

FLORIDA'S OUTLOOK ON THE DENTAL LABORATORY PROFESSION

3rd Quarter 2025

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Unlocking Precision IN DIGITAL DENTISTRY

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SYMPOSIUM & EXPO
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focus

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The Greater Good

Rick Sonntag, RDT

FDLA President

*"Coming together is a beginning;
keeping together is progress;
working together is success."*

— Henry Ford

*It's the human
touch, the
conversations,
advice, and
feedback
that make
relationships
in this
profession
blossom and
prosper.*

Hello...my name is Rick Sonntag, Founder and President of 4Points Dental Designs. I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce myself as your 2025 President of the Florida Dental Laboratory Association. It's an honor to be leading an organization whose mission is dedicated to enhancing oral health care through education, advocacy, and collaboration.

This organization wouldn't be here today if not for the hard work and dedication of those who came before me, so I'd like to thank all those who have served the association and its membership in the past; the officers, the board members, volunteers, and past presidents. I'd also like to thank Partners in Association Management, whose hard work and common vision are vital to our success. Lastly, I'd like to extend a special thank you to all our sponsors and vendors; your advertising in Focus and support at the Symposium help immensely in making all of this happen.

Like most of you, I started at the bottom with an entry-level job. In my case, I was a metal tech in a high-production lab, waxing and finishing cast copings to prepare the cases for the ceramists. In 1992, a fortuitous turn of events led to a turning point in my career. I had the opportunity to live and work in Bavaria, Ger-



many where I had the chance to do work at a level I had only dreamed of while reading magazines like Dental Labor and Dental Dialogue. It was the era of Geller, Mutherthies, and Hegenbarth, Polz Schultz, the first generation of leaders that were recreating nature with ceramics. It was there that I learned about the importance of Discipline and Mental Toughness, traits that would serve me well in the future.

In the spring of 2002, after several trips to St. Petersburg to attend courses at The Dawson Center, I was offered a job as a ceramist. I owned my first lab at the time, West Bay Dental Ceramics, in Victoria, British Columbia and despite a dreadfully poor exchange rate which basically doubled the cost of everything priced in U.S. dollars, I still made the trips. I completed sev-



FDLA Mission

Advancing the individual and collective success of Florida's dental laboratory professionals to enhance oral health care.

Values Statement

INTEGRITY - being honest and open in all that we do

LEADERSHIP - being the guiding light in a changing environment

RECOGNITION - honoring those committed to our industry

SAFETY - promoting safe and quality driven manufacturing practices

INNOVATION THROUGH COLLABORATION - fostering an environment where creative and inspiring ideas are encouraged to enhance patient care

eral courses (Tech I, Tech II, Seminar 1 & Seminar 2), all while running a one-man lab. It was during that time that I learned about the importance of Sacrifice and Resilience, two more traits that would serve me well in the future.

Fast forward to 2009. The economy was reeling from the Global Financial Crisis, Lehman Brothers went under, people lost jobs, lost their homes, and the economy was in shambles. In March of that year, the same week that the Dow Jones Industrial Average bottomed, 4Points Dental Designs opened its doors. I thought to myself, “my house is underwater, the job I had isn’t an option, the economy couldn’t get any worse... what do I have to lose?” It was during this experience that I learned about the importance of Curiosity and Creativity. The Curiosity side told me to ask questions, to become an active listener when a prospective client spoke and constantly question how I could make the restorative experience smoother. The Creative side made me think of ways to make it happen.

As I look back on the last five years of where the profession has been, COVID, the lockdowns, and the recovery, I think about what the next five years will look like. We as an industry are facing numerous challenges that will affect each and every one of us. The most ominous challenge is consolidation of dental offices. As DSOs take a larger share of the dental market, labs will continue to be pressured to lower fees or to outsource to Asia.

Our second biggest challenge is a severe shortage of skilled labor with not nearly enough young people entering the profession to replace those retiring. While 3D printing, CAD, and A.I. may have introduced efficiencies into the system, the machines still need an experienced technician to input ac-



curate data and to process that data to produce a clinically acceptable restoration. An experienced and knowledgeable tech is still needed to communicate to clinicians WHAT is needed and WHY it’s necessary. People still matter, maybe now more than ever. It’s the human touch, the conversations, advice, and feedback that make relationships in this profession blossom and prosper.

On the positive side, the U.S. dental laboratories market is estimated to be valued at approximately \$10 billion with a compound annual growth rate of 6.32 percent. The market is growing, which means opportunities exist for those with the business model to capitalize on them. At the core of those business opportunities are relationships and education. It’s through collaboration with clinicians and most importantly, with your peers, that accelerates the learning process and invites business opportunities. The return on investment almost always increases when building win-win relationships and collaborating in continuing education.

The FDLA has always been that beacon that encourages and fosters continuing education opportunities, whether through regional workshops or the annual Southern States Symposium. The leadership of the FDLA wants all its members to succeed in building profitable and healthy businesses. One of the essential goals of my own lab is building relationships, and I’d like to bring the same vision to the FDLA, building relationships for the greater good of our profession. We all share the same things in common: Resilience, Mental Toughness, Discipline, Sacrifice, Curiosity, and Creativity. Let’s use these qualities to make dental technology in Florida better and stronger in 2025 and into the future...and most importantly, let’s do it TOGETHER! 🇺🇸



BUILDING THE IDEAL TEAM

What does your team look like today? Is it the perfect, well-oiled machine that fires on all cylinders with maximum output and cohesiveness? If so, read no further. If your team has room for improvement, then you may find merit in reading further.



