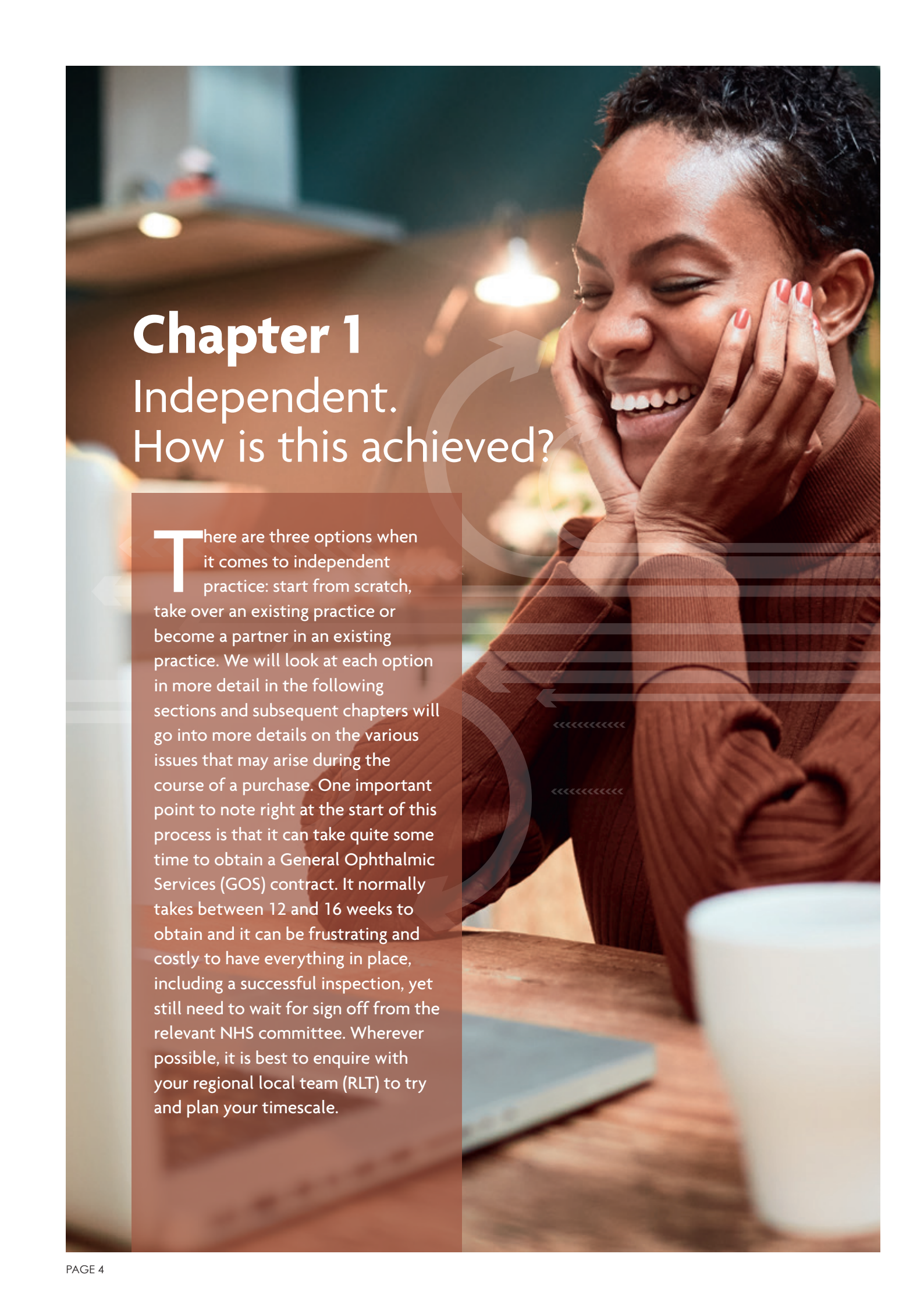
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A photograph of a smiling woman with dark hair, wearing a brown sweater, sitting at a wooden desk. She has her hands on her face, looking down. In front of her is a laptop and a white cup. The background is blurred, showing a warm, indoor setting with lights.

Chapter 1

Independent. How is this achieved?

There are three options when it comes to independent practice: start from scratch, take over an existing practice or become a partner in an existing practice. We will look at each option in more detail in the following sections and subsequent chapters will go into more details on the various issues that may arise during the course of a purchase. One important point to note right at the start of this process is that it can take quite some time to obtain a General Ophthalmic Services (GOS) contract. It normally takes between 12 and 16 weeks to obtain and it can be frustrating and costly to have everything in place, including a successful inspection, yet still need to wait for sign off from the relevant NHS committee. Wherever possible, it is best to enquire with your regional local team (RLT) to try and plan your timescale.

START FROM SCRATCH

One option for owning your own practice is to start from scratch. This can be a high-risk strategy as it is conventional wisdom that approximately one in four new practices fail. Before starting from scratch it is very important to research the area, customer base and competition. Companies such as Myers La Roche can provide a location validation service that can be used to research potential locations. You can do your own research using freely available information from the Office for National Statistics or third party websites such as www.streetcheck.co.uk. You can also visit potential areas and conduct your own market research. Whichever method you choose, remember that starting a practice can be a significant financial investment. Although it can be tempting to save money where you can, you should consider the cost of expert advice against the potential cost of a failed business. Our advice would be a combination of the two; use your own research to produce a shortlist and then consider seeking expert advice for validation before you commit to a lease or other costs.

Two of the major expenses when starting from scratch are equipment and shop fitting. While it can be tempting to skimp on these, optics is a very competitive market and most modern practices have a smart appearance and are well equipped. There are several companies that specialise in quality second-hand equipment and you can often find a few bargains where someone has upgraded to the latest version and is looking to sell a well-maintained piece of equipment.

Whether you are starting a new practice or buying into one, you may want to consider not only what equipment is necessary to provide services, but also if you have any personal preferences. This may be a particular type of slit lamp, visual field screener, fundus camera or OCT. If you are updating equipment you may also want to consider what the requirements may be for future services. As an example, if glaucoma shared care is one of the next services to be launched, will the field screener that you currently have be suitable? That isn't to suggest that you must purchase a top of the range Humphrey Visual Field Analyser, but you should consider if the equipment you purchase will be suitable for any schemes you may wish to take part in.

When you are ready to purchase equipment, you should consider whether you purchase or lease the equipment but purchasing expensive equipment can have an impact on your ability to reclaim the Value Added Tax (VAT) on the equipment. VAT is discussed in Chapter 10 (page 45).

PROS AND CONS OF STARTING FROM SCRATCH?	
PROS	CONS
Freedom to choose where you set up	Most desirable locations have high levels of competition
You have complete control	No existing income for the practice
No existing expectations	No existing patients
No redundancy costs	Marketing costs are likely to be higher
No requirements to use existing staff	Finding suitable staff
Freedom to choose equipment	Costs of equipment/finding suitable equipment
Freedom to choose suppliers	Cash flow
You can build the brand how you want	Building a brand from scratch can take far longer

BUYING A PRACTICE OR BUYING INTO ONE

This can be a far safer way to own a practice, however it is not without its pitfalls. Although these two options are slightly different we shall consider them together. There are a number of sales agents that market practices and this is one way to find an existing practice for sale.

Buying a practice

Buying a practice seems like the easiest option, you find a practice for sale and then you are free to put your own stamp on it. It sounds easy but there are a few unique challenges and considerations: the most obvious one is why is the existing owner wanting to sell? This may be due to a wish to retire, relocate, or the often quoted "wanting to pursue other business options". If the reason for sale is genuine retirement, then you may have found a business that could grow and provide an income and the opportunity to do things your own way. However, be mindful of practices that "require a greater time commitment" or "the owner wants to pursue other interests": this may be true, but it may also mean that the practice isn't working well or the current owner hasn't made a success of it. There is no surefire way to find out if this is the reason for sale, but looking at how long the current owner has owned the practice and doing some research may save you a financial headache.

One way of doing some very simple research is to look at the accounts over several years. You should see the last three years' accounts as an absolute minimum. This way you can see if the practice is growing, or shrinking. >>

If the practice is shrinking, is this due to the location and competition or is it due to someone winding down towards retirement? One way to view a shrinking practice is to see it as a new start up, but with a slight head start. Remember though that the price should reflect this and changing perceptions can be very difficult.

When purchasing a practice you will need to consult a specialist solicitor for advice on drawing up a contract of sale. It is also prudent to seek tax advice from an accountant. If you are applying for a new GOS contract but you intend to trade under the previous GOS contract until your application is complete, your solicitor may wish to include an agreement in the contract of sale that allows the previous owner to act as a consultant or agent to collect the GOS fees and pass them to your business. Your solicitor may also want to include a money-back arrangement in the event that a new GOS contract cannot be obtained due to problems that cannot be rectified. The most common example of this would be an inability to meet current disability access requirements.

It is generally a good idea to try and buy the building as well if possible. This of course will depend on whether the owner wishes to sell and if you can raise the necessary funding. However if this is possible, it increases the long term investment value of the practice.

Once you have found a suitable practice then you need to consider what the practice currently offers and its client base. Do these fit with your vision for the future of the practice? Consider a practice that has a reputation for budget eyewear, how will the client base react if you want to convert it into a high-end designer boutique? This isn't to say it can't be done, but a large proportion of the cost of buying a practice is the goodwill. This is in effect the cost of buying a captive patient base with the idea that many of the patients will continue to visit under the new ownership. This provides a ready income and helps to make budgeting and cash flow easier. Of course some patients will not remain under the new ownership. This will depend on a number of factors, the most obvious one is have you changed the practice ethos? Some patients will have wanted to leave for a while and will take a change of ownership as a chance to shake off the loyalty they may have felt to the previous owners. This factor is often influenced by the practice staffing arrangements. If the practice has a single longstanding optometrist, then it may be susceptible to patient loss following a change of ownership. Some of this risk may be mitigated, if the other longstanding staff are being retained. If the practice has multiple optometrists and some can be retained, at least in the short term, this can help to retain patients until the new owners are established. In reality, although all new business owners think they know how to do things best, change is often best made in steady increments to avoid scaring or alienating the existing patients.

ADVANTAGES OF BUYING A PRACTICE OR BUYING INTO ONE

Buying a practice	Buying into a practice
Easier to make changes	Often initially cheaper
Complete control	Continuity
Clean slate	Previous owners still present
	Lower risk

Buying into a practice

Buying into a practice brings a different set of challenges. The main benefit is that at least in part the existing owners will still be around, this provides much needed continuity and a helping hand. Of course it also means that you are not free to simply do as you wish. You need to compromise and work with your new partners and how well this works will depend on how well you know them. Beware even when you know them well, changes to the dynamic can take time to settle down. As a co-owner you may have big ideas, but for an existing owner who is used to doing things their own way, it can take a while for a suitable way of working to emerge.

Phased buy-out

A variation on the buying a practice option is a phased buy-out. In this model the incoming owner buys an initial stake in the business and over a period of a number of years gradually continues to purchase the remaining portion of the business. This leads to a phased take over. In some instances the incoming owner buys a majority stake and then purchases the remaining stake over a period of time. This works very well if you already work at or have previously worked at the practice. In other instances the incoming owner buys a minority stake and increases the ownership percentage over a period of time. There are advantages and disadvantages to taking a majority or minority stake in business. These are broadly similar to those covered previously, but the main advantage is that this option may present a more managed route to purchasing the whole practice in a way that is easier to finance. This is because less finance is needed up front, with additional amounts of the business purchased using profits from the existing share. If you are considering a phased buy-out of a practice, it is a good idea to seek tax advice from an accountant to fully consider the impact that this may have on income tax or VAT.

BUSINESS ENTITIES

Sole trader

This is perhaps the easiest to set up. It's just you, meaning that you are personally responsible for everything from a tax and legal perspective. The good news is that any profit you make is yours to do with as you see fit. You don't have to register as a business and you don't need to file accounts with Companies House.

You will need to tell HMRC that you are self-employed and complete an annual self-assessment tax return or find an accountant to do it for you. There is no legal separation between personal and business property.

Partnership

This is very similar to a sole trader except that there is more than one owner. Each owner has a specified percentage of the profits and the liability is shared. The amount of profit each partner receives is normally set out in a partnership agreement. In the same manner as a sole trader there is no legal separation between business and personal property. Tax is dealt with on an individual basis, but the partnership needs to register with HMRC.

Limited company

A business set up as a limited company is a separate legal entity. This requires that the company is formed/incorporated and registered with Companies House. There is a requirement for a limited company to have certain standard legal documents that set out what it can do and how the business operates. Shares in the company can belong to one person or be shared with partners. There are a number of benefits to a limited company, but also some additional requirements. If you establish your business as a limited company and you use a protected title such as 'optometrist' in the business title then you will need to register with the GOC as a body corporate. The GOC define a body corporate as a limited company or limited liability partnership that has been incorporated with Companies House. However, if you do not use a protected title you do not currently have to register as a body corporate and business registration with the GOC is optional.

The key benefits of a limited company are:

- **Tax efficiency** - income can be received as both a salary and dividends. As dividends are generally taxed at a lower rate than PAYE there is a potential tax efficiency.
- **Reduced risk** - any liabilities or debts that the business may accrue are separate from your personal finances. This means that if things do go wrong your personal finances and property are far less likely to be at risk.
- **Flexibility** - shares in the limited company can be sold to raise funding or release equity.

The downsides are:

- Company directors have a duty to the company. There are currently seven key areas defined by the Companies Act 2006
- Limited companies are expected to file returns with HMRC and Companies House every year. This means that certain information about the company will be held on public record at Companies House. This information can be easily viewed by anyone who wishes to see it.

Limited liability partnership (LLP)

In simple terms, this is a partnership that also has some of the characteristics of a limited company: it can be thought of as a hybrid of a partnership and a limited company. They are often used by professional services providers such as accountants, solicitors and architects. An LLP has a continuing legal existence independent of its members.

LLP members are treated as self-employed individuals, therefore they have to register for self-assessment and pay tax and national insurance on their individual profits.

The key benefits are:

- A business setup as an LLP avoids the rigid structure imposed by a limited company and the Companies Act 2006. The LLP also does not have a tax liability itself, it therefore does not pay corporation tax in the way that a limited company does


The downsides are:

- An LLP pays tax in the same manner as individuals do, making it less tax efficient than a limited company

RELATIVE EASE AND RISKS OF BUSINESS ENTITY

Business entity	Ease of set up	Risk
Sole trader	Easiest	Highest
Partnership	Easy	High
LLP	Moderate	Moderate
Limited company	Hardest	Lowest

The easiest business entity to start is that of a sole trader, all you need is a business bank account and to register as self-employed with HMRC. However, it also places you in the most exposed and responsible position.



