



Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and optometry

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Optometry Victoria South Australia (OV/SA) surveyed early career members in 2019 with the aim of better understanding the experiences of early career optometrists in the workplace. As the member association for optometrists practicing in Victoria and South Australia, and with membership rates of around 88 per cent of registered practicing optometrists, OV/SA is uniquely placed to identify the issues impacting members across a diverse range of practice types and locations.

The research, which was developed and led by OV/SA's Early Career Optometrists (ECO) committee, highlighted some of the struggles early career members experienced with the profession¹. In particular, the survey results revealed KPIs as a recurrent theme that potentially influenced the job satisfaction of some early career optometrists.

What are KPIs?

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), also known as key success indicators, are measures which demonstrate how effectively individuals or an organisation are achieving key strategic goals and business objectives. KPIs can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively.

All industries and sectors have KPIs. In the restaurant industry common KPIs include average revenue per table or guest and in education this includes average daily attendance or number of degrees awarded. In hospitals, regularly measured KPIs include average length of stay and patient care hours.

KPIs in optometry

The optometry profession is unique in the healthcare sector in that optometry practices often generate revenue by offering both eye health services and eye health products such as spectacles and contact lenses. Commonly measured KPIs in optometry include teamwork and co-operation with staff, the conversion rate of patients seen compared to how many patients buy glasses, the percentage of patients that pay for eye health technology and the actual sales price (ASP) of Medicare billings per patient.

In this context, it should be acknowledged that there can sometimes be challenges with maintaining autonomy as a healthcare provider, while also providing a financially viable service. While financial considerations are important, they should also not influence your integrity and regulatory compliance as a health-care provider. It is your responsibility as the clinician to make clinical decisions that are in the best interest of the patient. This sentiment is reflected in the Optometry Board Code of Conduct which states that "optometrists have a duty to make the care of patients their first concern", as well as being "being transparent in financial and commercial matters relating to an optometrist's work"².

KPIs and the employer

Many practices use KPIs as a means to ensure that employees are meeting the broader goals of the practice or the business. In practices with smaller teams, employers may have a good grasp on the practicing behaviour of their employee optometrists. They may be able to have a more direct and personal understanding of whether employees are practising in line with the strategic direction and goals of the business. When practices and businesses have hundreds of employed optometrists, there are inherently more difficulties in ensuring that patient outcomes are consistent. Implementing tools like KPIs to demonstrate efficiencies and achievements when personalised interaction is difficult, offers opportunity for discussions to be had between employers and employees. It also provides opportunity for performance differentiation among employees across the organisation.

While KPIs can serve an important role, how they are communicated can be a strong reflection of the organisation's workplace culture. An example of this is ranking optometrists on a leaderboard based on quantitative KPIs. From one perspective this can be seen as a celebration of high performance, but it can also be seen as prioritising corporate goals over patient outcomes which may in turn fuel undesirable employee attitudes and behaviours. In addition, perceived pressure from ranking may result in individuals becoming very creative in how they manipulate the information to their advantage.

In order to achieve particular KPIs, some employee optometrists may feel discouraged to extend their scope of practice, which can have unintended consequences on the business. This includes avoiding traditionally "non-converting" patients such as those requiring a complex contact lens fitting, visual fields examinations or dilated fundus examinations. Practitioner hesitations in making these consultations due to the perceived potentially negative impact on their KPIs, may result in poor management of these patient and overall reduced patient eye health outcomes. As a consequence, patients may seek out other optometrists or other health-care professionals. In these cases, not only are KPIs not serving their original functions, but they may also have a detrimental impact on the patient's perception of the business and the optometry profession as a whole.

Similarly, patients who present with a red eye are unlikely to require spectacles at point of examination. However, when you pick up disease, preserve visual function or alleviate the pain of the person with said red eye, you are possibly making a patient for life. This has the potential to make a significantly positive impact on the business and differentiate you from other practitioners.



KPIs and the employee

KPIs exist at all organisational levels of the corporate structure starting from chief executive officers and executive boards all the way down the chain. As a health professional it is important to balance KPIs that are business focused with your integrity as an optometrist and the patient care you provide.

As an employee, regular monitoring of your personal KPIs can provide insight into your impact on both the business and patient outcomes. KPIs assist in providing clarity to both employees and employers regarding role and responsibilities and help to focus attention on particular areas that may require support and improvement. They can support you as a resource in professional discussions like remuneration reviews and promotion opportunities. KPIs should be designed to be dynamic with the potential to evolve through consistent reviews and adjustment.

Engaging in regular conversations with employers regarding why KPIs are important and how they can be constantly evaluated and improved to be a better reflection of their circumstances and performance is important. This can be a useful strategy to ensure mutual understanding and agreement on the intent of KPIs and how they are utilised.

Talking about KPIs

From the beginning

Before employment begins, transparent communication around the strategic goals of the business is important. This can ensure that employees are aware of their role and accountabilities, and provide clarity on the organisational direction and values.

For employers, clear discussions regarding the purpose and use of KPIs through the recruitment process and once employment begins can be very valuable. Many graduate optometrists in particular may not be aware of healthcare business realities. Ensuring transparency of what the KPIs are, how KPIs may be weighted to determine an employee's overall individual performance, being realistic in what they are trying to achieve and, what the actual data represents is critical in ensuring that there is no confusion.