Regardless of the size of your team or how much financial success your lab enjoys – most lab teams have some level of team dysfunction. Dysfunction can manifest itself in many ways. Sometimes it is in subtle actions or in overt gestures. See if any of these resonate with you:

- When a process, procedure, or delivery go afoul, finger pointing begins and we get to watch the latest episode of “The Blame Game.”
- Less than stellar communication between technicians and the office team.
- Team members who are arrogant. They cannot accept accountability/responsibility for their actions, and they do not know how to apologize when appropriate.
- You have a personnel manual, but your supervisors/managers do not apply policies objectively. They let personal relationships influence the enforcement (or non-enforcement) of policies.
- Morale fluctuates like a kite in the wind.
- When corrective action is required for a team member, the supervisor/manager puts off the discussion for so long that it is easier to just “sweep it under the carpet.”
- The team perceives that certain team members are treated with favoritism.
- Team members do not have an individualized career path in the lab.

According to Patrick Lencioni, the root cause of the above dysfunctions is the absence of trust – and I wholeheartedly agree! When a team doesn’t trust each other, it leads to team members who have a fear of conflict, a lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. So how do you build a team that trusts each other? Very simply, the owner/manager of the lab must lead by example and become an authentic leader who fosters and builds trust through his/her actions. As John Maxwell states very clearly: “When you make a commitment you create hope. When you keep a commitment, you create trust.”

BUILDING TRUST – SERVANT LEADERSHIP

So, let's look at what behaviors an "Authentic Leader" should model in the lab to build a foundation of trust:

ACT WITH INTEGRITY – keep your word (even if it's inconvenient), do the right thing (even when no one is looking), follow your moral compass i.e.: model behavior your grandmother would validate.

PRACTICE INTENTIONAL TRANSPARENCY – when appropriate, explain to your team what you're thinking and why. This gets the team involved in your decision-making process and helps to train them in critical thinking techniques. Transparency in decision making affects processes in the lab and forms the basis of continuous improvement ideas.

SAYING "GOOD MORNING" TO EVERY TEAM MEMBER EVERY DAY – not just a "hello," but stopping to talk for a minute or two to find out: 1) how he/she is; 2) any challenges they are facing that day; 3) if they don't have enough work for the day, would he/she like to be cross-trained to pick up additional time?

HAVE A 5–10-MINUTE EARLY MORNING HUDDLE with supervisors/managers (if your team doesn't have managers, simply gather all team members together). Openly discuss topics that will affect lab operations for the day. Typical items are: 1) absences – what's the plan to get the cases completed on time?; 2) did we hit our billing goal for the previous day – are we projected to hit it today?; 3) the number of cases in the lab; 4) who is on vacation the following week and the plan to cover for those team members; 5) is all equipment functioning properly?; 6) who is in training this week. You get the idea.

MAINTAIN AN "OPEN-DOOR POLICY" – assure your team that you are available to them regardless of the severity of the situation. Be accessible to everyone.

WHEN YOU MAKE A MISTAKE, openly accept responsibility and be accountable for your actions.

DON'T AVOID DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS – the longer you wait, the more difficult the conversation and resolution will become. The team sees when people avoid addressing issues and all sorts of perceptions ensue. There's a leadership book entitled "Extreme Ownership" by Jocko Willink that sums-up this behavior very nicely: "it's not what you preach, it's what you tolerate."

PLACE A SIGN-UP SHEET IN THE LAB so that team members can have lunch with you at the lab's expense. The lunch can just be friendly conversation, or it could involve discussing his/her

career aspirations, studying for the CDT examination, etc. It's a great trust-building exercise.

ASSIST THE TEAM "IN THE TRENCHES" – let the team know that no task is beneath you. When a palate of stone is delivered, help unload it (if you are physically able). If a small maintenance job needs to be performed, show the team that you're willing to help. When you receive equipment, help to unpack it and get it functional with other team members.

CELEBRATE "WINS" AND "LOSSES." Get the entire team together to celebrate when the team hits a sales goal, gets a new customer, buys a new mill or printer, the NBC certifies a team member, etc. Also get the team together to celebrate losses – we lost a big customer. Discuss the "why" and plan with the team how to avoid repeating the mistakes that caused the loss – this is a facet of continuous improvement where the team can create an SOP (standard operating procedure) to follow in the future. The leadership guru John Maxwell stated that victories should be celebrated for the same length of time as a defeat – 24 hours. His concept is that if you celebrate too long for either situation, it can become debilitating.

MONTHLY TEAM MEETINGS – and they don't have to be fancy PowerPoint presentations. Take this opportunity to practice some open book management and share lab metrics that can get the team involved with continuous improvement projects. Discuss sales (current year versus last year and budget), labor-to-sales ratios, internal and external remakes, on-time delivery, etc.

WHEN YOU HAVE A LAB LUNCH – the authentic leader is always last in line – his/her team comes first.

Get the entire team together to celebrate.



A team trust exercise that I have had great success with starts by giving each team member a piece of paper containing these two questions:

QUESTION #1: What is the one thing I do best to keep the team moving forward / keep the team on-track?

QUESTION #2: What is the one thing I do that derails the team or how can I better support the team?

One week after the team has an opportunity to formulate their answers, we arrange the meeting room tables in a U-shape, and I sit with the team as each person openly provides me with his/her answers. This exercise allows me to be vulnerable to the team, and they witness how I receive both positive feedback and suggestions for improvement. It also builds trust because the team witnesses over time how I modify my behavior to better lead the team. Team members also benefit from building trust with each other since they are making themselves vulnerable by openly expressing their opinions.

THE IDEAL TEAM PLAYER

Over the course of my 45-year career, I have witnessed countless techniques to cultivate team trust, unity, and collaboration. Many of these approaches center around concepts and language which is not commonplace and ends up creating a chasm (or disconnect) between the trainer and the intended audience. Sometimes this type of language is used to elevate the image of the trainer and/or training program and other times it's because the trainer is trying to apply complex solutions to a simple problem.

The key to connecting with your team is through a simple but strong message: a team that operates with trust will foster loyalty. Patrick Lencioni's concept of "The Ideal Team Player," (in his book of the same title) has so many practical applications for recruiting, hiring, training, and team building based upon three attributes: being humble, hungry and people smart.

