

# CLOCKWORK

Time to Thrive in Your First Medical Assisting Job

By Brian Justice

**T**he first thing medical assisting students may learn when transitioning into careers is that while the hands-on skills they bring to that first job are invaluable, other skills can be acquired only through the daily activities of a busy, fast-paced clinic. In those situations, new medical assistants develop good habits, strong working relationships, and drive to not just succeed but also thrive.

## Help Wanted

How can you get off on the right foot in your first job? Within the first few weeks, find out what success looks like in your new role.<sup>1</sup>

“New medical assistants are highly motivated and ready to learn,” says Eleya Montroy, the manager of clinical care services and the apprenticeship program at Henry Ford Health in Detroit. “In school,

the environment is controlled, and any scenario can be set up to meet a competency, but they aren’t fully prepared for the realities of clinical practice and real-world patient interactions. That’s a steep learning curve!”

Ask your manager about both big-picture and day-to-day expectations, including priorities, meetings you are expected to attend, and the policies about communicating after hours.<sup>1</sup> Knowing these basics will help avoid confusion and build confidence from the start, knows Carmin Watson, a certified medical assistant coordinator at Henry Ford Health. “There’s no such thing as a dumb question,” she says. “They are just out of school and still learning. I want them to feel safe about speaking up when they don’t understand something and [to know] it’s okay to not know everything.”

Good relationships with coworkers are the significant part of a congenial and productive workplace. Initiating one-on-one

conversations over coffee, during breaks, or even quick chats between tasks, as well as socializing outside the office, are great strategies for learning about the workplace in a more relaxed and casual atmosphere. Make note of how you might make coworkers’ jobs easier, because your success includes contributing to your colleagues’ success too.<sup>1</sup>

## First Job Jitters or the Last Straw?

Whether a first job, a new position, or a career change, every workplace has its own culture, and fitting into it can be stressful. When the initial nervousness around a new job fades away, doubts can still linger, but are they simply “growing pains” or red flags, and how do you tell the difference?

## Appreciate the Experience

Even after every effort has been made, a job may simply not be a good fit. There is no shame in moving on, so take time for thoughtful reflection and focus on finding the right position. Also, remember that every work experience, whatever its nature, teaches you something valuable to remember and use throughout your career.

Still, workplace conflicts will invariably happen. “When it comes to coworkers, I’ve always taken the position that we are all adults, and we should be able to sit down and talk about our issues calmly,” advises Sara VanHorn, CMA (AAMA), who formerly worked at Manuli Internal Medicine in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. “They may be going through something personal that’s affecting them at work; so just ask, ‘Hey, are you okay?’ ”

Check in about your work performance, even as early as in the first few weeks, and whether the organization subsidizes off-site learning opportunities, seminars, or conferences. That will show seriousness about

## Finding Your Footing

New jobs are major life events, with routines, environments, and expectations very different from school. That can be uncomfortable and cause some self-doubt, especially in the first few weeks, but those feelings should pass as you learn the rhythms of the clinic, your coworkers’ personalities and talents, and the vibe of the place.

Give yourself time to adjust, get to know everyone, and give yourself credit for even the smallest early contributions. Allowing time to properly adjust will allow confidence to grow and flourish.<sup>4</sup>

growing within the job and the profession. Take uncomfortable input in stride and not personally. Feedback can help you refine skills and become part of the team.<sup>1</sup>

“Ask for feedback,” says Lauren Welles, vice president of primary and immediate care at Endeavor Health in Chicago. “Don’t just assume that managers are going to automatically give it, and whatever it is, accept it and respond to it. Ask a new work friend for help, or do some research or seek out education, but react to it.”

## Work in Progress

While you should establish your aptitude and attitude in the first few months, what you say and do through the rest of that first year is key too.

Doing solid work is expected, but stand out by going a step further. Ideas for making tasks and the practice more efficient prove that you not only understand the job but the organization as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

“Effective time management and organization are essential to success,” agrees Patricia Boutilier, MBA, MS, BS, EDS, CMA (AAMA). “Setting goals using the SMART [Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound] framework helps prioritize tasks and maintain focus, makes decision-making easier, and enhances productivity.”

It also shows your potential for promotion. Keeping track of the problems you have solved and compliments received will come in handy come review time or when applying for another opportunity. It may seem too soon, but update your résumé immediately and create an engaging LinkedIn profile.

No one does it alone, especially in health care, which depends on a staggeringly wide range of educational levels, skill sets, and experience. Become the go-to person for a specific task or skill. For example, when others learn that you are good at math or managing complex processes, or have mastered some aspect of the job that helps the whole team, your contribution becomes more valuable. Also, acknowledge people who help you, from mentors to managers and coworkers. More than just good manners, it shows appreciation and creates connections who will advocate for you when needed.

## Time for Evaluation

Six months should be enough time to acclimate,<sup>5</sup> but if serious uncertainties last beyond that, it may be something more. Maybe the role is not as described, the management style is not a fit, or the environment includes tensions beyond the norm in a professional health care setting. However, it took time and energy to prepare for this career and to find this job, so take the same care to determine your next steps.<sup>4</sup>

Identify the source of discomfort. What can be done to change it? Many issues (e.g., unclear expectations, awkward interactions, or erratic schedules) can be resolved. Managers truly want employees to succeed, so initiate a candid conversation about how to make changes.

Finally, experts recommend staying in your first job for at least a year.<sup>3</sup> That shows future employers that you are reliable and capable of committing to a role, even when it is challenging. Leaving too soon can raise questions. That kind of pattern can make hiring managers think twice, but giving yourself a year sets a strong foundation for the rest of your career because it signals professionalism, reliability, and the stability needed to see things through. ♦

## References

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