Chapter 2

Developing a business plan

A business plan takes the idea you have for your business and helps you turn it into an actual business, and may be necessary for financial investment/loan. It allows those lending you money to see how the business will hopefully generate a return on the investment, and provides a level of assurance regarding its viability. Generally, it involves thinking through the various parts of your business to make sure everything will work. It is a fairly lengthy piece of work and may take a few weeks to complete. This chapter covers what you should consider in your business plan.

Your business and key objectives

This section should describe your business and its core services and products. It should also provide an overview of the aims your business is trying to achieve and over what length of time this will occur.

Your skill and experience

This section should provide an overview of your experience in relation to the business. This is where you might detail your experience, not just as an optometrist or dispensing optician, but skills that relate to managing a team of employees and actually running a business. If they are optics related, great, but even if they aren't, don't worry, you may have transferable skills that are equally as relevant. In essence, you are showcasing why the people lending you money can be confident that you can deliver.

Customers, competition and the marketplace

This section should detail who your target customers are and how you will attract and engage with them. It is also where you should explain how you have identified your potential customers and what competition you face. This is also the section that should be used to explain why your customers will choose you over the competition.

Unique selling point (USP)

A USP is the item or idea that makes your business stand out from the crowd. For independent practices this is normally their clinical expertise. By having greater control over your own diary and appointment booking, as well as the type of equipment you use and the service you provide, you can really stand out from the crowd.

Sales and marketing

Here you will detail exactly how you will attract customers. You should outline the products that you will stock, the branding and look of your practice, and the pricing strategy that you will employ. You will also need to demonstrate how you will let patients know that you are in business or have bought the business. This might include details of advertising campaigns, social media engagement, open days, or talks to local groups. It might even be something as simple as a stand at the village fair.

Operating the business

How many staff will you need? What will be their roles? Where will the practice be based? What equipment will you need? This section should also talk about legal obligations with which your business will need to comply. For an optical practice this will mean considering the need to register with the NHS to provide General Ophthalmic Services (GOS) sight tests and a possible need to register with the GOC as a body corporate.

People also often consider risks to the business in this section. For optical practitioners this would normally involve the risk of action by the GOC and civil claims for negligence. ABDO is a leading provider of professional medical malpractice insurance for dispensing opticians.

Finance

In this section you should outline how you would fund the setup costs, including rent, refitting the premises, equipment and advertising. This may be a combination of personal contribution, loans from friends and family, or bank loans or other sources of finance.



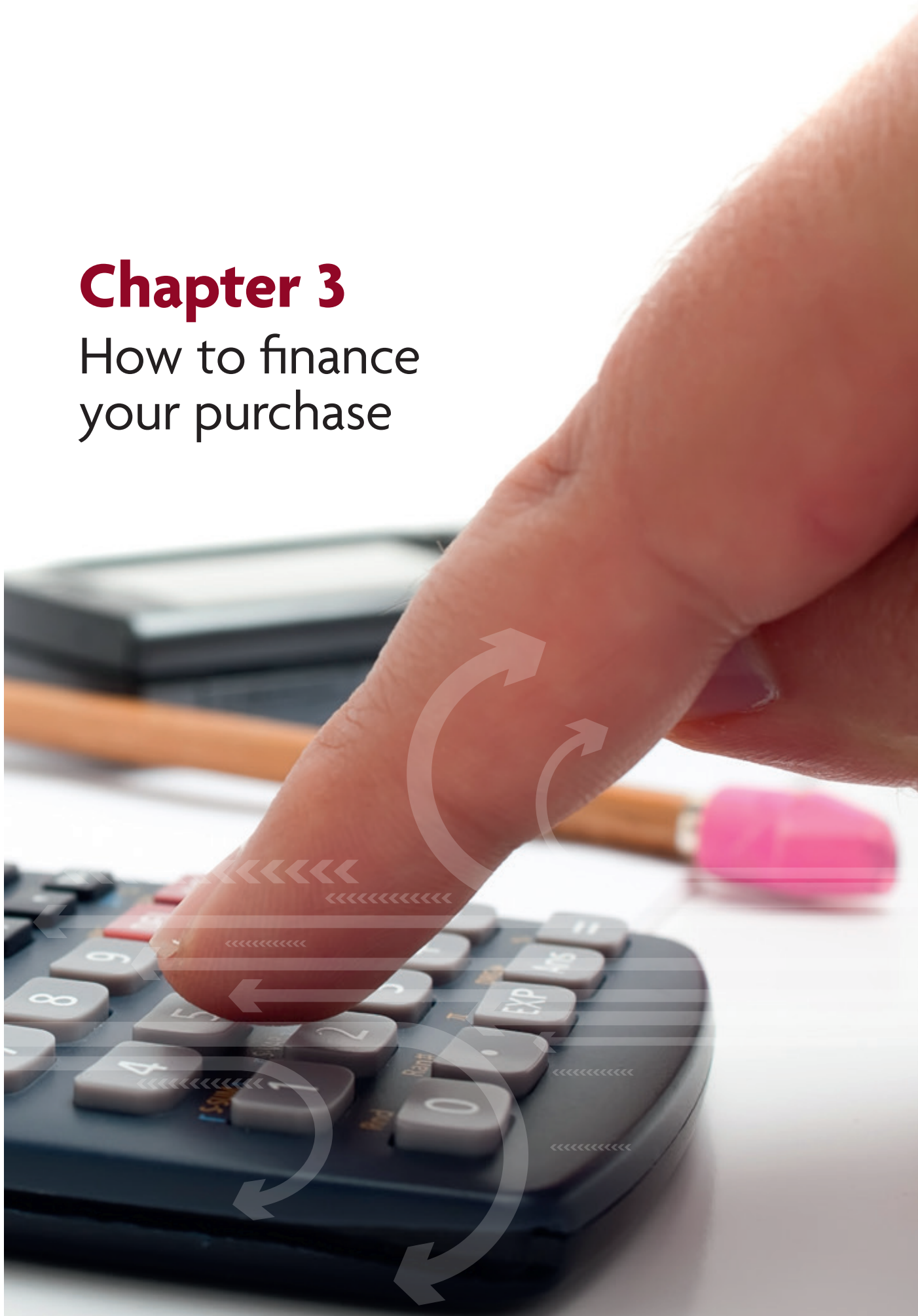
You should also include cash flow projections. These include sales forecasts and expenses and should include any money in or out of the business. Don't forget to include the salary that you need to draw from the business, but be realistic. While it would be nice to instantly draw a six-figure salary in the early days, you need to draw a salary that allows the business to first survive and then to thrive. With a little luck you can get your reward for all the hard work once everything is up and running.

There are a number of online resources available to guide you through the process of writing a business plan. A few examples can be found at:

- **The Prince's Trust**
www.princes-trust.org.uk/help-for-young-people/tools-resources/business-tools/business-plans
- **UK Government**
www.gov.uk/write-business-plan
- **Barclays Business Banking**
www.barclays.co.uk/business-banking/business-insight/writing-a-business-plan

Chapter 3

How to finance your purchase



TYPES OF BUSINESS FINANCE

The different financial options include:

Bank loans

Banks are perhaps unsurprisingly the most common source of external funding for small businesses, but there are limits to what they can do. Banks will not normally lend the full amount you need, but will often lend around 60% of the cost. What's more, before banks will consider lending, you have to make a good case for why they should. To do this you may need to provide a great deal of information and documentation. The bank may refer to this as, or request, a formal business plan.

Exactly what the bank will need to see will depend on whether you are buying an existing business or starting from scratch.

If you are buying an existing business you will need to have some information about the business; the main piece of information is the accounts. These will need to be official audited accounts for the business that you want to buy. Smaller businesses may not be required to have audited accounts, however, there should still be appropriate financial statements. You should obtain at least three, but preferably five, years' worth of accounts or financial statements. The bank will only lend based on what is in the accounts; they cannot and will not lend money based upon unsupported potential.

Specialist finance companies

Traditional lenders have been joined by a new generation of finance providers. These may include some who specialise in the medical and optical sectors, and who are more likely to understand optical practices and how the profession works. They may therefore be more likely to lend a greater proportion of the cost of the practice. In some instances it may be that the full value of the practice can be financed.

There are a large number of these lenders, and it can be helpful to get expert help in finding the one that's right for you.

Self-fund

This is perhaps the easiest way to purchase a practice if you have the funds to do so. The decision on funds is yours and is not reliant on external decision makers, which may seem to make things easier. However, you should remember, you are also shouldering all of the risk, and, even if you can cover all the initial costs, you could be faced with additional need for funding as your new practice finds its feet and develops a healthy cash flow. Before deciding to self-fund a practice, you should consider the risk it may present to your other assets such as your home or other businesses.

Family

If you are fortunate enough to have family that can afford to help with the purchase price then this is a viable option. Of course, should the business not succeed then you are also risking the money of family members. This could place personal as well as business relationships at risk. If you choose this option, any family members should be fully aware of the risk and you should seek legal assistance in drawing up formal agreements.

Crowdfunding

We are not aware that a practice has ever been purchased via crowdfunding but that isn't to say that it couldn't be done. A small group of people with an incentive to fund a practice via an offer of free or discounted eye care could be a viable option. This method would require careful consideration as to how many backers you would need and what you could offer them in return to secure their support. Remember, crowdfunding takes a great deal of work to set up and can take a great deal of time to provide the level of funding you may need. A high proportion of crowdfunding proposals fail to deliver the necessary funds, meaning that all cash has to be returned to investors.

Venture capital

If you have a new, exciting and unique business idea, you may be able to attract venture capital funding to start the business. It is highly unlikely to be suitable for a normal practice, but if you have an innovative idea this might be the way to go. Venture capital can be structured in many ways, and you could find that you don't have full control of your business if your venture capital investors have other ideas about how their money should be used.



GETTING EXPERT HELP

There are many types of business finance, as well as many different lenders to consider. Getting the most appropriate and the most competitive funding for your particular needs - and paying less for the finance you want - can be easier with some expert help.

Chapter 4

Business skills



Contracts of employment for staff

When an employee starts working for you they will be employed under a contract of employment from the very beginning, even if you have not given them a written contract.

The employment contract doesn't need to be in writing and in fact may be written or oral, or a combination of each.

If an employee has worked for you for a period of one month or more, they are entitled to a written statement setting out their main terms of employment within two months of starting employment. This is often issued in the form of a written contract of employment. See also Chapter 6 (page 29).

Failure to provide employees with a written statement containing the required information could lead to an employee making a complaint to an employment tribunal. An employer could be liable to pay compensation if an employee brings a separate successful substantive claim against them in an employment tribunal.



The principal written statement should include the following information:

- Name of the employer and employee
- Job title or brief description of role
- Date of employment start and the date on which the employee's period of continuous employment began (taking into account any employment with a previous employer that would count towards that period)
- The scale or rate of pay or the method of calculating pay and interval of payment i.e. weekly, monthly or other specified intervals
- Terms and conditions relating to hours of work including normal working hours
- Either the place of work or, where the employee is required or permitted to work at various places, an indication of that and of the address of the employer
- Entitlement to holiday and whether it includes public holidays, and holiday pay
- Terms and conditions relating to incapacity for work and sick pay
- Terms relating to pensions and pension schemes
- The notice period required from the employer and the employee to terminate employment

Supplementary information that should be provided, but not necessarily in the same documents as above is:

- Any collective agreements which directly affect the terms and conditions of employment
- A note specifying any disciplinary and grievance rules or reference to a document which is reasonably accessible to the employee and which specifies such rules and procedure (e.g. a disciplinary policy)
- Any collective agreements which directly affect the terms and conditions of employment
- A note specifying any disciplinary rules and disciplinary or dismissal procedures, or reference to a document which is reasonably accessible to the employee and which specifies such rules and procedure (e.g. a disciplinary policy)
- Where the employment is not intended to be permanent, the period for which it is expected to continue, or, if it is for a fixed term, the date when it is to end

Where the employee is required to work outside the UK for a period of more than one month, you should note the period for which they are to work outside the UK, the currency in which remunerations is to be paid while they are working outside the UK, any additional remuneration and/or benefits to be provided by reason of their working outside the UK and any terms and conditions relation to their return to the UK.

Employers may choose to include further clauses in an employment contract such as those relating to probationary periods, benefits, conditions of employment and restrictive covenants. It is important to note that despite what is written in a contract of employment, employers and employees should always be aware of and abide by their legal rights and obligations under employment law more generally. Examples of such legal provisions are the statutory sick pay scheme, statutory minimum notice and the right to minimum holiday entitlement under the Working Time Regulations.

The employment relationship between the employer and employee is governed by express terms of employment, implied terms of employment (such as the implied duty of mutual trust and confidence), statutory provisions and incorporated terms.

ABDO members can download template employment contracts for employed staff from the ABDO website. It is important that members always check contracts carefully and ensure that they are happy with all the contents before using them. The contract templates are primarily for new employees. We recommend members contact us for further advice if they are wanting to issue contracts to existing employees, or if they have taken over a business.

Employment law is complex and we recommend that you seek advice if you have enquiries when preparing, issuing or agreeing contracts, or if you are looking to make any changes to contracts.

LEASING PREMISES

Leasing business premises has historically been a minefield of risks and problems. However, in 2007 a new code of conduct was produced to try and eliminate some of the common problems. This code was called the “The Code for Leasing Business Premises in England and Wales 2007”. Despite its name, it is also a useful and applicable guide for Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, it is a voluntary code so there is nothing to ensure that landlords will abide by it. The full guidance can be found at www.leasingbusinesspremises.co.uk

The key points to consider regarding leases are as follows:

Length of lease

This could be one of the most important decisions when signing a lease - how long is the lease for? This is of utmost importance as, depending on the business entity used, you could be committing to paying or being liable for the lease costs for quite a long time. Break clauses are a point in the lease when you can, as the name suggests, break the lease. An important piece of advice to new businesses is to ensure you have a break clause relatively early in the lease. This way if the business isn't working you can break the lease and cut your losses.

Rent review

Landlords are often keen to include a rent review period where, after a period of time, the rent payable is adjusted

upwards in line with current market value rents. It is more sensible to have a review that allows for movement up or down depending on the economy, trading conditions and changes to the locality.

Repairs and dilapidations

You should ensure that the lease does not require that, if you vacate the property, you are expected to put the property into a better condition than when you took on the lease. It is therefore a very good idea to take multiple photographs of the condition of the building before you begin any shop fitting. These photos should be kept somewhere safe in case you need to prove that you are leaving the property in a better or equivalent condition on vacating. You can commission surveyors to do this for you.

It is also worth bearing in mind that, unlike domestic properties, business leases are often fully repairing, meaning anything that needs repairing throughout the lease term is down to the occupier. Further consideration should be given when taking on a lease with an existing business as you may be required to return a somewhat dilapidated building to the condition before the current owner took on the lease. This can come as a nasty surprise and it may also prove difficult to ascertain the original state of the building if many years have passed since the original lease was taken on.



SUPPLIERS

Suppliers effectively fall into two categories. There are those that provide the key products your business sells such as spectacle frames, lenses, contact lenses and related sundry products. There are also the other suppliers, who provide the products that your business uses such as utilities, telephones, printing and IT equipment.

When considering utility suppliers, the key is always to shop around for competitive prices. While it may not seem that important, savings on utilities and other business needs can really help cash flow in the early days.

There are many suppliers of spectacle frames and lenses. Representatives of many of the smaller companies will most likely make themselves known to you once you are open, after all they are looking for new business as well.

Before you open, one of the best places to see a large number of suppliers is one of the optical trade fairs, 100% Optical and Optrafair. 100% Optical is held in January in London and Optrafair is normally the beginning of April in Birmingham. There are far too many frame companies to note here, but note that some big companies own a large number of the most well-known designer brands. If you want to stock many of the popular designers you will most likely need to deal with one or both of these companies. This brings a unique set of challenges, which are outlined on the following pages.

Exclusive sales zones

In order to protect the image of the brands they represent, Safilo and Luxottica, along with other companies that stock designer brands, will commonly not supply a practice if they already supply another practice within a certain distance.

Minimum order quantities

It is common practice that you will need to order a minimum number of frames to stock a brand, which can be difficult for new businesses due to the financial outlay required. It is also common for there to be a minimum order quantity for each brand, and mixing and matching is not normally allowed.

STOCK

Stock for many of the brands is produced in relatively small quantities and many practices routinely report long lead times. This can be frustrating if a patient has broken a frame or simply wants a second pair of the same frame.

Deciding which contact lens products to stock has a number of facets; one is product familiarity which may be determined by the staff who are conducting the contact lens fits. You should also consider what the local supermarkets and other practices stock and at what price. Although it is ultimately a business decision for each practice, it seems illogical to stock a brand of contact lenses that can be bought much cheaper over the road in the local supermarket. Supermarkets have vast purchasing power and can often sell lenses cheaper than small practices can purchase them.



PHOTO: Stepper

BUYING GROUPS

Joining one of the optical buying groups such as SightCare, National Eyecare Group or CECOP can provide better prices. These organisations use bulk purchasing power to obtain discounts on commonly used products. This can be helpful for products such as contact lenses where small practices lack the purchasing power of larger competitors. Being part of a buying group can also mean a single consolidated bill at the end of each month, which can also help keep a track of that all-important cash flow.

However, if you use a lot of a particular product you may be able to obtain as good or better discounts direct from the manufacturer in return for making them your main supplier. The downside of this approach is that most independent practices pride themselves on not being tied to one supplier. It is a decision for each practice to take as to whether better prices for products are worth losing a little independence.

www.sightcare.co.uk

www.nationaleyecare.co.uk

www.cecop.co.uk

PURCHASING TERMS

Most companies will extend some credit to practices, the terms of which vary from company to company. Most will provide 28 days to pay an invoice, while some will offer 60 or even 90 days. The terms that you can obtain will depend on whether you are starting a new practice or have purchased an existing practice. The better the terms, the more chance you have to sell some of the stock before the bill to the supplier has to be paid. This is obviously advantageous for cash flow.

Some manufacturers will provide stock on consignment. In this case they provide you with a range of frames that you only pay for when you sell them. This may be on a frame by frame basis or at the end of the month. This can provide a much needed cash flow boost for many practices: the downsides tend to be that you need to take quite a large amount of stock from a manufacturer, which may limit the choice you can offer. You also often need to meet certain sales targets to continue to receive the consignment stock. If the manufacturer decides to end the consignment arrangement, you may need to quite quickly replace a large volume of stock and, if you order individual frames to replace those that are sold, you will pay much more in postage costs than if you order a bulk of stock.

Bulk purchasing

True bulk purchasing normally requires a volume of goods to be purchased that far exceeds what is possible for an independent practice. However, even on a smaller scale there

can be significant benefits for practices. The most obvious one is saving on postage and packaging costs. Items such as spectacle cases, cleaning cloths and cleaning solutions can, if cash flow allows, be purchased in quantities that attract a bulk purchase discount and save on postage costs. It is worth working out realistic projections over how many of these items you will use in a one, three or six month period and purchase appropriately.

YOUR PATIENTS

Retention: keeping patients coming back

Why is retaining patients so important? There are two main reasons. The first is a measure of success or patient happiness: if patients keep coming back they are probably happy and as a business you are probably doing something right. Of course some won't come back and that doesn't always mean they aren't happy. Some will be tempted away by the perception of a better value product or special offer. Some will be genuinely dissatisfied, but not necessarily because you have done anything wrong - sometimes personalities or expectations do not match.

However, if you have a low retention of patients then perhaps you are not providing either the service or price point that your patients expect. Why does this matter? The cost of attracting a new patient, depending on which study you read, is between five and twenty-five times the cost of retaining an existing patient. Measuring those patients that leave you is more difficult than for other businesses because unlike, for example, a mobile phone company or gym membership that is often paid by regular direct debit, it is difficult to know if a patient has gone elsewhere. Have they gone elsewhere when they don't respond to the first appointment reminder? What about the second? Is it when they are a year overdue, what about three years overdue? I think you see the problem. However, despite it being a somewhat difficult metric to measure, it is still of vital importance to a growing business.

Know your USP

Why did patients come to see you in the first place? If you know why patients chose your practice, it is far easier to ensure that you consistently deliver what patients are expecting.

Manage expectations

Arguably the most important strategy is to manage expectations. This can sound like management and marketing speak, and to some extent it is, but the simple fact is 'don't make promises to the patient that you can't deliver'.

Expert knowledge

Optical businesses are increasingly relying on the advice, service and knowledge that they can provide to differentiate from cheaper competition. Patients



will often be prepared to pay a premium of some sort for this advice, but the premium they will pay will vary area by area.

Measure patient satisfaction

This may be directly, in the form of patient surveys or questionnaires, or indirectly through repeat patients or recommendations to family and friends.

Listen to what your patients want. This is an extension of measuring satisfaction, but if you don't know what your patients want, how can you try and provide it?

Be approachable and contactable

This may be as simple as being open on time and when you say you will be. It may be answering the phone in a prompt and friendly manner. In the modern world people use social media to interact and share recommendations and expectations. If you engage via social media, make sure you respond to patients and keep the social media accounts active.

Visibility

One of the biggest problems for practices is that patients often only visit a practice when they are due for an appointment, which may only be every two years. That is a very long time between contacts, and patients can forget what you offer and why they came to you. This can lead to competitors appearing more attractive if they have significantly larger advertising budgets. While it is likely that you cannot compete on advertising, you can make sure that you stay in touch with

patients on a regular basis and remind them what you can offer. This might be via regular updates on offers, a regular patient newsletter, or via social media.

STOCK CONTROL

At the most basic level it is knowing the type and number of items that are in your inventory.

The building block of stock control is stocktaking; this is the physical counting of all your stock and cross referencing it against your stock records to discover any discrepancies. This might be done monthly, bi-annually or even annually. Differences between the stock that you have recorded on paper and the physical count of stock may reveal several issues, covered below:

Theft

As unpalatable as it may be, in almost any retail-based business, no matter how careful you are, some stock will almost inevitably be lost to shoplifting. Of greater concern is employee theft. Stocktaking will reveal if there are any major problems and allow you to take steps to prevent or eliminate the issue.

Targets

If your stock take reveals a major discrepancy in your stock levels, you may need to adjust or review financial projections for the year. It is better to know this than be faced with an unwelcome surprise at a later date. An unexpected bill may affect your end of year results and lead to missed targets.

Performance

Carefully monitoring the stock you have ensures you are aware of those items that sell well and those that do not. It can be quite common for practitioners to have a misconception over what they think sells well and what actually sells well.

Ordering

Imagine if you thought that you had enough spectacle cases for the next six months, but actually you only had enough for one month. This doesn't sound like a significant problem, unless the lead time on replacement cases is three months. The same process can be true for spectacle frames, but can be more difficult to manage.

Pricing

As we have said, the stocktake process can reveal the items that don't sell as well as others. When this is matched to the trade and retail price of the items, it can help to reveal those items that may have sold if they were in a different price band.

The cost of stock control

There are several elements to the cost of stock control. Some of those are logistical costs, such as the cost of the mechanism for monitoring stock or performing the stocktake, along with the associated staff time. Stock control systems can help to ensure that you don't run out of items you regularly use or sell, by providing minimum stock alerts. This allows stock to easily be maintained at a predetermined level, and generates stock reports.

However, there are other costs associated with regular replacement of stock. One of the most obvious is missing out on economies of scale on commonly used items, along with the increased postage and shipping costs associated with ordering small quantities or single items.

The opposite of being understocked is being overstocked. In this instance you may have valuable funds tied up in stock that you don't need and that will simply depreciate.

Stock availability

Some stock items, particularly those that are personalised with the business logo, may have a significant lead time. Similarly, certain frame brands are notorious for long lead times when replacements are needed. Having an awareness of which brands you stock that may take longer to replace can help you decide how many of an item is sufficient. This can help to avoid a disappointed patient who has their heart set on two pairs of a designer frame.

Order in, or sell from stock

There are two options when it comes to stock, you can either sell items from stock or order in as needed. There are advantages and disadvantages to each method. If you sell from stock you do not have to worry that the item may be out of stock at the manufacturer or has been discontinued. This decreases the time to turn around an order, and also helps to



avoid unexpected delays. There is also the advantage that you have less money tied up in display models that you cannot as easily convert to cash, and the associated cost of maintaining a display stock. The downsides are that models sometime get damaged or worn while on display (shop soiled) and you should make patients aware they are purchasing the model they have tried on. Also, you need to carry enough spare stock to fill any gaps in display ranges to avoid your displays looking bare, it does not look good when patients arrive at a practice to see half full displays. Ensure that you read the Optical Confederation Guidance on spectacle sales from display on the ABDO website.

If you order in as needed, each product is brand new and it can serve as a warning if a model is discontinued. Your displays are full and the practice appearance is therefore improved. The downsides to this approach are that you have a large amount of money tied up in display stock, you are exposed to potential manufacturer delays and the postage cost of ordering each item is significantly more. Also, it is very easy to not refresh the range of stock as often, as the practice displays are always fully stocked and there is then less of an incentive to see new frame ranges. This can be managed by scheduling regular stock reviews.

There is no right or wrong answer to this decision and many practices use a combination of the two methods. For budget lines you could order multiple items of the same model and keep a display model. For higher price ticket items that may be subject to manufacturer delays, you could sell the stock item to avoid ending the year burdened with a large volume of last year's stock. Of course, this can provide stock that is perfect for an end of year sale.

SALES

There are a few reasons to run sales: to attract new customers, to entice customers to visit during otherwise quiet periods, to clear excess stock or to clear last season's stock.

New customers

A tried and tested sales tactic is to run a special offer to tempt customers away from the place that they usually shop. The logic is that this provides an opportunity to upgrade the item or to entice them to purchase from the non-sale stock. It also provides an opportunity to gain new customers who hopefully enjoy the experience of being a customer of yours.

Quiet periods

All businesses have seasonal lulls in the volume of customers that they see, leading to decreased income for the business.

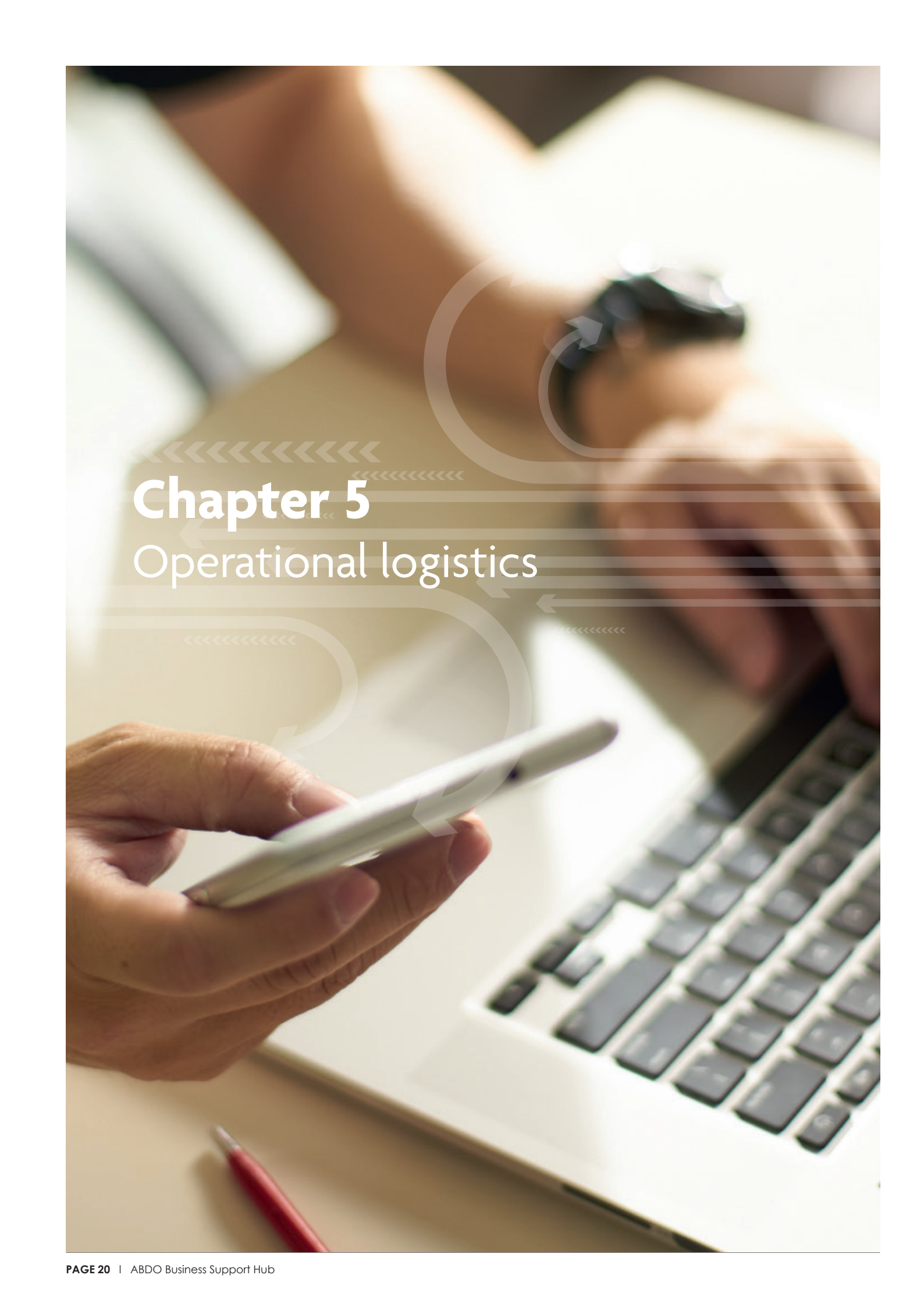


A sale can be used to entice customers into making a purchase on the basis that the offer is too good to turn down. This can help to bolster the flagging income at the times of year when people have other things on their mind. A good example of this is the winter or Christmas sale; notoriously at this time of year patients have other things on their mind and may be tempted to put off purchasing new spectacles until the new year. A sale can help to convince patients to make the purchase now rather than waiting.

Stock clearance

Sometimes, despite the best stock management, it is possible to end up with too much stock or stock that has simply been difficult to sell. A sale can be a great way to clear the excess stock, allowing you to convert money that is tied up in stock back to liquid assets. This can then be used to purchase different stock or clear other bills and expenses.

Another similar reason is stock that is at the end of its life cycle. This tends to occur more in product lines that have a clear season and will be replaced or discontinued. The most common example is designer stock. If you run a practice that has a clear business ethos of always carrying the latest brands and frames, your patients will most likely not want to purchase last year's models. However, a sale can allow you to clear old models and again return money that is tied up in stock to liquid assets. If you order in rather than selling from stock, you can use the display models as an end of season clearance designer sale. This can be a great way to attract patients who would otherwise delay the purchase of a pair of new spectacles.



Chapter 5

Operational logistics

GOS contract: how to apply and how to comply

For most optical practices in the UK, it is vital to have a General Ophthalmic Services (GOS) contract in order to provide NHS tests to eligible patients. The arrangements vary in each of the four home nations. In England it is a contract issued to the practice by NHS England. In Scotland the regulations are different as the services provided under GOS are more extensive and the fees higher. Wales still operates under 'Terms of Service' rather than a contract and, in Northern Ireland, it is administered by Health and Social Care Northern Ireland. In all four nations the voucher arrangements for eligible patients are the same. An important point is that there is a right to a contract if the qualifying criteria are met.

Human resources

Human resources (HR) can be a significant challenge for optical practices, particularly smaller independent practices. It is very easy to presume that it doesn't apply to you as you only employ one or two part-time staff members. However, there are a number of common issues that crop up:

- **Employment law regulations.** It is important to stay abreast of changes to employment law and regulations. This includes issuing employment contracts within the legal time frame (currently two months from the individual's start date), job descriptions and policies and procedures, along with maternity and paternity rights. You should also be aware of minimum and living wage regulations.
- **Sickness absence.** If you employ people, sooner or later someone will be ill - this is a simple fact of life. Normally that illness will be short, but you should be prepared to have a staff member on long term sickness and/or multiple short absences at some point. Setting out clear guidelines about sickness absence reporting requirements and sick pay entitlement communicates expectation and ensures consistency across the business. It can also be helpful to refer to a written document if you need to address sickness absence issues with your employee. It is useful to keep a brief record of all sickness absences in case you need to refer back in the future.
- **Resolving conflict.** People do not always get on, another simple fact of life. However, if you have staff members who are not getting on in a significant way, this could affect your business. If this happens it is important to seek professional HR advice to ensure that you resolve any issues legally and without exposing the business to unnecessary risk.
- **Rewarding staff.** Some companies run bonus schemes to incentivise staff. It is important that these schemes are fair to all staff, achievable and motivational.

- **Dismissals, managing underperformance and/or conduct issues.** It is inevitable that at some point one or more of these issues will arise. It is always sensible to follow a fair and reasonable process in dealing with such matters. Guidance can be obtained from ABDO's HR service (see overleaf) as well as by reading the guidance from the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) www.ACAS.org.uk, on disciplinary, grievance and performance management. Failure to do so could result in expensive and time consuming legal action.
- **Protecting your business.** It is sensible to identify and make adequate provision (both in any contracts and in practice) to safeguard your confidential information, patient information, industry contacts and business generally. For example, this might include robust confidentiality and post termination restrictions in your contracts with employees, as well as ensuring that all staff know they must take proper care of your property and not discuss personal data belonging to patients whilst in public.

Therefore, while for a small practice it may be unfeasible to initially employ a dedicated HR professional, you should know where to turn for relevant advice. One such resource is ACAS, which deals with all of the common HR issues; it has a number of free online resources, but can also provide training or dispute resolution services. Our in-house employment law team can help with contract queries, employment rights and common employment issues.

See Chapter 4 (page 13), for more information about employment contracts.

PENSION SCHEME REQUIREMENTS

The new regime of auto-enrolment and the requirement for employers to have a compliant/qualifying pension scheme in place. It is important that as an employer you understand the requirements of the Pension Regulator and ensure you are in a position to comply. Smaller employers may want to consider a group scheme such as NEST, a workplace pension scheme set up by the government.

All employers are required to comply with auto-enrolment pensions regulations, which includes providing access to a compliant/qualifying pension scheme. It is important that as an employer you understand the requirements of the Pension Regulator and ensure you are in a position to comply. The Pensions Regulator website www.thepensionsregulator.gov.uk/en/employers will take you through a step by step process of what you need to do to ensure that your business is compliant.

LOCUMS

If you are using locums to supplement your staff, it is sensible to use a good contract which makes very clear the terms of the relationship between the practice and the individual. Take legal advice to ensure that the contract contains sufficient and appropriate protections for your business regarding any potential misconduct, negligence, omissions and liabilities relating to the locum's tax and employment status, or their work for you.

TUPE

The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 as amended by the Collective Redundancies and Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) (Amendment) Regulations 2014, or TUPE for short. This legislation protects the rights of employees when a business or organisation is taken over or transfers to a new employer.

If you are buying an existing practice this could apply to you. If it does, the employees of the outgoing employer automatically become your employees when the business transfers to you, unless the individuals object to the transfer. This "automatic transfer" principle means that the employees in question automatically become your staff, with continuity of service from their previous employer (relevant normally for notice periods and certain statutory benefits such as redundancy pay) and the same terms of employment. There are a few exceptions to this rule regarding criminal liabilities, some profit share schemes and accrued pension rights up to the date of transfer, but you should take legal advice about these. In effect, you, as the new employer, "step into the shoes" of the previous employer.

You are likely to have a few practical questions about this. We have tried to make this as straightforward as possible by setting out the following information:

- Who transfers?
- Obligations before the transfer.
- Employment terms after the transfer date.

Who transfers?

All the employees who are, immediately before the transfer date, "assigned" to the practice transfer to you.

Obligations before the transfer

The person or persons selling the business must provide information about transferring employees to the new owner, this is called Employee Liability Information. This information must be accurate and meet data protection requirements. The information must be provided not less than 28 days before the date of transfer or, if this is not possible, as soon as is reasonably practicable.

The following information must be provided by the outgoing employer to you, the incoming provider:

- The identity and age of the employees who will be transferred to the new owner.
- Any information contained in the written statement of those employees.
- Previous or ongoing disciplinary action taken against an employee that has occurred in the previous two years.
- Any grievances raised by the employee in the previous two years.
- Any court or tribunal claims by the employee against the employer in the previous two years.
- Information relating to any collective agreements.

Although not mandatory, it is sensible to ask for any additional information you think is relevant to the practice's workforce. For example, copies of the individuals' employment documents, the practice's policies and procedures, details of any reasonable adjustments which have been made, or are being made, for disabled employees, non-contractual bonus schemes, details of their locums and agency workers too. Just bear in mind the outgoing employer is not obliged legally to supply this.

You should take legal advice on the actual purchase agreement. Ensure the agreement contains adequate warranties and indemnities (contractually binding promises made by the outgoing employer) regarding the accuracy of the information it has supplied, its compliance with all relevant legislation (e.g. data protection, the Bribery Act, equality legislation, health and safety legislation etc.) is obtained.

Measures

The incoming employer must tell the outgoing employer of any measures they envisage taking in connection with the TUPE transfer e.g. change of workplace. This should be confirmed in writing as soon as possible so that the employees can be informed of it.

Informing and consulting with the affected employees

Both the outgoing and incoming employers must consult and inform their affected employees' representatives (not the employees directly unless the business is a microbusiness) about the transfer process. Consultation must be conducted in good time before the TUPE transfer and must be adequate: having one ten-minute meeting with the representatives the night before the transfer is unlikely to be sufficient.

The representatives will be trade union representatives, an internal employee forum which is permitted to consult with you about such matters, or elected employee representatives. If no elected representatives are in place, employers should



arrange elections if there 10 or more employees. If there are less than 10 employees, employers can consult directly with the employees. If you have more than 10 employees in your practice, you cannot force the affected employees to agree to consult directly with you.

Failure to comply with your information and consultation obligations can result in employment tribunal claims and compensation being awarded against you of up to 90 days actual pay for each affected employee. It is sensible therefore to ensure that you fulfil your duties properly and obtain an indemnity from the other employer that they have complied with their obligations.

Information must be provided to employees' representatives in writing and must include:

- A statement that the transfer is going to take place, and an approximate estimate of when this will happen and why this will happen.
- How the transfer will affect them.
- Details of any measures the incoming provider envisages.
- How many agency workers are employed, what type of work they are doing.

The new employer (you) takes over the transferring employees' employment contracts, including:

- All previous terms and conditions of employment.
- Any failure of the previous employer to observe employees' rights (so that employees could make a claim for discrimination against the new employer, even if it took place before the transfer).

- Holiday entitlement.
- Period of continuous employment— an employee's start date is the same as before the transfer, so continuous employment isn't broken.
- Any collective agreements previously made.

What if employees don't want to work for the new employer?

Employees can refuse to work for the new employer and object to their employment transferring. This brings their employment to an immediate end on the transfer date. If staff choose to object to the transfer they cannot normally claim unfair dismissal or redundancy pay. In this case the employee does not need to give a notice period and is not entitled to payment in lieu of their notice period; the employment with the outgoing employer would cease at the point of transfer. If an employee objects to their employment transferring, it is sensible to remind them what this means for their employment and ask them to confirm their decision in writing.

Can you change the transferring employees' employment terms?

Before the transfer

Employers cannot normally change an employee's terms and conditions to match those of the incoming employer, even if the employee is in agreement.

After the transfer

Changes to employment terms may be desirable to reflect your own existing employment contracts or simply to make changes which suit your business plans. However, you cannot change employment terms after the transfer except in particular situations.

TUPE protects employees against changes to their employment terms if the sole or main reason for the change is the change of employer, unless specific circumstances apply (see below regarding economic, technical and organisational changes). Changes can be made to the terms if those changes are unrelated to the TUPE transfer, but you should always seek legal advice before doing so and endeavor to have a clear paper trail supporting your rationale. Employees who leave could claim constructive dismissal if changes to their contract are perceived to have been because of, or connected to the TUPE transfer. Dealing with such litigation is typically a time consuming and costly process, so it is always best to understand your obligations and duties first and to take legal advice where appropriate.

The new employer cannot change an employee's terms and conditions if the reason for change is the transfer itself.

Economic, technical and organisational reasons

The new employer can change the employees' terms and conditions, for the following reasons:

- Economic reasons to do with how the company is performing.
- Technical reasons to do with the equipment or processes the company uses.
- Organisational reasons to do with the structure of the company.

For example, this may involve changes in workforce or workplace due to redundancies or a move from a managerial to a non-managerial position. The employee needs to agree to this change.

Exceptions to this rule are as follows:

- The terms of the employment contract allow the employer to vary the specific term and the parties agree the change.
- The terms are incorporated from a collective agreement and the change occurs more than one year after the transfer.
- The employer is subject to insolvency procedures.

Positive changes

Employers can improve employees' terms and conditions after the transfer if the employees agree. For example: increased holiday allowance, but these changes cannot be imposed; they must be done in agreement with employees. Bear in mind that the employees can cherry pick the most advan-

tageous benefits from the old and new contracts if they wish, e.g. increased holiday from the new employer and increased overtime pay from their previous employer.

Dismissals

Employers can dismiss employees due to economic, technical or organisational reasons that necessitate a change to the workforce. The dismissal in this case is normally referred to as a redundancy. The normal rules regarding fair dismissals still apply.

Pension rights

Employees' company pension rights earned up to the time of transfer are protected, but the new employer doesn't have to continue an identical pension. However, if the contract specifies a percentage contribution to the personal pension scheme, this must be continued. Changes to a pension scheme or contributions to it will be "measures" and you must inform the outgoing employer of these (see above).

Once the transfer is complete, employees should be given written confirmation that their employment has transferred to the new business. This should include the name of the new employer and a statement saying that the terms and conditions haven't changed.

Redundancy

The new employer cannot make employees redundant just because they transferred under TUPE from another employer;



doing so will expose their practice to claims of automatically unfair dismissal (i.e. the redundancy dismissal was connected with, or solely because of, the TUPE transfer). The normal rules regarding redundancy procedure and consultation apply, but the new employer can now consult with the affected employees at their own site about these proposed redundancies before the transfer is complete, as long as the old employer agrees to this. If the employee is made redundant for an economic, organisational or technical reason that results in changes to the workforce, they may be entitled to a redundancy payment.

Summary of key points about TUPE

Both the incoming and outgoing employers must consult employee representatives about the TUPE transfer and inform them of anything (including measures proposed by the incoming employer) that would affect the employees (e.g. reorganisation). They should try to gain agreement about these changes.

Employers with less than 10 employees can inform and consult directly with employees if there aren't any appropriate representatives.

It is a breach of contract and potentially grounds for employment tribunal claims, if the new employer doesn't meet the terms of the employment contract. It could also result in poor morale, negative impact on your reputation more generally, or grievances being raised by the staff.

If an employee's working conditions are significantly worse because of the transfer, they can object to the transfer, or resign and claim unfair dismissal.

Information about employees must be provided by the previous employer 28 days before the transfer date.

Locums and self-employed staff do not transfer under TUPE.

Full guidance can be found at www.gov.uk/transfers-takeovers

It is worth noting that in the case of a business purchase of take-over will almost always apply. It can be complex so please do get advice.

BUSINESS CONTINUITY

If you have taken over an existing business and you haven't previously worked there, then the patients will not be familiar with you. It can take time for even the most engaging practitioner to build a rapport with patients. As such, it is highly advantageous to have familiar faces around the practice to smooth the transition to the new owners. Therefore, wherever possible, it is usually advantageous to retain the existing staff; not only will they provide that familiar face but they will also help provide unique knowledge about the existing

patients. This may seem simple, but it can help to retain patients after a change of ownership.

MEDICINES AND HEALTHCARE PRODUCTS REGULATORY AGENCY (MHRA)

The Medical Devices Regulations (2002), amended in 2008 require all medical devices to carry the CE marking. Most ophthalmic devices such as spectacle lenses and frames are classified as Class 1 medical devices. This means that anyone who manufactures or assembles these products must be registered with the MHRA.

Under the Medical Device Regulations, the glazing of spectacle frames is classed as assembly and the surfacing of spectacle lenses is classed as manufacturing. If your practice receives remotely edged lenses and fits them into a frame, this is also considered assembly. This means that if your practice is undertaking any of these tasks, you must register with the MHRA. This can be done online by setting up an account and then completing the registration process online at <https://aic.mhra.gov.uk/era/drsystem.nsf/login>

INFORMATION COMMISSIONERS OFFICE (ICO) AND DATA PROTECTION

Anyone who processes personal information relating to individuals including staff, locums, contractors and patients, needs to register with the ICO. Processing means obtaining, recording, storing, updating or sharing the information. As all practices need to maintain a list of patient records and appointments, it is highly likely that this applies to you. If any of this processing is conducted using computers, which is very likely, then you must register with the ICO and pay a recurring fee.

You will also need to ensure that you have adequate data protection processes in place including, but not limited to, adequate terms in your contracts with locums and suppliers and a privacy notice in place for patients and staff members. You will need to consider whether you need to obtain individuals' informed consent before processing their personal data. You can find detailed information and guidance on the ICO website www.ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-fee

ABDO will continue to assess GDPR implications on optical businesses and the latest updates will be available to members via our website.

INSURANCE AND PROTECTION FOR YOUR BUSINESS

To hold a GOS contract with NHS England you are required to have insurance covering a minimum of £5million employers' liability and £5million public liability insurance. Policies to cover this can be obtained from a variety of insurers, but it is worth approaching a specialist insurance provider who understands the sector. ABDO members can source public liability insurance through GD Anderson Insurers. Find out more in the ABDO members area of the website.

A typical insurance policy will include cover for loss or damage re the following:

- Your premises (if required)
- Your contents including equipment, displays and stock
- Money
- Public and employers' liability
- Fidelity guarantee

When getting quotes, take the time to understand the conditions of each policy. Different insurers may ask for different levels of security or apply increased excesses. These could affect the premium you end up paying as well as your ability to make a claim.

In addition to practice insurance, you will also need to consider the following:

- Management liability insurance
- Locum insurance
- A workplace pension
- Property owners' insurance

Getting advice from an experienced, specialist broker will help you get the most appropriate cover for your new business; particularly crucial if this is the first business you've ever set up.

EQUIPMENT AUDIT

An equipment audit is simply the act of checking and inspecting the practice equipment. This is important for several reasons: first and foremost is safety. This takes two forms: one is ensuring the equipment is doing what it is intended to do; the other is ensuring that it is safe to operate. Many pieces of equipment have a self-test function or diagnostic routines to identify faults, but for those that don't you should either inspect them yourself or have a suitably qualified person inspect them for you. There are several companies that will inspect and calibrate equipment where necessary. Items such as non-contact tonometers cannot usually be self-calibrated. However, it is a very simple job to replace a non-working bulb. Items such as contact tonometers can and should be

checked for calibration. For anyone who has completed the glaucoma repeat readings training, the steps to perform this calibration check are taught within the module. Other items may not need calibrating but you should ensure that they are in good working order: for example, does the slit lamp work; is there a spare bulb; are all the cables visually ok and secure; are any wires frayed; is the plug damaged?

When conducting an audit of your equipment you can use a simple table or spreadsheet and the following headings will ensure you are recording the correct information:

Equipment audit
Item
Serial number
Date inspected
Name of person inspecting
Calibration date (if required)
PAT date (optional)

The other reason for conducting an audit of equipment is to ensure you know what equipment you have: this can be important if you need to claim for loss due to theft, or damage.

PERSONAL APPLIANCE TESTING (PAT)

Many people are familiar with personal appliance testing (PAT). Businesses will often receive approaches via phone, email or post from companies offering this service. Many companies imply that this is a legal obligation for all businesses and they can be very persistent. However, while this may be good practice it is not a legal requirement. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) are keen to make it clear what the actual requirements are.

The following is taken from the FAQ section on the HSE's website and is very informative for the next time you are being told there is a legal requirement to carry out a PAT:

Q: Is portable appliance testing (PAT) compulsory?

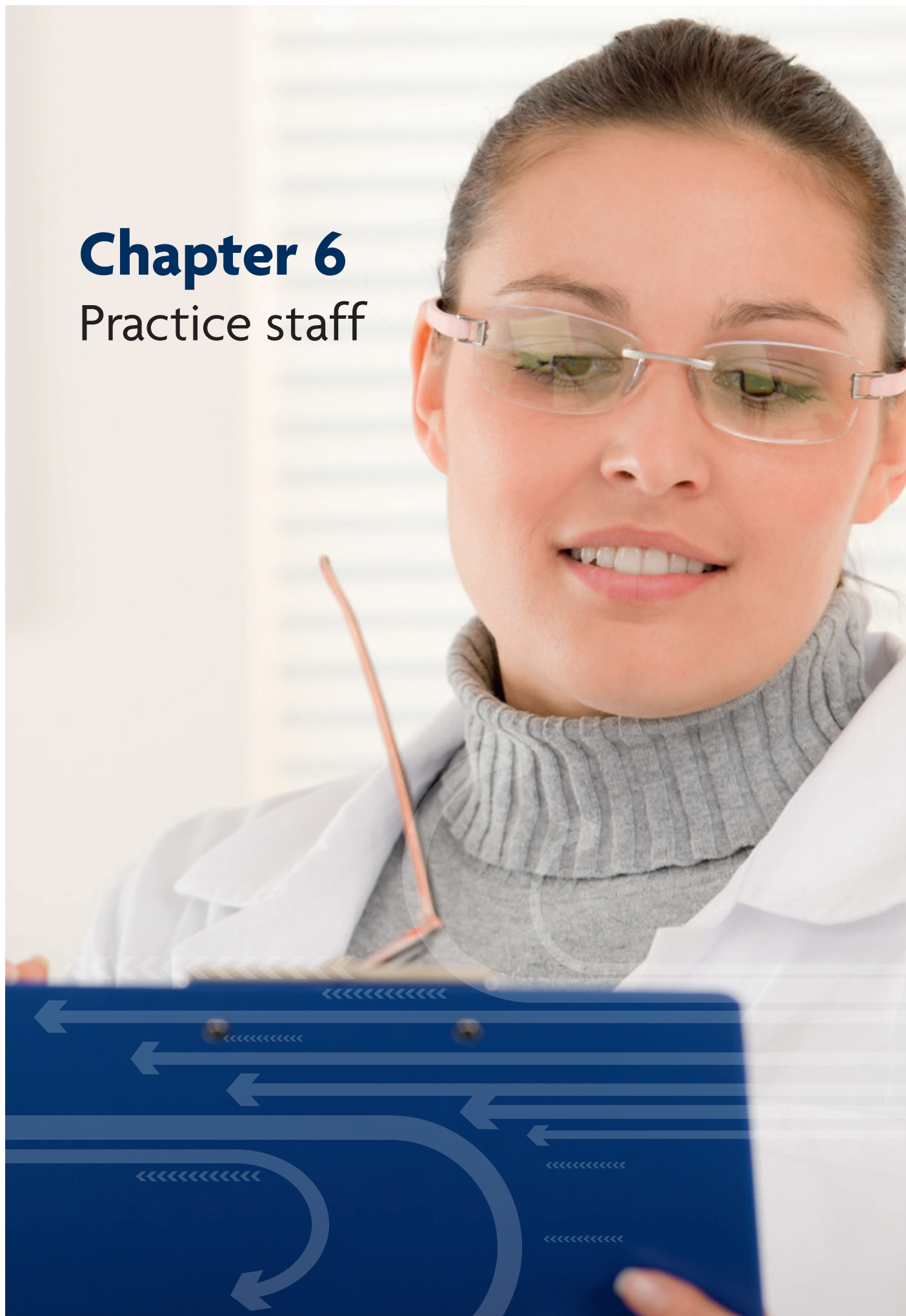
A: No. The law simply requires an employer to ensure that their electrical equipment is maintained in order to prevent danger. It does not say how this should be done or how often. Employers should take a risk-based approach, considering the type of equipment and what it is being used for. If it is used regularly and moved a lot e.g. a floor cleaner or a kettle, testing (along with visual checks) can be an important part of an effective maintenance regime giving employers confidence that they are doing what is necessary to help them meet their legal duties. HSE provides guidance on how to maintain equipment including the use of PAT.

More information can be found on the HSE website at www.hse.gov.uk/electricity/faq-portable-appliance-testing.htm



Chapter 6

Practice staff



CHOOSING STAFF

Practice staff are one of the most important assets to the practice and therefore choosing the right staff for your business is vitally important. If you are starting a practice from scratch, this provides both a challenge and an opportunity. Optical practices operate in an unusual business environment, which means that staff need a more diverse range of skills than many other businesses. When starting a new practice the correct mix of skills can be difficult to find: careful recruitment coupled with a commitment to staff training can help to solve this problem.

When taking on staff in an existing business, there will sometimes be a mismatch between their capabilities and their level of seniority or salary. This will require careful handling to avoid conflict with newer staff members.

Depending upon the role of the staff member, they may need a combination of various skills. These include:

- General administration skills: answering the telephone, booking appointments, cashing up, managing extended services.
- An understanding of NHS processes: completing and submitting NHS paperwork.
- Frame selection and dispensing: helping patients choose appropriate frames and lenses, understanding spectacle prescriptions.
- Pre-screening: how to use the various pieces of equipment and how to answer patient questions and get good results
- Contact lenses: ordering, recommending and teaching patients to use them.
- Adjustments and repairs: adjusting spectacles and basic repairs.

STAFF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Staff training is an often-overlooked aspect of running a practice, but it can be a major benefit to the practice. Not only does training provide benefits to the staff member, it also serves to help the business. Training should be an ongoing process and shouldn't be confined to new starters.

Staff training is important not only for the skills that are delivered to staff but also to protect the practice owners, as the owners are most likely GOC registered practitioners and there will be many times when your staff are acting under your supervision. In some cases this will be a more formal supervision, such as dispensing spectacles to children; in other instances it will be conducting visual field tests for you. When staff are performing these tasks it is important

that they know how to perform them correctly and any laws or regulations that may be applicable. If they are unaware or can't perform these tasks properly, this can lead to expensive mistakes, either financially or via damage to your reputation. In the worst case scenario it could lead to action being taken by the GOC.

The benefits to the business of staff training can include the following:

Keeping up with changes to the sector

Optics is currently going through a significant period of change. Failure to keep up to date with the latest technology risks practices being left behind. Training also ensures that the practice and its staff are complying with current legislation. If your staff are not aware of the latest changes to regulations, there may be delays in receiving NHS payments, which could have serious implications for your business. Currently one of the largest areas of change is the increasing numbers of extended services such as MECS: it is important that your staff are aware of how these impact day to day practice.

Keeping or getting ahead of the competition

If you and your staff are not developing your skill sets on a regular basis, your business can suffer as competitors move forward and develop new services and offers. By ensuring your staff are trained in the latest products and technology you can get ahead of the competition. This is effectively a progression of keeping up with the sector.

Spot weaknesses and skill gaps

A regular planned training program can help identify and resolve skills gaps within the workforce. These can be filled with staff training or if necessary staff recruitment.

Maintain knowledge

An ongoing training plan allows staff to retain skills. Some staff members will not perform some tasks as often as others and it is easy to end up with a mentality that "employee X deals with that". For most practices, especially with small teams, it is important that most staff members can perform most tasks. This helps with holiday, sickness and staff changes and makes for a more versatile, adaptable business.

Provide a career path

Staff training can provide a career path to new opportunities and roles and, as a byproduct, increase job satisfaction for employees. In practice, this could be supporting a staff member all the way through to becoming a qualified dispensing optician. This provides career advancement for the employee and gives the business another qualified member of staff, who can work more autonomously and take on a greater level of responsibility.

MANAGING A SUCCESSFUL TEAM

Arguably the most important aspect of managing a successful team is leadership: this is usually best established by building a relationship with staff. This relationship should be based around trust and loyalty rather than fear or power. In a small practice the team will need to rely on each other and work quite closely for large periods of time.

Key areas to consider

Key things to think about when building a team include:

- **HIRE THE RIGHT PEOPLE.** If you are starting a new practice it is important that you build a team that has the right skills for your business. It is also important that they will be a good fit with you and other employees. You should consider all aspects of the business, from the general administration through to managing your social media presence. Often a mix of experience and skill sets provides a well-rounded business
- **HAVE A PLAN.** You need to communicate to your employees the aims and ideals of the business. If they are unaware of how you want the business to grow, they cannot be expected to achieve the targets you set
- **SMALL THINGS GO A LONG WAY.** Simple things like providing tea, coffee and biscuits can help staff to feel valued. Although you want your staff to work, being overly prescriptive about when staff can get a drink or use the bathroom can make them feel undervalued
- **IDEA SHARING.** It is important that employees feel valued and that they feel able to contribute ideas. This can be partially achieved with regular staff meetings, where ideas can be shared and problems or issues can be raised
- **PRAISE STAFF WHEN THEY DO WELL.** If employees feel you have noticed that they are doing well, they are more inclined to try harder and therefore you are more likely to achieve your goals
- **INVEST.** We have already talked about the importance of staff training, but sending staff on courses to learn new skills can help to enable staff to achieve more. However, it is very important that once you have made this investment, you provide opportunities for your employees to showcase these new skills

INCENTIVES AND APPRAISALS

Two other areas that you may want to consider are incentivising staff and having a clear staff appraisal method. Staff appraisals can help to improve the performance of employees by identifying strengths and weaknesses. This enables you to improve areas where staff are not performing as well as they could be. Before you decide to implement an appraisal system, you should be clear on your objectives for the process and be prepared to commit to the process. A half-hearted, haphazard approach to appraisals is arguably worse than not carrying them out at all. Acas has a useful guide to staff appraisals in their Tools, Templates and Resources section, under 'Useful templates for letters, forms and checklists, Managing staff'.

Incentives can be a good way to motivate staff to achieve targets and growth for the business. However, you must be careful to not set an incentive that could risk complaints. The GOC standards of practice states that optometrists and dispensing opticians must "Listen to patients and ensure that they are at the heart of the decisions made about their care". With this in mind, try not to make targets purely based on sales: instead try and focus on targets that encourage good practice.

Consider two example targets: the number of anti-reflection coatings sold, and the number of spectacles that have to be remade. One encourages the potential for accusations of over-selling; the other encourages great customer service and still helps the profitability of the business. That isn't to say you can't attach an incentive to products, but you should try and make the aim great customer service and discourage over-selling.





MYSTERY SHOPPING

Mystery shopping can provide information on your business from a fresh perspective. You may think that patients are clear about the services you offer and the products you can provide, but to an outsider it may not be so clear. It also provides an objective measure of whether or not your staff are treating your patients as you would wish when you are not there to observe them. The key benefits are set out below.

A fresh pair of eyes

The feedback from an experienced mystery shopper can inform you about how your business is perceived by an outsider.

Patient satisfaction

One of the main aims of a mystery shopper is to evaluate the customer service aspect of your business. This can act as a proxy for customer satisfaction.

Monitor employees

If employees know that any patient could be a mystery shopper, it can encourage them to always deliver the best possible experience. However, a word of caution: while this can have merit, it is important that staff don't feel as though they are not trusted and that 'big brother' is constantly watching them.

If you choose to use a mystery shopper, it is important that, once you have the report, you carefully examine it and then have a team discussion about the points raised. This shouldn't be confrontational and should be constructive. There may be good reasons why your staff deviated from an agreed business procedure: you should listen carefully and take on board this feedback, and then consider if a review of business processes is required.



Chapter 7

Practice image

The image of the practice is how outsiders perceive your business and, if you are taking over an existing business, you may want to update or modernise the appearance.

This may be due to neglect by the previous owner or to put your own unique stamp on the business.

SHOP FITTING

One part of modernisation is the overall look of the practice: from a patient perspective, this is equally, if not more, important than the consulting room. Modern practices tend to have a much cleaner look than twenty years ago; however there are exceptions to this. You should consider the look of the practice, the location and clientele that you are looking to attract. While you may crave an edgy looking practice with exposed brick work and industrial design elements, you should consider if that fits with your anticipated client base or if this will alienate potential patients. There are a number of ways to arrange a shop fit, each with its own merits.

Do it yourself

You can purchase displays and cabinets from a number of suppliers and, with a little hard work, you can improve or replace tired-looking displays. This is usually the cheapest way to complete a refit, but it can be slower than hiring professionals and, depending upon your DIY skills, the level of finish may not be as good.

Generic shop-fitters

There are often many local shop fitting companies and trades people that can complete a refit. They may not be optical specific but are capable of building cabinets, putting up partition walls and building displays. This can be far cheaper than optical specific shop-fitters but the downside is they may not be familiar with how practices are built and designed, meaning they may require a greater amount of input and guidance than a more specialist fitter.

Specialist optical shop-fitters

These are experts in designing and fitting practices. They will be familiar with optical practices and will bring not only expertise, but also ideas. The downside is that they will also be the most expensive.

MERCHANDISING

Merchandising is defined as the activity of promoting the sale of goods, especially by their presentation in a retail setting. The sales process often starts with the eyes and merchandising typically involves presenting products in a way that attracts attention, shows them off to their best and encourages people to purchase them.

There are a number of merchandising strategies, including:

- Window displays (see next section)
- Grouping similar products
- Signs on displays
- In store advertising featuring products
- Demonstrations
- Promotional items

Things to consider when planning the merchandising of your products include:

- Regularly change your displays and promotions, such as seasonal themed displays and promotions. A well thought out display can attract attention and make a significant difference to the patient perception of a product.
- Showcase the products that people want, not the ones that they need. Make the latest styles and products the centre of your displays. Have you just invested in a new designer range or a new range of sunglasses? If so, make them a centre piece of your display to draw attention to them and to help turn the money that you have invested back into profit.
- Light your display. Make use of directional lighting or LED light effects to draw attention to the ranges that you really want people to look at and buy.
- Rotate stock. Despite your best efforts, there will be some areas of the practice that will be less prominent. Unless you are very lucky or very good at planning, you cannot have all of your displays in the most prominent positions. Some practices use these spaces for their more budget orientated stock. Either way, by moving the stock around now and again, it can give lines that have proven more difficult to sell a chance to shine.
- Unless you are running a very high end practice, with an ethos of “if you have to ask you can’t afford it”, make sure the prices for items are clearly displayed. It can be embarrassing for patients if they don’t realise that the product they were looking at is out of their price range and have to change their mind. Business owners should be aware of the legal requirements to clearly indicate prices. Historically, one of the criticisms of optical practices has been the lack of clarity over pricing. Some of the most successful businesses have built a reputation on clear pricing: this has changed patient perceptions and, while you don’t have to follow their lead, you should at least be aware.



WINDOW DISPLAYS

Window displays are an important and fairly cheap way to market your business. A little imagination with a window display can go a long way. The display should showcase the products, but you should be careful to avoid it looking cluttered and the products becoming invisible.

A few things to consider are:

- Change the display regularly. No matter how good your display is, if it doesn't change at all, people will become used to it and it will lose its impact. Your display should therefore change regularly, at the very least seasonally. Some businesses advocate monthly or even weekly updates.
- Eye level. It may sound obvious, but if you put products at eye level, people will be more likely to see them. Of course you can't put all of your display at eye level, but you can place the products that you particularly want to highlight at eye level.
- Keep it simple. People walking past your window display are called passers-by. You should keep this in mind: people walking past don't have hours to study your display and work out what is going on. Therefore you should keep your display simple, eye catching and clear.
- Create the right impression. Earlier on in this guide we talked about brands: you need to keep this in mind when you design your window display. If you put all of your most expensive products in the window you will create a certain impression. If this fits your brand identity, then that is

fine: however, if you are running a price conscious/value practice, then you should consider whether what is in your window display reflects the business.

CLEANLINESS

You should never underestimate cleanliness: paying attention to the details helps to create the right impression for patients. Clean floors and hallways, dust free shelves and displays and neatly arranged products all help to create a sense of professionalism. In contrast, dusty and dirty displays will make patients question the level of care that you are capable of delivering.

MODERNISATION OF EQUIPMENT

While you do not need the very latest equipment to be able to meet the NHS requirements or to provide a sight test, you may want to modernise. This is especially true if you are taking on a practice that may not have seen much recent investment. In this case you may need to freshen up the look of the practice both inside and outside of the consulting rooms.

Over the years patients have become more used to modern equipment and they will have certain expectations, and as technology continues to move forward these expectations will rise. This can be a double-edged sword: the need for updated equipment represents an additional cost to the



business, however it also presents an opportunity to improve the efficiency and workflows of the practice. It may be that you invest in a fundus camera or OCT with an easy to use semi-automatic mode. An easier to use fundus camera, or an updated suite of refraction equipment, can help to speed up the refraction section of the patient examination.

When taking on or starting a practice you should make a list of what equipment you want and what equipment you need (see Chapter 1, page 4). Some of the items used in modern optometric practice have changed very little in the last 50 years and are not perceivably different in use or appearance to patients. An obvious example is the focimeter. While modern automated focimeters make it easier for untrained staff to take readings, this may be an area that can be sacrificed in the early days.

FACILITIES AND SERVICES

What services will your practice offer? Most practices will offer the basics of sight testing and spectacle sales, many will offer contact lenses. These are unlikely to make you stand out from the crowd, however there are a number of other services that you may offer. Some of these are optometry related and others are in allied health professions.

Enhanced services

For example, MECS and IOP repeat shared care. These are useful ways to generate footfall and income that are not solely linked to the provision of spectacles. Unfortunately,

they are currently not universally available across the country. The same applies in a slightly different way to diabetic screening. Once this was conducted almost solely in optometric practice, now there are a multitude of different schemes, some in optometric practice, some delivered via mobile services as well as in hospitals and other clinics. The provision of these schemes is often outside of the control of practices and reliant on local commissioning decisions.

Specialist contact lens clinics

This may be offering a range of products that is beyond those found in many practices, such as myopia control, orthokeratology, or even taking on work for the local hospital eye department.

Independent prescribing

By completing your independent prescribing qualification, it is possible to position yourself as a treatment destination for patients with eye conditions. This may be as an addition to MECS or it may be specialist dry eye clinics.

Non-optical services may include hearing care or other complementary therapies.

Whichever services you provide to help your practice stand out from the crowd, it is important that you make patients and potential patients aware of services. After all, there is no point having a range of services that set you apart from the crowd if no one knows about them.



Chapter 8

Marketing and public relations

Many people think of marketing in terms of promotional or sales activities, but the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) definition of marketing is very broad, putting the customer at its heart. They describe marketing as: “The management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably.”

If you replace the word ‘customer’ with ‘patient’ you’re probably already doing a lot of what is broadly considering marketing in your day to day practice



DEMOGRAPHICS OF PATIENT BASE

UNDERSTANDING NEEDS AND MOTIVES

Understanding your patient demographic is one of the fundamentals of running a successful practice. If you don't understand who your patients are, how can you ever aim to meet their needs?

If your patient demographic is predominantly older patients, the latest edgy designer brands are less likely to be attractive to them. Similarly, if your patient demographic is predominantly under the age of 40 the latest multifocal lens technology is unlikely to resonate with them, as much as a good eyewear collection.

MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY

The CIM recommends using the 'seven Ps' to help structure and develop your marketing strategy. These are:

The Seven Ps
PRODUCT
PRICE
PLACE
PROMOTION
PEOPLE
PROCESS
PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

PRODUCT

What is it you are offering your patients or customers? At this point it would be a good idea to consider your brand.

Branding

Branding is arguably the DNA of your business, it is how you identify your business but more importantly it is how your patients recognise, experience and think of your business. Therefore, your brand should reflect what your business stands for and what it means to you. It should help you differentiate from your competitors and convey the strengths and aims of your business. There are many different types of brand, some of which are applicable to the optical market and others which are not. Which type of brand is right for your business is down to you, but questions to consider may be:

- Are you aiming to offer cheaper products than everyone else and undercut their prices? If so, you may be a budget brand.

- Are you going to provide high quality, high cost products? Then you may be a luxury brand.
- Are you aiming to provide a high quality, personal service by adding value to the process of examining patients and providing advice and guidance to your patients? If so, you may be a service brand.

Whichever brand you choose, you should remember that building a brand takes time and changing the perception of a brand is very difficult. If you establish your practice as a budget brand, it will be very difficult to convert it to a luxury brand later down the line. In essence, you would be starting again, and risk losing the patient base that you have built that is attached to your current brand. This also applies if you are buying an existing practice. If you buy a practice that has a reputation as a budget brand and you want to convert it to a luxury brand, you may risk losing the patients for which you paid the previous owner a significant amount of money.

PRICE

Your products and services are only worth what someone is willing to pay. An element of the price will be determined by your costs, such as the cost of the materials to make a pair of spectacles. The price will also have to cover the cost of your overheads such as rent, rates, utility bills and staff costs; on top of this you need to factor in your profit.

The level of profit will in part be determined by local competition and the type of business you decide to run. This should be considered when marketing your products. Consider the different approach taken by a discount retailer compared to a high-end boutique and then reflect this in your marketing and pricing.

PLACE

Where will patients or customers experience and view your products and services?

Predominantly this will be in your practice via the in-practice and window displays. It will also include your website, social media pages and search engines. On occasion, there may also be opportunities to display your products and services at events such as local fêtes, or via talks to schools or interested groups.

Website

Websites have come a long way from the early days of the internet. A good website should provide the information that your patients will need or want and should be easy to navigate. They don't have to cost a fortune but you should consider the functionality that you need before you build it.

Do you want a simple site that only provides information? Do you want patients to be able to contact you via your website? Do you want to enable appointment booking or to sell products via your website? There isn't a correct answer to any of these questions and some of the options will be determined by your budget.

One thing you should ensure is that your website works on mobile devices such as phones and tablets. Most patients will now have access to one or both of these devices and for many they have replaced the traditional computer for nearly all tasks.

Your website should have a privacy policy explaining to site visitors how you use their data.

It is also important that whoever builds your website understands how search engines work. Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of making sure your website is visible and can be found. In turn, this helps your website to appear higher up the non-paid search results. One form of SEO is key words for Google rankings. As the largest search engine in the marketplace, this is an area to ensure that your website is optimized for.

PROMOTION

How and when will you promote your business? This includes public relations, advertising, social media, word of mouth, and patient communications.

Public Relations (PR)

According to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, PR is about reputation. Effective PR can help you manage your reputation or profile by communicating and building good relationships with all the stakeholders of your organisation. It is planned and sustained activity to establish your profile, feeding into your wider marketing strategy. For optical practices this can be about engaging with local newspapers to cover promotions for eye health campaigns, charity events and business milestones. It can also be supporting local events such as fêtes and school fundraising or producing public facing information for your patients. Along with local newspapers, you may also consider approaching other types of media including local radio stations, online publications or writing a blog or news story for your practice website.

You can use PR to:

- Make patients and customers aware of your business.
- Help to build your brand.
- Improve your reputation and patient trust.
- Support other marketing activity.

PR activity can be wide ranging, from writing press releases and evaluating your media coverage, to the production of materials or special events. Each practice will need to decide the level and types of activity that are required and appropriate for them.

Advertising

Marketing and advertising have many things in common, but they are not the same. Marketing involves research, design, data gathering and the creation of a strategy. It is the process that helps to define how a product or service will match up with the intended audience. Put another way, it is the process of preparing the product for the marketplace. A marketing campaign aims to let people know who the product is for, how it can be used, and information relating to the product. It is often said that marketing helps to define your brand, and the colours, logo and general design of the image of your product or service are all part of marketing.

Advertising is the actual process of letting people know that a product or service exists. Advertising campaigns often use a variety of media and should be targeted to the audience. So, while these two items are intrinsically linked, it is important to remember that they are different, especially if you are recruiting someone to do some work on either of them for you. In simple terms: marketing convinces potential patients that you can offer the right products or service for them; advertising is the mechanism that you use to communicate this message to them. This may include radio advertising, local newspapers and online.

Paid social media is sponsored content or advertising that is delivered via sites such as Facebook or Twitter. The aim is to reach people that wouldn't normally see your social media posts as they don't follow you. It enables you to target specific groups of people who have expressed an interest in products or services similar to those you can provide or in the local area. As these adverts can be aimed at people who don't normally follow your social media, it can help to increase the reach of your business. Many paid social media adverts contain a clickable call to action: this enables you to direct potential customers to the exact product or service that they are interested in. Paid social media has seen a large growth over the last few years with a significantly increased spend since 2014, and can be a significantly cheaper and better value option than other forms of traditional advertising such as print or direct mail.

Social media

Social media is, surprisingly, still described by some as the next big thing. This couldn't be more wrong. Social media isn't something that is on the way - it is something that is already here. Simply setting up Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts is not enough unless you have a plan of what content you are going to deliver via these channels.

This means designing a social media strategy and it should be considered along with your general marketing strategy. You may want to consider the following areas:

What are your goals for social media?

The short answer to this question is that you should be aiming to drive traffic to your website and either directly or indirectly to your business. How you measure the success of this strategy may be via a number of methods. For example, are you aiming to measure the number of likes via Facebook, the number of retweets via Twitter or the number of likes and comments on Instagram? How will you achieve this? The best plan is by sharing regular and consistent content that aligns with the image that you wish to portray of your practice.

Review existing social media

If you have bought a practice it may already have a social media presence. If that is the case, the first action is to work out what accounts you have, how they showcase your practice and who has access or control of them. At this point, you should also ensure that there aren't any spoof or fraudulent accounts that are designed to appear as if they represent your business. Although this is relatively unlikely, it is worth investigating. Once you know what social media accounts you have, you should review whether or not they are going to reach your target audience.

Let's look at two social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram, using data provided by Hootsuite, the social media management platform. According to Hootsuite, in 2016, Facebook had 1.65 billion monthly users. In comparison, Instagram has a community of 500 million users. Facebook users were divided by age as follows: approximately 82% of online 18-29 year olds use Facebook, 79% of 30-49 year olds and 56% of the 65+ age group. In comparison, approximately 55% of online 18-29 year olds use Instagram, 28% of 30-49 years old, 11% of 50 to 64 year olds and only 4% of the 65+ group.

Therefore, Facebook has many more users and, despite what some people may suggest, is still growing at an astonishing rate. The demographic data demonstrates that of those that use the varying platforms, Instagram's audience has a younger profile. Similar data exists for Twitter and LinkedIn.

Content for social media

You need good content to both grow your account and keep people interested. Therefore, it is important that you have a plan of what you are going to post and when. You should plan out your social media campaigns in the same way you plan your marketing campaigns. That plan might mean special or seasonal offers along with linking in to general media activity. Your social media activity should reflect the message you are currently sending to patients via direct mail and other advertising mediums.

You can see what the significant dates are in the world of optics and plan content to tie into the relevant events. Things to consider are National Eye Health Week, World Glaucoma Week, World Sight Day and back to school campaigns. A more exhaustive list of all the possible awareness days and campaigns can be found at www.awarenessdays.com

Applications such as Hootsuite and Buffer allow for scheduled posts, so you can set up your campaigns and almost forget about them. However, you need to keep an eye on current affairs to ensure your scheduled campaign is still relevant and hasn't been undermined by world events. Many large companies have been caught out by failing to reschedule a planned social media message and appearing insensitive by sharing their latest special offer in the midst of a big news story.

When using social media, it is also important to not just push overt promotions for products. While this should form part of what you share, you need to also share interesting or amusing content to stop people becoming bored, and to encourage them to share your posts with their friends and family.



PEOPLE

Do you have the right people in the right roles? Excellent after care support and customer service can add real value and are likely to lead to brand loyalty and word of mouth recommendations. More information on staff training can be found in Chapter 6 (page 28).

Word of mouth

Word of mouth referrals from existing patients can be the one of the most persuasive and cost effective ways of attracting new patients, so it's worth considering incentives or special offers to encourage word of mouth referrals.

PROCESS

Are your systems designed to benefit the patient as much as possible? Can you monitor and measure your marketing so you know what works and what doesn't? Chapter 9 (page 42) contains more information on the type and frequency of information that you may want to consider collecting.



PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

This can include a clean and well-lit practice, word of mouth recommendations, and written testimonials in your marketing materials and online reviews. Practice image is discussed in Chapter 7 (page 32).

General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)

The 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) represented a significant change to data protection rules. This legislation toughens up both the rules around data processing and the penalties that can be imposed if those rules are broken. Two common queries that have been raised so far are: does GDPR stop me sending reminders to my patients, and how does it affect my ability to send marketing to patients?

Reminders do not pose a problem as they are necessary to perform the functions of an optometrist, and the process of sending reminders is covered by one of the articles of GDPR.

Marketing is slightly different under GDPR and therefore the best practice approach is to obtain consent before sending marketing material to patients. For existing patients, the marketing of optical appliances should not pose a problem as there is a legitimate interest for both parties in doing so. However, consent is likely to be needed if you want to market to new customers or for other services such as audiology.

You can find further information on our website.

MARKETING AND PR BUDGET HOW MUCH SHOULD YOU SPEND?

One of the first questions anyone asks is “how much should I spend on marketing and advertising?” The generally accepted amount is approximately 10% of gross turnover, but this will vary on a business by business basis and depending on what you are trying to achieve. If you have started a business from scratch and you have no patient base at all, you may need to spend a significantly higher amount than 10% of your projected turnover in the first couple of years. If you are buying an existing business, you may be able to spend a little less. However, one question to ask yourself is: if you don't tell patients about the new exciting technology or latest designer frame range that you have invested in, how will they know?

Having a large amount of money tied up in the latest all-singing, all-dancing OCT and not having anyone to use the service could prove far more expensive than spending money on marketing and advertising.



PHOTO: Stepper



Chapter 9

Setting business goals and objectives

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs). WHAT SHOULD YOU MONITOR AND HOW OFTEN?

KPIs are a way to measure how well your business is performing. Some are much maligned and have negative connotations in the profession, the most obvious being the dreaded conversion rate. This is a measure of how many patients who have had sight tests go on to purchase spectacles. Most opticians have at some point heard this term and many associate it with pressure to sell products to patients. Many also consider it unprofessional.

Unfortunately, it is arguably one of the most important measures of how an optical business is performing. There are very few practices in the UK that can balance the books on sight test fees alone, this is because most practices do not charge a fee that is sufficient to cover the operating costs. There are several reasons for this:

- **The NHS sight test fee.** Many practices set their private fee to be similar to the NHS sight fee in the mistaken belief that is a fair value
- **Local competition.** If all the practices locally provide free or low priced sight tests, it is easy to feel that you must adopt a similar approach in order to compete. This is something you should consider when looking at your business plan. Unfortunately, this may be a reality of the local market
- **Patient perception.** Some patients still believe that sight tests are, or should be, universally funded by the NHS. Further, they think that the fee paid by the NHS is sufficient to run the practice
- **Not understanding the true costs of the business.** If you want to run a highly clinical business with all the associated equipment and time costs, you need to set your fees to reflect this. You can only do this if you truly understand the cost of running your business. Not just your salary, but the salary of your staff, insurance, utility bills etc

If you are starting a business from scratch, there is potential to set your fee levels to try and alleviate this issue. However, for many practices this means a significant change to patient perception. Although most practices would like to charge £100 per sight test and no longer need to consider spectacle sales, this is only possible if you have a client base who can support this model. This is a business decision for each practice to take.

The main advantage of being your own boss is that the level of conversion rate that is desired can be set much lower. It may be that to make your business viable, based upon your business model, you only need one in three patients to purchase products. However, if you do not monitor it at all, you risk your business failing and then you cannot help your pa-

tients. The example KPIs given below are not exhaustive, but they do provide information on many of the key elements of the business that you should have an idea of if you wish to monitor how the business is performing.

Potential KPIs

- **Number of sight tests per day/week/month.**
How busy are you?
- **Appointment types.**
Sight tests/MECS/contact lenses. Adults/children.
- **Appointment types.**
Private/NHS
- **Number of new patients per day/week/month.**
Are you growing?
- **Average dispensing value.**
How much do people spend?
- **Proportion of patients who purchase products following an examination.**
How many people spend money?
- **Sales per staff member, spectacles, add on and contact lenses.**
- **Weekly/monthly/yearly sales.**
- **Top-selling products.**
- **Stock levels.**
- **Direct debits.**
Value, failed collections.

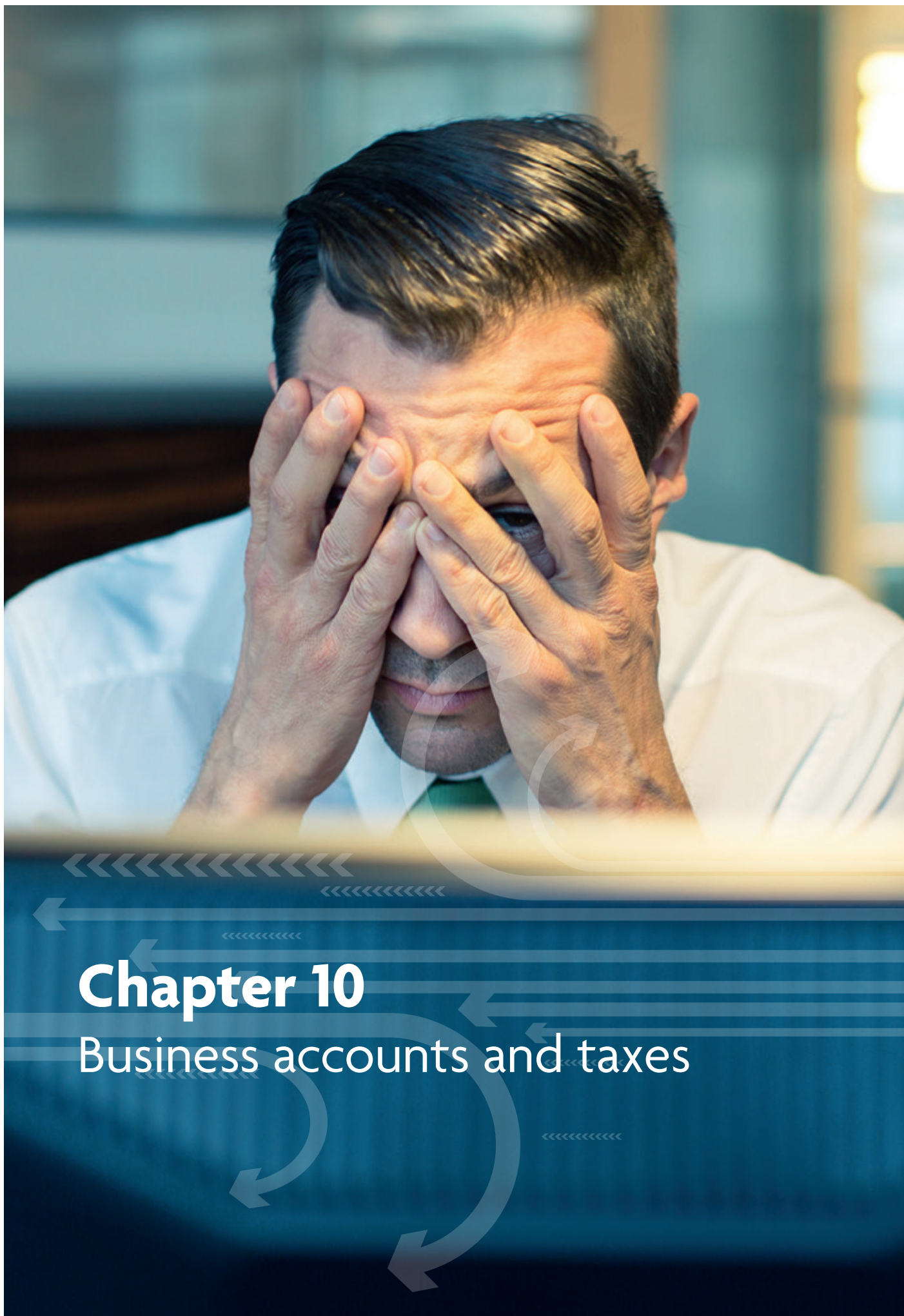
How to measure and record KPI data

Once you have identified what data you wish to monitor, you should also consider how you are going to record this data. At the most basic level, manual recording of the data and manual entry into a spreadsheet will enable you to monitor your performance. The problem with manual recording is that it is time consuming and labour intensive. You could get one of your staff members to perform this task for you, but you may not have the staffing levels to easily do this, and you should consider that some of the information you are measuring is sensitive and contains valuable information about your business that you may not want in the hands of junior staff members.

Another option is to make use of one of the various practice management systems that are commonly used throughout optical practices up and down the country. These systems can record data on business performance as well as providing record keeping and patient recall. There are several systems available that provide this function.

Some of the common ones are:

Optix www.optix.co.uk
Occuco www.ocuco.com/uk
Optinet www.optinetuk.com
Optisoft www.optisoft.co.uk
Opticbase www.opticbase.co.uk
XeyesX www.xeyex.co.uk



Chapter 10

Business accounts and taxes

CASH FLOW

Cash flow is the money that moves in and out of your business in a month. Cash into the business will be from patients or customers who are buying your products and services. Cash out of the business will be all of the business expenses such as rent, rates, wages, loan repayments, taxes, and suppliers.

Cash flow is the balance of these two flows. If the money coming in is greater than the money out, you will be in a positive cash flow position; if it is the opposite, you will be in a negative cash flow position.

For new businesses, cash flow can be extremely difficult, with large amounts of money going out in a short period of time and no sales to put money into the bank account. Depending on the level of money in your business account, negative cash flow can quickly leave you overdrawn. Therefore, most new businesses need to have access to easy credit in the form of an overdraft to cover short term cash flow issues.

Initially, it is helpful to keep a very close check on cash flow for a new business; this may be on a daily or weekly basis. As the business becomes more established, this may move to a monthly analysis of cash flow. This close monitoring can help to plan purchasing cycles so as to avoid committing large sums of money to a new project in a period of time when cash flow is poor or a large bill such as a rent payment is due.

It is a good idea to try to forecast your cash flow requirements for the future months so that you can monitor your actual spend against the forecast. It will also help you to work with your bank on the potential credit limit required.

VALUE ADDED TAX (VAT)

VAT for optical practices is more complex than for many businesses. This is because some of the areas of the business are exempt from charging VAT, and others are either not exempt or are only partially exempt: this is referred to as mixed supply. Professional services such as sight testing are exempt from VAT; the sale of spectacles frames and lenses is a taxable supply, and spectacle sales with a dispensing aspect are partially exempt. This is because it is accepted that the dispensing of spectacles also contains a professional aspect.

If you think your business includes the mixed supply, i.e. sales with a dispensing aspect, you will need to decide the methodology to be used to support the amount of VAT you will charge to your patient/customer in these circumstances.

It is advisable to take specialist advice to ensure that the calculations used have been performed correctly and that you are fully compliant with the various VAT rules and regulations.

To calculate what percentage of your mixed supply sales are liable for VAT you need to consider the following points:

- How much VAT you pay on supplies.
- The value associated with your dispensing services.

There are several methods of calculating the amount of VAT you are required to charge your patients/customers. However, the two ways HMRC have confirmed that they will accept are as follows:

Separately disclosed charging (SDC)

In this method, practices charge separately for the supply of goods (i.e. frames and lenses) and services (dispensing measurements and advice). For this method to be valid and approved by HMRC, the patient must be aware that they are paying for two separate supplies and that they understand the price they are paying for the goods and the price they are paying for the professional service aspect. This information is normally conveyed to the patient via the invoice or till receipt. Modern electronic till systems or electronic point of sale (EPOS) have made this process far simpler.

Full cost apportionment

In this method, the link between the cost of making the supply of goods and the cost of providing the professional services aspect is used to work out the respective portion of the selling price to which VAT must be applied. It works on the assumption that the ratio of the cost of providing the goods and the services is the same as the ratio between supplying these to the patient. In essence, the profit made on sales is split between the goods and the professional service aspects in line with the established ratio of the costs to the business. If you wish to use a different basis of establishing the ratio, you would need to provide evidence to HMRC to support this.

This method requires a calculation of the average cost of frames and lenses plus the cost of any in house glazing. A calculation must also be made of the costs of the staff in the provision of the dispensing of spectacles, i.e. the cost of the professional service.

The apportionment calculation must be clearly documented, and it is advisable that you revisit the calculation every three years to ensure that it is still being applied appropriately.

Clearly this can be a complex area and it is advisable to seek specialist advice to avoid any unwelcome surprises from HMRC.

PARTIAL EXEMPTION

Any VAT registered business that has supplies which are a mixture of taxable and exempt areas operates within the rules of partial exemption. VAT cannot be charged on an exempt supply and likewise input VAT cannot be recovered on costs directly incurred in relation to exempt supply.

THE DE MINIMIS LIMIT

De minimis is a Latin expression meaning “about minimal things”. In this context it can be taken to mean when the amount of VAT paid on purchases relating to exempt supplies is only a relatively small amount, and it can still be reclaimed. When the input VAT from exempt supplies is below the de minimis limit, all input VAT for that quarter can be recovered. This can result in the need to perform a full, partial exemption calculation in every accounting period in order to determine if the level of input tax is within the de minimis limit, and can be recovered in full. Thankfully HMRC have provided two simplified tests and an annual test to make this process simpler.

To be able to reclaim VAT in this manner you need to be able to satisfy one of two tests and an annual test:

TEST ONE

The total input tax incurred is less than £625 per month on average and the value of exempt supplies is not more than 50% of the values of all supplies. This test means that there is no need to perform any direct attribution of input tax as it uses the total input tax incurred by the business: this can be easily calculated. This method is only available to smaller businesses which incur costs liable to VAT with an annual value net value of more than £42,850.

If the business passes test one, there is no need to carry out an annual adjustment at the end of the year.

TEST TWO

The total input tax incurred less input tax directly attributable to taxable supplies is less than £625 per month on average and the value of exempt supplies is not more than 50% of the value of all supplies. This test requires some direct attribution, but for optical practices this should be relatively straightforward as the main input tax directly attributable to taxable supplies is goods for resale, i.e. frames, lenses, contact lenses and accessories. This test requires an annual adjustment to ensure the annual limit of £7500 has not been exceeded. As the limit is only £7500, this test will not be applicable to larger businesses as it is the VAT bearing overhead costs, rather than the total costs, that must have a net value of less than £42,850.



ANNUAL TEST

This test allows businesses to carry out only one partial exemption calculation each year rather than at each VAT return. This allows a business that was within the de minimis limit in the previous partial exemption year to treat itself as within the de minimis limit in its current partial exemption year without carrying out any quarterly calculations. The partial exemption calculation must still be completed at the year-end so that input tax relating to exempt supplies remains within the de minimis limit for the year. This calculation can either be one of the simplified tests or a full partial exemption calculation. If these tests show that input tax relating to exempt supplies is above the de minimis limit at the year-end, the business will have to repay any input tax relating to exempt supplies that it provisionally recovered during the year.

In order to make use of the annual test, the business must meet the following criteria:

- Be below the de minimis limit for the previous year.
- Apply the annual test consistently throughout any given partial exemption year.
- Have reasonable grounds to not expect input tax to be over £1 million in the current partial exemption year.

TAX

There are a number of taxes that affect optical practices. Some of these are only applicable to certain business entities. It is important to be aware of your liabilities as not paying your tax on time can result in a significant fine from HMRC.

Corporation tax: Corporation tax is paid by limited companies and is calculated on the taxable profit of the business. This is normally the profit that the business has made after all applicable deductions such as salaries, expenses, and any allowances. Corporation tax is self-assessed, i.e. the amount payable is calculated by the business or more likely by the accountant for the business. Once this has been done the tax return is filed with HMRC. Corporation tax is due for payment nine months after the end of the financial year. The company tax return must be filed within 12 months of the financial year end.

VAT: Businesses that sell products and services normally need to charge VAT. This tax is applicable to most products and services sold or provided in the UK. There are some exemptions and optical practices are partially exempt (see VAT section, page 45).

The standard rate of VAT is currently set at 20% of the price that the customer pays for the goods or services. Businesses can register for VAT voluntarily at any point, but they must do so once their non-exempt turnover exceeds £85,000. VAT is charged as a separate amount on an invoice and is paid to

HMRC on a quarterly basis. Businesses that are VAT registered can normally reclaim VAT that they pay on products and services relating to taxable supplies.

National Insurance: Businesses are required to pay National Insurance Contributions (NIC) on staff wages. These are paid to HMRC when the business pays staff their wages. There are a several classes of NIC.

If you are a director of a limited company, you are treated as an employee with regards to National Insurance and have to pay Class 1 contributions on your wages and the company also has to pay Class 1 employer contributions. Most employees are classed as category A for NIC, however you should be aware that there are other categories that may be applicable. Examples of employees in the other categories would include apprentices and staff who are over the state retirement age. If the employee is currently in category A they currently pay 12% on earnings between £157 and £866 per week (2017/2018) plus 2% on earnings over this amount. Employers' contributions are 13.8% on all earnings over £157.

If you are sole trader or in a partnership you need to pay Class 2 and Class 4 NICs. Class 2 contributions are currently £2.85 per week (2017/2018) and must be paid by anyone earning over £6025 (2017/2018) per year from self-employment. Class 4 NIC are paid on any profits you make as a sole trader or in a partnership. These are calculated at 9% of all earnings between £8164 and £45,000 and 2% on any earnings over £45,000.

Income tax: Sole traders pay income tax based on the profits they make from the business: this process starts once you earn more than £11,500 (2017/2018). If you are a director of a limited company, your salary will be taxed via Pay As You Earn (PAYE) in the same way as an employee. However, you must still complete and submit a tax self-assessment at the end of the year. This will allow for any tax that is payable due to dividends that you have taken to also be paid.

Dividend tax: Dividends paid from a limited company are also subject to tax. Previously many company directors would pay themselves a small salary and draw more of the money as dividends. Often this was more tax efficient, however, the tax rules around dividends changed in 2016/2017. The tax rates for dividends are 7.5% for any earnings within the basic tax rate band, 32.5% for higher rate tax payers and 38.1% for additional rate payers. These changes were introduced to counteract the advantage that limited company owners had previously enjoyed. There is a £5000 tax free dividend allowance, but this is scheduled to decrease to £2000 in coming years.

BUSINESS RATES

England and Wales

Business rates are a tax that is charged in proportion to the value of a property which, depending upon the size and location of your business, you may need to pay. The rateable value of the property is usually linked to the rent that is paid for the property: as a general rule of thumb, the rates payable are usually around half of the rent.

This process underwent an overhaul in 2017. All business premises for England and Wales were revalued with changes coming into effect in April 2017. Some properties will have seen an increase in business rates payable while others will have seen a fall.

Small business rate relief

- Businesses with rateable values of £12,000 and below will receive 100% relief under the new rules.
- Businesses with rateable values of between £12,000 and £15,000 will receive a tapered business rates relief.

Scotland

The system for small business rate relief is similar in Scotland, except the thresholds are slightly different.

- Businesses with a rateable value of £15,000 and below receive 100% rate relief.
- Businesses with a rateable value between £15,000 and £18,000 receive 25% rate relief.
- For businesses that do not receive a discounted rate the rateable value is multiplied by the “poundage”. The poundage rate is set by the Scottish Government: for 2017–2018 this is 46.6 pence.

Northern Ireland

Small business rate relief in Northern Ireland is based upon the Net Annual Value (NAV) of the business property. This gives three bands:

- Businesses with a NAV of £2000 and below receive 50% rate relief.
- Businesses with a NAV of more than £2000 but not more than £5000 will receive 25% rate relief.
- Businesses with a NAV of more than £5000 but not more than £15,000 will receive a 20% rate relief.



WHAT IS BOOKKEEPING?

Bookkeeping is simply keeping a record of all your transactions, receipts and expenses. Keeping accounting records is a requirement of Companies House when running a limited company and it is necessary for a number of purposes, from producing accounts, to completing your VAT return, or paying your corporation tax. Perhaps the most important to you is that it lets you keep track of that all-important cash flow. There are a number of bookkeeping applications available such as Sage and Quickbooks. Using software like this can make it far easier to keep records. If you choose to go with a manual or a spreadsheet-based solution, then you should keep a log of two main areas of the business:

- **Income.** You should keep a record of all sales and any unpaid sales invoices. You should keep a note of VAT charged, which will be used to complete your VAT return.
- **Expenses.** You should keep a record of all purchases and expenses for the business, from rent, rates, wages, equipment and stock, to smaller items such as postage, stationary and telephone and broadband bills. A record of the VAT paid on all items should also be kept; again this will be needed to complete your VAT return.

You should also record any bank deposits or withdrawals. At the end of each month you should add up each of the areas, i.e. income and expenses. Your bank balance at the end of the month should be equal to your starting balance plus your income minus your expenses and any unpaid invoices or cheques that haven't yet been cashed.

Payroll

Payroll is the process of ensuring that you pay your staff (including yourself if you are running a limited company) regularly weekly, fortnightly, or monthly as agreed, and that you also make the correct deductions for income tax (PAYE) and NIC to pay to HMRC. As an employer, it is your responsibility to deduct tax and NIC from your employees' pay and ensure this is paid to HMRC. You are also responsible for ensuring that any employers' Class 1 NIC is paid. Employees must be provided with a pay slip that clearly shows these deductions. It is normally necessary to register with HMRC as an employer in order to be able to make these deductions.

It is possible to manually calculate the value of deductions that you should make using information that can be obtained from HMRC. However, it is easier to either make use of specific payroll software, or if you employ an accountant or a bookkeeper they will sometimes offer this service.



Taxes

If you are sole trader or in a partnership you will need to pay your income tax via self-assessment. This must be completed after the end of the tax year, usually 5 April. The deadline for submission of the self-assessment along with the payment of any tax due is 31 January.

Being paid

As we have already discussed, cash flow is important to all businesses but even more so to small businesses, especially in the early years. One way to significantly improve cash flow and avoid a growing debtors list, is to take full payment from the patient at the time of order. This simple step improves cash flow and also decreases the risk of patients not collecting their spectacles.

Another option, especially for contact lenses, but also applicable to spectacle sales, is to consider Direct Debit payments. There are a number of companies that provide Direct Debit solutions for optical practices. As opposed to full payment when ordering, Direct Debit payments can have a negative impact upon cash flow. However, for items that are supplied on a regular basis such as contact lenses, this is not necessarily the case. Direct Debits can also help to increase the value of sales, but they need careful consideration for new practices without substantial backing.

Another option is to offer 0% finance to your patients.

This can be arranged via a specialist finance company. These companies charge the practice a fee per episode of finance, but they can bring benefits for the practice. It can make it easier to sell patients better products as the cost is spread out, but cash flow is not normally affected for the practice as the finance company pays the full amount to the practice once the finance has been agreed.

Payments

In the same way that you need to get paid, so do your suppliers. Most will offer terms for payment of around 30 days. This can ease cash flow issues, but you should ensure that you make payments promptly — if you don't you risk attracting a negative rating which may mean that future orders need to be paid for in advance.





Chapter 11

OTHER OPTIONS:

Joint venture partnership or franchise

Of course there are alternatives to owning a practice; rather than setting up an independent practice, you could opt for a franchise or joint venture partnership (JVP).

This section sets out some of franchise options and looks at the pros and cons vs. independent practice.



JVP VS FRANCHISE

What is the difference between a JVP and a traditional franchise arrangement? In a franchise arrangement, you sign a franchising agreement with a company and agree to sell their products and services. The franchise agreement normally has a limited time period, similar to a lease or license period, and at expiry it can either be renewed or sold back to the franchise partner. In a franchise arrangement the business is owned and operated by the franchisee, however the franchisor retains control over how the products are marketed and sold as well as monitoring quality standards within the business. This is necessary to protect the image of the parent brand. There are ongoing support fees and the initial set up costs are normally paid by the franchisee.

A JVP is an agreement between two or more business partners to work towards a common business strategy. This may be the business owners and the joint venture company, e.g. Specsavers or Vision Express. Both partners have a stake in the business and the term is open ended. Both partners own shares in the business which can be sold at a later date. Costs are usually lower in the JVP model as the costs are shared, but you also have a little less control.

When entering into a JVP you will need to pay a management fee for support services, and practices also need to budget for advertising. There are also other costs payable that are contained in the JVP agreement. The cost of staff, partner salaries, electricity, rent, rates and stock costs are met by the practice.

Profits that are not required to be retained for business needs are available for distribution to the shareholders.

Specsavers

The most well-known JVP in UK optics is Specsavers. With over 700 practices and still growing, they are the biggest UK optical joint venture.

Vision Express

Vision Express also offer a JVP program. Details are available on application.

Optical Express

Another company with a JVP program, Optical Express announced a push to recruit JVP partners in the summer of 2017. Again details are available on application.

Boots Opticians

Boots offer a traditional franchise arrangement, where the franchisee owns 100 per cent of the business and retains all profits. The agreement is for 20 years with a right to renew every five years. At the 20th anniversary Boots Opticians can either buy back the business from you at the current market rate (based on an independent valuation), or agree to a new 20-year franchise agreement. The franchisee owns all the equity and can sell this at any time subject to some conditions. Boots charge a monthly service fee percentage. Funding to buy the franchise has to be arranged by the franchisee, but Boots state there are a number of lenders who fully understand their franchise model and are keen to lend money. Boots also expect a significant personal investment on top of any loans.

Advantages of independent and franchise or JVP

Independent	Franchise or JVP
Complete control	Brand recognition
Freedom	Large degree of support
Potential lower start-up costs	Purchasing power
Stand out from the crowd	Advertising/marketing
More agile/flexible	Lower financial risk



NOTES:







abdo



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