Let's explore how these attributes can be applied to instill a culture of team trust, unity, and collaboration. The first quality is being humble – a leader who is confident in his/her capabilities is not afraid to acknowledge his/her shortcomings and be accountable, thereby promoting an atmosphere where team members can do the same. The second quality is being hungry – craving both personal and professional growth for your team. Laboratory owners/managers who encourage one-on-one and team debate and who are receptive to having ideas being challenged will tap into the full potential of their teams, creating a strong team that is passionate about delivering on the commitments they make to their teammates and for the laboratory's success. The third quality is being people smart – laboratory owners/managers who promote simple acts of civility understand the impact they have on strengthening relationships and building bonds throughout the entire team. Think about civility as practicing the "Golden Rule" which is essentially treating people the way you wish to be treated.

It is the responsibility of the laboratory owner/manager to explain the principles of humble, hungry, and people smart to the team – basic ideas that have powerful impact. That's just the beginning. You have to use every opportunity to reinforce the three principles with your team every day and in every situation. As an example, when you walk through our laboratory, you will find laminated signs that say humble, hungry and people smart all through the building. Team members are constantly reminded of these principles and over time have adopted these attributes in both their personal and professional lives. When your team begins to practice the qualities of an "Ideal Team Player," trust will

A team that operates with trust will foster loyalty.



flow back and forth between team members like an electric current. That flow of trust builds team loyalty, strengthening relationships and building collaboration throughout the laboratory.

Okay, that's great for current team members, but how do we address new hires? Again, taking the simple principles from Patrick Lencioni, we have successfully used the following interview questions to determine if potential candidates have the makings of an "Ideal Team Player":

- Tell me about a career goal that you have accomplished and why that was important to you?
- Tell me about a time when you were a part of a great team. What was your part in making the team effective?
- Describe what you see as your strengths (skill sets) related to this job/position.
- Describe what you see as challenges related to this job/position.
- How would current and/or former teammates describe you?
- What was the most important learning opportunity in your career?
- What was the biggest disappointment in your career?
- How do you handle giving/accepting an apology?
- What are some typical decisions that you make and how do you make them?
- Can you tell me about a time when you suggested a better way to perform a process?
- How would you handle a situation where deadlines and priorities change frequently and rapidly?
- What strengths do you rely on in your current (or last) position to make you successful in your work?
- What was the most creative thing you did in your current and/or last job?
- What would you have liked to do more of in your last position? What held you back?

COLLABORATION

Now that you've established an environment of trust, your team can safely engage in the practice of collaboration. True collaboration allows team members to openly express ideas,

assist other team members to be successful, and learn new skill sets, all with candid, honest discussion. When your team of "Ideal Team Players" begins to collaborate (with your guidance), they will discover that casting blame for situations is counterproductive. Instead, they will want to uncover the root cause of a problem (with your guidance). Some examples of my team's initial collaborative efforts were:

- A commitment from each team member to reading every Rx, work ticket and call notes – and if there are discrepancies, bring them to the attention of their supervisor.
- If there is an issue with a case, reschedule the case in Magic Touch by following the SOP.
- All customer-facing team members commit to returning customer calls quickly.
- Improve communication with dental offices by accurately documenting all call notes in Magic Touch so that the customer can view changes to case status in the customer portal.
- When cases are pre-scheduled by customers, alert all team members who will be involved in the production of the case before the case arrives at the lab.
- Every team member agrees to check to see if anyone needs help before he/she gets ready to leave for the day – then check with their supervisor before "punching-out."
- The team unanimously agreed that better communication = less reaction/stress.

At this point, the team began to view each other as internal customers of the lab. The scheduling team viewed their customer as the preliminary technicians, the preliminary technicians viewed their customer as the scanning technicians, the scanning technicians viewed their customer as the designers, etc. The entire team openly discussed how to support each other and took ownership of the cases that they worked on and barcoded. As the leader of the team, it is incumbent on you to reinforce this interdependence by empowering every team member with the authority and responsibility to stop production on any case that has a problem.

This was an opportunity to reinforce two important concepts:

- The quicker we stop an internal remake, the better chance we have in keeping the case on-schedule, so we do not disappoint the doctor or the patient.
- Tracking internal remakes helps the team identify issues with materials and equipment and provides opportunities for training (or retraining).

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

So, you now have a team comprised of “Ideal Team Players” who trust each other, who openly and honestly communicate, who want to work collaboratively – what’s next? Introducing the principles of continuous improvement:

PRINCIPLE 1 – Improvements are based on small changes - by approaching change in small, incremental steps, the continuous improvement model reduces anxiety and increases speed to improvement. This makes the laboratory better one small initiative at a time.

PRINCIPLE 2 – All team member’s ideas are valuable - continuous improvement relies greatly on team members to identify “opportunities for improvement.” Team members who are closest to the problems are better equipped to solve them.

PRINCIPLE 3 – Incremental improvements are typically inexpensive to implement - team members can focus on small changes that can be accomplished without a lot of expense. Keep an open mind. Ideas can involve eliminating processes, rather than adding them, which is an excellent way to be sure that every activity adds some value to the customer and reduces wasted effort.

PRINCIPLE 4 – Improvement is collaborative - constant feedback is an important aspect of continuous improvement. Open communication during every phase of executing an improvement is critical to both the final results of the improvement and to the maintenance of team member involvement.

PRINCIPLE 5 – Improvement is measurable and potentially repeatable - it is not enough to simply make a change and call it improvement. To achieve sustained improvement, the

impact of change must be measured. This makes it possible to determine if the change can be applied successfully to other problems.

Share the above principles with the entire team. Discuss them openly and to “kick-off” the process, gather the team for lunch and provide them with the list of questions below:

- What improvement could be made that would save someone five minutes a day?
- How can we better satisfy our customers?
- Are all critical processes documented?
- Are all process documents up to date?
- Can everyone who needs them access the process documents?
- Could process documents be improved with images or video?
- Is each workspace adequately arranged and equipped for the work that happens there?
- Do team members have an easy way to report potential opportunities for improvement?
- Are team members given constructive feedback frequently enough?
- Have you trimmed down on excess supplies?
- Is it easy for a prospect or customer who visits our website or calls us to find the information or person they need?
- Are the results of improvement activities measured against business objectives such as cost savings, quality improvement and revenue?
- What is the most meaningful part of your job?
- Is there a process for getting to the root cause of product defects or dissatisfied customers?
- Is the process of buying from the lab easy?
- Is there a simple way for customers to provide both positive and negative feedback?
- Do team members feel empowered to speak up when they spot an urgent problem?
- What process can be fixed or improved?
- Is there anything in your work world that’s less than stellar/causing frustration or delays?

*Improvements are based
on small changes.*



- Are you crystal clear on your role and what you should be working on? If not, what aspects aren't clear?
- Looking back on the week, is there anything that could have gone better?
- What inspires you to succeed every day?

Ask them to narrow the list to three questions by group consensus. Instruct the team to be prepared to answer the three questions at a group lunch the following week and to openly discuss their answers. You may be pleasantly surprised at the number of good ideas to implement! Once you have exhausted the first three questions, run the process again with three new questions. After time, you will discover that your team will start to identify opportunities for continuous improvement without a formal meeting or structure. As your team is successful in this pursuit, you may fondly recall a quote from an astute leadership guru, Simon Sinek: "We know true collaboration happened when the idea can no longer be traced to one person."

GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Now that you have a team that consists of people whose primary focus is on being deliberate in serving the dentist, who are more concerned about the team's success than their own success, who are willful in making a positive difference, who have learned to comfortably coexist with failure (and learn from the experience), and who are comfortable taking calculated risks – it's time to focus on career growth.

Your challenge as an owner/manager is to get your team to understand that there is no growth in their comfort zone and no comfort in their growth zone. Let them know that it's okay to have fear. Having fear means that they have the opportunity to do something brave that will help them grow and learn something new. As an authentic leader, your task is to show each team member a path to personal growth and career fulfillment by exploring these practical, commonsense approaches (that are not mutually exclusive):

1. **CAREER PATHING** – define goals for each team member (perhaps use a SWOT analysis to assist in this aspect), gather all necessary data/documentation, identify resources to accomplish the goals, establish a timeline with benchmarks and wage increases that accompany accomplishment.
2. **EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES** – use the Foundation for Dental Laboratory Technology Learning Library, avail yourself of manufacturer website training, and/or subscribe to

Productivity Training Corporation (PTC) for its educational and testing programs.

3. **FOSTER "OVER THE SHOULDER" TRAINING AT THE BENCH** – tied to the development of critical thinking skills that enable technicians to understand the principles of an optimal treatment solution for each case.
4. **CROSS-TRAINING** – train technicians within their designated department and between departments – create SOPs for the technician's ready reference.
5. **SKILLED RETIREES** – engage retired and semi-retired technicians for technician training.
6. **MENTOR YOUNG TECHNICIANS** – go beyond technical training and set an example of strong ethics, diligence, personal responsibility, determination, self-reliance, integrity, and a "whatever it takes attitude."
7. **CREATE INCENTIVES** – develop a system to bonus the team for a reduction in remakes, increased profitability, a reduction in overtime, etc.
8. **FORMULATE A SUCCESSION PLAN FOR TEAM MEMBERS ON THE CUSP OF RETIREMENT** – open discussions will allow for proper planning and their assistance in training a successor.

Over the course of my career, I have read many books about leadership (and will continue to do so). I have come across many definitions of how authors describe a good leader. To date, I find Stephen R. Covey's definition by far the most accurate: "Leadership is communicating to people their worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves." 🗨️

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Gitman is the General Manager of NDX Thayer, a full-service, Certified Dental Laboratory, specializing in anterior esthetics and implant restorations. He has been active in the dental business for 45 years as a consultant, author, and lecturer. Rob has served on many non-profit boards, and he is a past president of the National Association of Dental Laboratories. He recently spoke at the 2025 Symposium and Expo meeting.



Southern States SYMPOSIUM & EXPO

presented by **FDLA**



TREASURE HUNT

Uncovering Hidden Opportunities

This past June, dental laboratory owners, managers, technicians, dentists, and industry partners gathered for two full days o' plunderin' knowledge at the Symposium & Expo. CE treasures, a bustling Expo Hall, a rousin' Kickoff Reception, Learnin' Lounges, and countless chances to swap tales with fellow scallywags filled the days.

New this voyage – the grand return o' the Friday Night Reception! The crew came together at the Buccaneer Bash for a swig, light hors d'oeuvres, and lively camaraderie after a full day in the Expo Hall.

The FDLA Board and staff thank all attendees, sponsors, and exhibitors who made this year's event possible. Proceeds from the Wine & Liquor Toss and member donations will allow FDLA to contribute nearly \$1,000 to the Foundation for Dental Laboratory Technology!

We hope to see you at next year's meeting, June 5 – 6, 2026 at Signia by Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek!



Above: FDLA Board Installation



Keynote speaker John Wilson



Joe Young, 2025 NADL President



Rick Sonntag, RDT, 2025 FDLA president



Ryan Lewis keynote speaker



Above: Joe Young, NADL president, presents Kevin Krumm, CDT, TE with the President's Gavel plaque



Above: Best of Show



Above: Speaker Alexander Wünsche, CDT



Below: Keynote speaker John Wilson





Above: Expo Ribbon cutting



Above: Rob Gitman, speaker



Above and Below: FDLT Ring Toss



Above: Celebrating CDT & Dental Technician Appreciation Month





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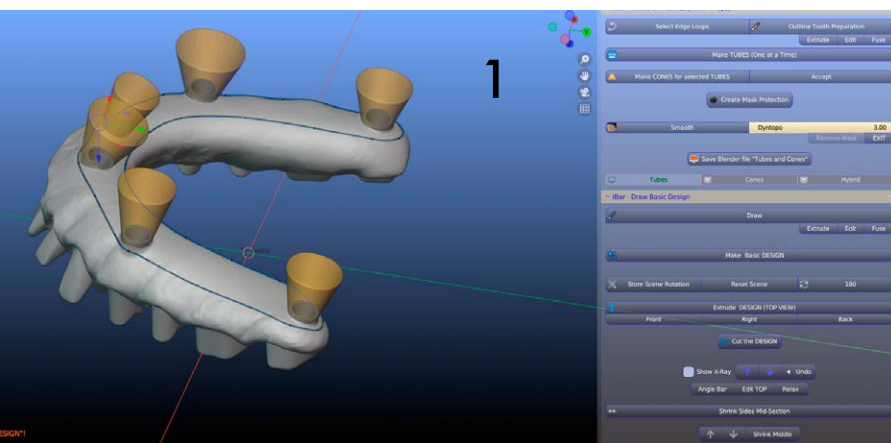
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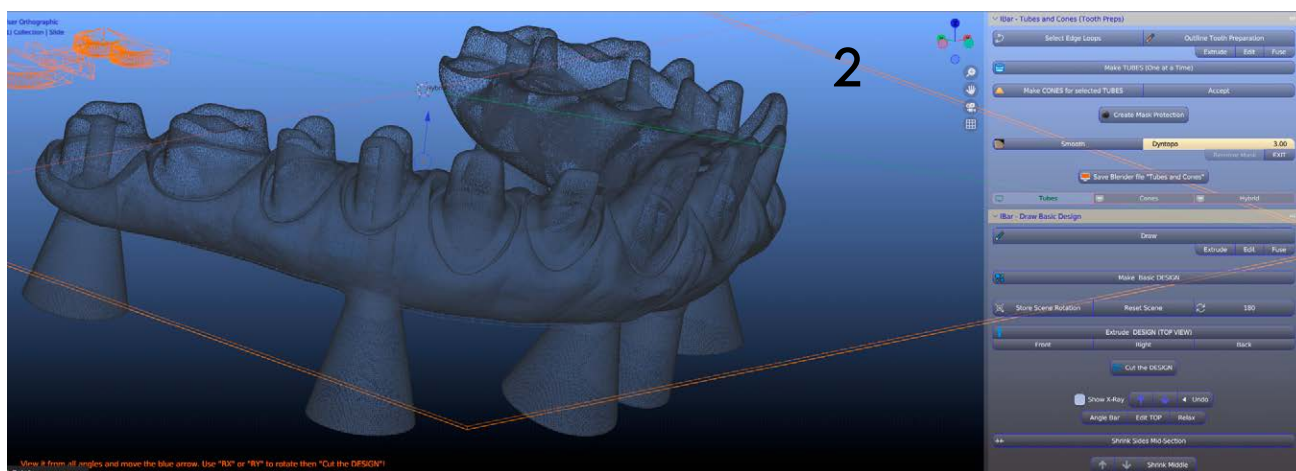
UNLOCKING PRECISION IN DIGITAL DENTISTRY: Harnessing the Power of Blender for Dental's IBar Module

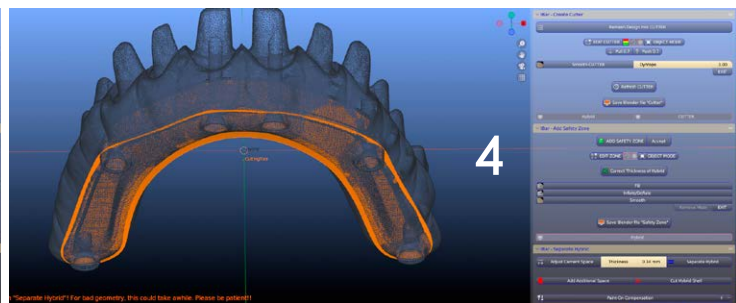
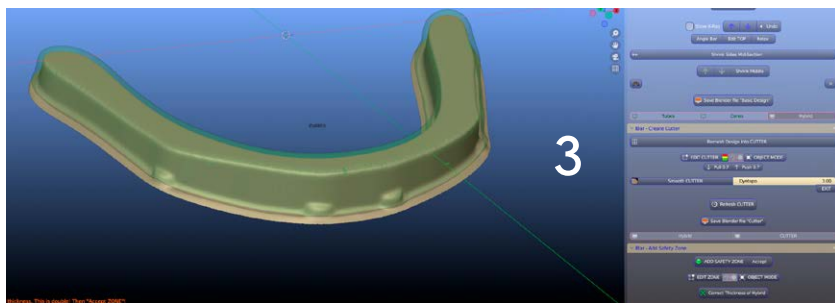
Digital dentistry continues to evolve rapidly, driven by groundbreaking innovation and the relentless pursuit of exceptional precision and efficiency. Among the most notable advancements in recent years is Blender for Dental (B4D), an open-source adaptation of Blender — a robust and versatile software originally created for animation and gaming. Developed by visionary innovators Michael and Wolfgang Teiniker, B4D uniquely leverages Blender's powerful geometry engine to create specialized dental tools, redefining the sophisticated design and meticulous manufacturing processes required for complex prosthetics, particularly bars utilized in hybrid restorations (Fig. 1).



Transitioning to Open-Source: Breaking the Chains

As a seasoned dental technician with extensive expertise in digital design, my initial workflow revolved around traditional dental-specific CAD software, primarily 3Shape and exocad. These platforms, although effective, eventually revealed significant limitations, especially when dealing with intricate and challenging geometries. Transitioning to Blender through the B4D platform represented a transformative turning point. It provided an innovative and versatile canvas, liberating technicians from the typical constraints imposed by proprietary software and opening avenues for unprecedented creativity and flexibility in design (Fig. 2).





Why Segmentation Matters

One of the most revolutionary innovations within B4D is the IBar module, which introduces an essential paradigm shift in bar design methodology-segmentation. Traditional workflows involved cumbersome processes of designing, milling, rescanning the bar, and subsequently designing additional prosthetic components. This approach frequently resulted in spatial compromises, thin areas, and structural vulnerabilities. The sophisticated segmentation capability of the IBar module proactively addresses these issues, enabling precise isolation and meticulous control of each component within a prosthetic. This ensures accurate mating surfaces and optimizes structural integrity from the outset, dramatically enhancing restorative outcomes (Fig. 3).

A Refined and Efficient Workflow

Integrating the innovative IBar module into our laboratory practices has streamlined the complex prosthetic design process into a clear, efficient, and highly structured five-step workflow:

Precisely import and align the STL file within Blender's coordinate system.

Strategically position protective geometries, such as tubes and cones, to safeguard critical areas.

Carefully draw an intaglio-contoured spline and strategically extrude it to robustly support the secondary prosthetic segment.

Meticulously create and accurately position cutting geometry, clearly defining safety zones for precise segmentation.

Expertly set cement spacers and leverage B4D's specialized block-out module to achieve optimal offsets tailored specifically to each bar design (Fig. 4).

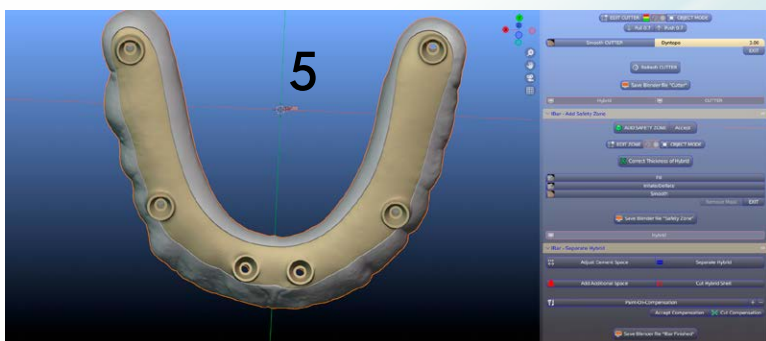
Challenges and Solutions

Initially, Blender's extensive toolset and intimidating user interface posed significant challenges, especially for technicians accustomed to streamlined, dental-specific software. The adjustment required embracing the unfamiliar - realizing we had stepped into a vastly different environment. B4D's modular structure, however, alleviated these challenges significantly by allowing technicians to concentrate specifically on the IBar module without needing immediate mastery of Blender's entire platform. Gradual exploration of additional Blender tools progressively expanded my skillset and deepened my understanding of the software's potential.

Moreover, mesh quality exported from exocad and 3Shape presented early difficulties, affecting processing speed and segmentation precision. Pre-refining meshes before importing them into Blender substantially enhanced workflow efficiency. Additionally, Blender's powerful sculpting tools filled critical gaps in cosmetic and structural enhancements not adequately addressed by traditional dental software (Fig. 5).

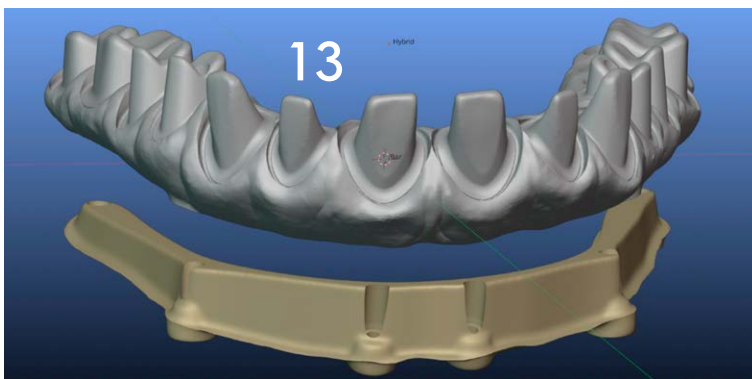
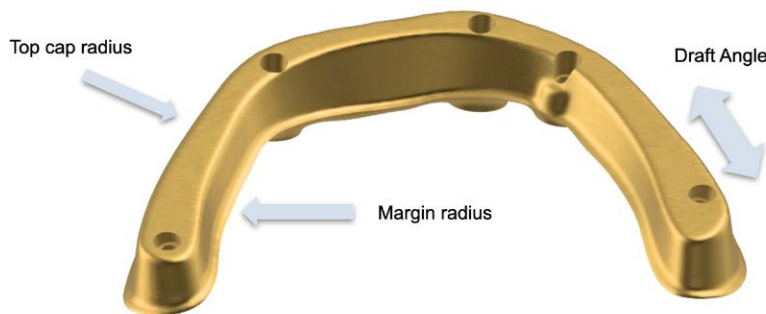
Practical Advantages and Clinical Outcomes

The remarkable practical advantages of the IBar module are particularly evident in complex restorative cases, notably those requiring meticulous dimensional control, such as maxillary prosthetics anchored to pterygoid implants. Effortlessly creating robust titanium extensions within the module has resolved significant dimensional challenges, ensuring exceptional structural integrity and precision machining even in the most demanding clinical scenarios (Fig. 6).





12 3 critical design considerations



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Continuous Refinement

Comparing milled bars with original CAD designs through scanning has been immensely valuable, providing real-time feedback on discrepancies and driving continuous improvement. After completing over 350 intricate cases using the IBar module, this iterative feedback loop has significantly improved design predictability, machining accuracy, and overall restoration quality. Embracing and learning from our equipment's strengths and weaknesses continually allows technicians to refine their skills and excel by consistently "putting in the reps." (Figs. 7-11)

Conclusion: A Community-Driven Future

The future of digital dentistry is modular, exceptionally precise, and open. Blender for Dental's IBar module exemplifies this vision, not only through advanced segmentation capabilities and intuitive workflows, but also through the dynamic support of the open-source community continually driving its innovation. Laboratories seeking enhanced precision, remarkable efficiency, and economic viability will find Blender for Dental an indispensable tool, fostering excellence and groundbreaking innovation in digital dentistry (Figs. 12-13). 

About the Author

John Wilson is the owner of Sunrise Dental Laboratory | Educator | Key Opinion Leader



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By Rene Silva, MBA

OPERATING YOUR DENTAL LABORATORY IN A FAST-CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

At \$7.2 billion in annual gross revenue, the dental laboratory industry in the U.S. is slightly more popular than paper products and less popular than your local bike shop.

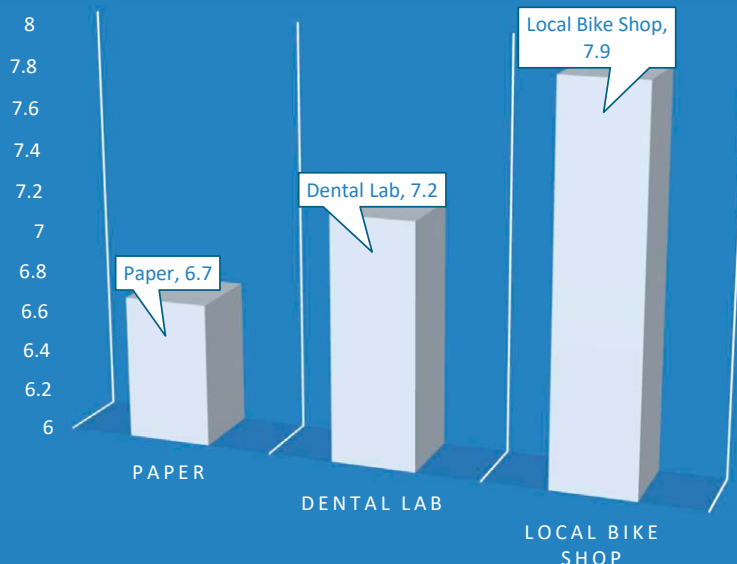
Even though the industry is not going to win any popularity contests, it has caught the attention of a very influential group, Private Equity (PE). The deployment of capital from PE sources follows a trend from upstream industries like dental clinics in general and specialist practice.

The advent of PE, both upstream and within the laboratory industry, has accelerated existing trends. This creates a rapidly changing business environment within which lab owners, technicians, and staff must operate. According to IBISWorld, the Compounded Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) was 1.9 percent for the previous four years and is expected to be 0.9 percent during the next four to five years, reaching \$7.9 billion in revenue by 2029. As a mature highly fragmented industry with moderate growth and innovation, dental laboratories are ripe for consolidation.

At the same time capital inflows enter industry, capital has also changed dental practices. Dental Service Organizations (DSOs) have managed to rapidly consolidate the dental practice space. The industry went from 85 percent dentist-owned practices in 2005 down to 72 percent in 2023 (IBISworld 2025).

With almost 25 percent market share, DSOs are commanding change in the dental laboratory industry. For instance, DSOs bargain for lower appliance pricing and longer payment terms and typically favor labs that can offer 90-day or even 120-day terms. On the other hand, even if the lab becomes a preferred provider, many DSOs do not guarantee demand

INDUSTRY SIZE BY REVENUE (\$ BILLION)



volumes because practitioners are given clinical discretion to choose which lab he or she wants to use (this dynamic allows other labs to retain a toehold on the market).

Administratively, DSOs have unique requirements to submit invoices for payment and, in some instances, a layered and “slow by design” reconciliation and payment protocol. For example, I kept receiving late payments from a particular DSO, after many inquiries and calls, I came to understand the

payment process was getting started on the day the payment was due, which the DSO considered “on-time” so payment would arrive 2-to-4 weeks late.

Because of the capital requirements needed to operate on a 90-day or 120-day billing cycle, laboratory operators need to be careful with the size and solvency of the client as well as the lab’s ability to support it. The earlier is important to consider because a \$25,000 monthly account with 90-day terms would require \$75,000 to \$100,000 to be committed in receivables at any given time.

The latter is vital to mitigate the risk of uncollectable receivables. DSOs are complex corporate structures, as such, measuring risk and credit worthiness is a very sophisticated process. Also, they are designed with multiple layers of protection for their investors; one of these layers is bankruptcy reorganization relief. I have experienced this firsthand when two DSOs filed for bankruptcy during the past six to nine months at a loss of about \$20,000. If this were a much larger DSO and the losses were \$200,000 instead of \$20,000, the lab would have been in trouble.

From a finance standpoint, margins are getting squeezed from all ends. Downward pressure on prices, increased capital intensity to offer longer terms at a time when capital costs are rising due to high interest rates, increased labor and material costs, and increased real estate expenses just to name a few. Lower margins are not sustainable in the long run because the business will lack sufficient retained earnings to reinvest in new technologies, talent development, and property Plant and Equipment (PPE).

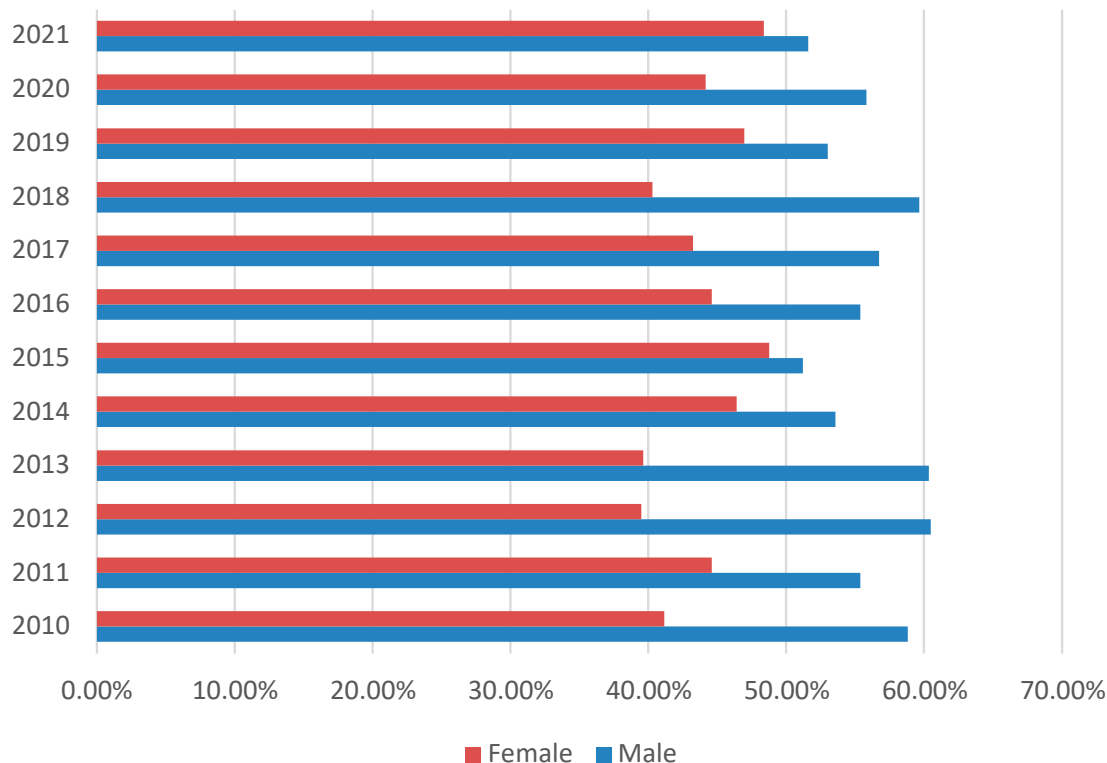
Offerings from overseas competitors are another matter to contend with. While not new, foreign competition has learned from its previous mistakes, so quality, materials, and craftsmanship have all improved. Many lab operators, however, have been able to leverage their competitive advantage to reaffirm their value proposition to the practices they help. For instance, by offering refined and streamlined customer-facing interactions such as professional and knowledgeable customer service and technicians who can help troubleshoot and problem solve at moment’s notice. Furthermore, the speed of service as well as streamlined communications help to reduce unwanted friction. From the roundtable discussions at the FDIA symposium, I learned that some labs devoted resources to having sales professionals visiting current and prospective accounts. These folks could immediately answer sales and technical questions and become an indispensable resource for the practice. Such a level of service is very hard to match for U.S.-based competitors, never mind a foreign one.

The current business environment surrounding import tariffs and the De Minimis value rule ([whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov)) have tempered the efforts from foreign dental laboratories offering products in the U.S. While this measure does not constitute an insurmountable hurdle, it can become a distraction at best or a hinderance at worst for these foreign competitors. On the other hand, U.S. laboratories are also exposed to the increased costs of materials due to tariffs. Even though materials may not be a large line item in many labs’ income statement (labs that deal with precious metals like gold have seen a dramatic increase in the cost for this material), any increase in costs is a matter of concern.

Due to the labor intensity of the industry, talent and its development are vital. According to the job search platform Zippia, almost 60 percent of dental technicians are over 40 years old. The aging labor pool and lack of interest from younger talent creates a challenge for laboratory owners and operators. In contrast, age has played an important role in the growth of industry. An aging population with increased insurance coverage, increased means, and/or increased access to credit for dental restorative treatment has been integral for industry growth. This trend, however, has been losing momentum due to increased interest rates, increased cost of living (especially in Florida), and lower disposable incomes.

In effect, attracting and retaining talent is a challenge, especially when the industry is looking for a more sophisticated type of candidate who can merge technical, CAD-CAM manufacturing, and clinical knowledge as well as being a good fit for the organization. All these are geared toward satisfying the needs of the modern dental practice of today. This dynamic creates upward pressure on technician salaries during a time of decreasing margins for lab owners. At the same time, competition for talent with the same skillset is increasing. Industries like machining have about 22 percent higher median wages (Onet 2025). On the lower end, the gig economy’s median wages are 29.5 percent less than the median wages for dental technicians (ZipRecruiter 2025). Bear in mind the average worker can earn the median wage in gig work from day one, a starting dental technician may not. At the lab, I have a junior technician who came from working at a fast casual restaurant. Even though she started earning less at the lab (I have heard from many people the money is good in this type of job albeit other things are not), she was looking for better hours, better working conditions, stability, and a career. In many ways, these have always been some of the benefits the lab highlights when attracting and retaining talent. I am happy to report that after a year of hard work, she earns more than before and is looking forward to continued growth with the lab.

Dental Technician Gender Ratio by Year



As females continue to enter the industry, the pool for available workers increases, which does have a positive effect for laboratories looking for talent.

According to data by Zippio, the male/female ratio has gone from 58.3 percent/41.17 percent in 2010 to 51.60 percent/48.40 percent in 2021. As females continue to enter the industry, the pool for available workers increases, which does have a positive effect for laboratories looking for talent. At the same time, lab operators need to recognize the needs of this growing segment of the workforce. Anecdotally, I can say that female talent partaking in motherhood is keen on flexible hours. At first glance, flexible hours may slightly increase operational costs, but it is a price worth paying because the payback in quality and quantity of work and commitment are orders of magnitude higher than the cost.

I would like to end with words from Trek Bicycle company's CEO, John Burke, during a recent interview with Fortune Magazine (youtube.com). Soon after he took over his father's company, it crashed. In his words, "It was arrogance, Trek was focused on Trek and not the customer, Trek did not take care of the customer. Then it got into some product issues, and it went downhill from there." In my view, businesses that are customer-centric, that provide a good product or service, and that take care of their customers are bound to succeed. