



DENTAL TECHNICIAN JOBS AND EMPLOYMENT: THE JOB OF A DENTAL TECHNICIAN

Dental technicians provide back-office support to dentists who need impressions of their patients' teeth. First the dentist takes a mold of the patient's teeth, and then, using the mold, the dental technician produces a wax replica of the teeth, constructs any needed crowns or false teeth, and then makes any adjustments that the dentist requests. Dental technicians work closely with dentists and orthodontists.

Our survey respondents wished they wouldn't be confused with dental hygienists, who clean teeth. "We don't scrape plaque or put our fingers in anybody's mouth!" wrote one. Dental technicians have no visibility in their profession and virtually no patient contact. They are called in to meet patients only in unusual situations that require a visual inspection of the patient's teeth. Many technicians are sole practitioners in their offices or work by contract with a number of dentists. This painstaking detail work is largely solitary. "If you're afraid of being alone, don't sign up," said one DT.

Successful DTs told us it's important to be able to make adjustments on the fly. They create facsimiles of people's teeth, and, while impressions can be perfect, often they are not, and the DT must work from X-rays and descriptions to adjust their molds to imitate the patient's mouth. "You can get through grinding and shaping three or four times and the dentist still isn't satisfied," wrote one. Another added that "it's not personal, but it can be very frustrating." DTs don't mind working hard on making their molds accurate and useful; after all, without a very close approximation, these casts are useless. A good eye and a good ear serve candidates well in this precise, exacting profession.

How to Become a Dental Technician

No formal college major is required to become a dental technician. Most candidates learn, on the job, how to shape, mold, and grind their materials, and how to analyze X-rays. Many train on the job for two to three years before becoming sole practitioners. About forty-five dental colleges in the country offer dental technician programs accredited by the American Dental Association. In their final years at those colleges, students choose one area of specialization, such as orthodontics or crowns and bridges, then take licensing exams (such as the one offered by the National Board of Certification), although these licensing exams are not always required.

Careers Related to Being a Dental Technician

Construction of medical devices requires attention to detail and knowledge of anatomy; people with these skills become prosthetics manufacturers, lens grinders for optometrists, and oral hygienists.

Career Prospects for Being a Dental Technician

There used to be only a handful of dental technicians who provided highly technical assistance for patients in oral crisis (e.g., massive tooth decay, full bridge replacements, or jaw deformity). With the rapid growth of orthodontics in the 1970s, work for dental technicians expanded and people began to enter the profession in significant numbers. Over the years many have had to return to school to keep up with new technology and new methods of construction, but the most pressing force behind change in the industry has been the use of new materials in making impressions and molds.

The future of dental technicians is dim in general, but there will be a demand for specialists. Because more standard procedures (such as brace making and tooth spacing) constitute the bulk of DT work, economies of scale have come into play. Larger firms can process these requests quickly and efficiently. Unusual conditions and oral crises require a specialist who can create solutions in situations where there are no "rules" and no historically proven way of getting the job done. For people who work in gerontological dentistry in particular, the future looks more promising.

Quality of Life

Two Years Out

Most of those who work in supervised environments have just completed their on-the-job training programs and work as assistant dental technicians, grinding molds to specifications, creating wax castings of teeth for crown construction, and shaping jawline impressions. Other relatively new professionals are now full dental technicians and continue to work in the place that hired them. Most work in offices of five people or fewer, so these early years are marked by close relationships and tight working conditions. Hours are long; satisfaction is average.

Five Years Out

Job mobility becomes significant; over one-third of dental technicians go into private practice at this point, either buying an existing shop or working as an independent contractor affiliated with a number of dentists or HMOs. The remainder move between dental offices, finding temporary matches between themselves and their employers. Satisfaction increases and so do hours.

Ten Years Out

Ten-year professionals have chosen areas of specialization such as ceramics, partial and complete dentures, orthodontic appliances, or crown and bridge replacements. Salaries increase, and many sole practitioners hire less experienced technicians to help them in their work. Satisfaction is at its highest as ten-year veterans are experienced technicians with a reliable client base and good business-recruiting skills. Those who lack any of these elements of a successful technician seek an associated career that satisfies them in the same way.

Professional Profile

# of people in profession:	48,000
% male:	85
% female:	15
average hours per week:	40
	\$20,000

Professionals Read

Dental Lab Entrepreneur

Books, Films and TV Shows Featuring the Profession

First Impressions

Practicing Dentistry

Major Employers

Employers include local dentists, orthodontists, and oral surgeons. Contact dental specialists in your region for employment opportunities.

You'll Have Contact With

Dentists

Oral Surgeons

Orthodontists

X-Ray Technicians

Major Associations

Dental Lab Technicians often join local health-care professional/skilled support staff unions. Contact these unions in your region for more information.