In instances where the practice has numerically measurable goals, it may be helpful if the employee optometrist does too. Understanding these quantifiable targets through dialogue with the employer is potentially beneficial because it illustrates to the employer that the employee is trying to better understand not just what they are being asked to do, but genuinely trying to understand how well they are being asked to do it. This can potentially demonstrate to the employer that the employee is trying to not only improve themselves but actively finding strategies to build on the success of the practice.

Having strong alignment between an optometrist's individual values and the practice's values provides the greatest opportunity for longer term success with the employment.

Ongoing conversations

There is also significant benefit in ensuring that opportunities to communicate feedback between employers and employees are available, and that they are planned and prioritised from an early stage. Tailoring these discussions to individual circumstances can also be valuable. When they are regularly scheduled, trust can be built and the meetings are less likely to be daunting and stressful for all involved. What is important is that these conversations should include both recognition of achievements and feedback in areas of opportunity.

Contextualising KPIs for specific circumstances and ensuring that they are reflecting an optometrist's behavior and patient outcomes, as well as being aligned with an organisation's objectives, is important to consider. For example, optometrists that frequently undertake difficult contact lens fittings will undoubtedly require more patient chair time and sell less glasses. The rate of "conversion" for these optometrists would therefore be expected to be less than other employees. In this circumstance, a possible KPI may measure how many of these complex fittings are being completed successfully.

Similarly, comparing the number of optical coherence tomography (OCT) or retinal images taken on diabetic patients, against peers in similar demographics can offer a lot of behavioral information on whether an optometrist is having all the conversations and offering patients the best care with all the options available. KPIs that are implemented to reflect the socioeconomic setting of the practice are more achievable and in turn may be better for staff morale. For this reason, conversations should provide ongoing opportunities for KPIs to be re-evaluated, recalibrated and adjusted to align with both organisation and personal goals.

Examples of non-financial KPIs:

- Provision of active glaucoma co-management
- Diagnosed binocular vision disorders (with Fusional Vergences, Near Point of Convergence and Accommodative/Convergence ratio recorded with reference to normative data)
- Diabetic reports sent to GP
- Return patient metrics
- Presentations at conferences or case reports at grand rounds
- Eye health presentations in the local community (for example at schools or aged care facilities)
- Completion of non-clinical professional upskilling courses that may benefit the business (for example social media, marketing, leadership, HR, public speaking, graphic design)

KPI disputes

When executed appropriately, KPIs have the potential to accurately provide objective information on individual and organisational progress towards an intended goal. There is occasionally a mismatch between the values of the optometrist and the values and goals of the practice. It is in the best interests of all parties to address this disconnect in a timely manner and initiate action towards ensuring a resolution. From an employer's point of view, employee dissatisfaction reduces engagement and productivity through increased absenteeism and turnover. As an employee, addressing conflict early ensures greater satisfaction at work and that patient care is not detrimentally impacted.

Just like KPI formulation is a collaborative process, commitment to achieving a KPI dispute resolution requires a respectful discussion with meaningful input from both parties. When either the employer or employee want to have discussions regarding any KPI conflict, it is likely to be most productive when the intentions of these conversations are clearly stated prior to the discussions. In the professional setting, this offers everyone a fair and reasonable opportunity to prepare for these conversations and prevents anyone getting defensive when caught off-guard. It is in everyone's best interests that an outcome is achieved with respect and without any personal attacks.

There will be occasions when a resolution cannot be achieved. Initially, it is worth being proactive in requesting follow up meetings to resolve the mismatch and making reasonable attempts to compromise. When further discussions are unable to yield desirable outcomes, it may be necessary to seek alternative options.

Unfortunately, you may not always get what you want. However, these experiences can empower you with a skillset that can help you to navigate through future career and professional life decisions.



Tips to getting the most out of your KPIs

- KPIs are an important measure of progress that exist in all industries and healthcare settings.
- Employers can strategically formulate KPIs that are both aligned with business goals and are conducive to achieving the best possible patient outcomes. When developing KPIs for employees, employers may consider a mix of health care focused KPIs and business focused KPIs to support and encourage optimal patient care and a health business focus.
- For employee optometrists, KPIs offer clarity on roles and responsibilities and identify both areas of strengths and areas of opportunity.
- When considering a new role as an employee it may be useful to ask about KPIs before signing an employment contract. This can provide clearer insights into the business goals of the practice. As a prospective employee, ask yourself whether the sentiments reflected in the KPIs reflect your own values as a practitioner. Is there room for compromise on any of these? How might the KPIs drive your focus as a practitioner?
- Communication is key. Collaboration between employers and employees can ensure that platforms for ongoing professional communication are open and accessible. In order to ensure that KPIs are effective as real-time navigation tools, consistent review can ensure that issues are highlighted early on. This offers opportunity for training, preventative actions, or amendment of KPIs if this is appropriate. For example, the shopping centre where the practice is located may be refurbished. This may reduce trade but should not affect personal KPIs.
- When KPI disputes arise, ensuring that discussions are conducive to maintaining a positive workplace environment is important. For example, when requesting a conversation regarding KPIs, it is professional to be clear from the beginning what the topic of discussion is and the approximate amount of time that you would like to have on this topic. Purposeful communication of your issues with the aim of seeking a solution, rather than allowing your KPIs to negatively influence your performance in the workplace, is the best way to grow professionally.

References

1. Optometry Victoria South Australia. Scope. October 2019: 9. Survey of OV/SA ECO Members Highlights Struggles with Job Satisfaction.
2. Optometry Board of Australia. Code of Conduct for optometrists.
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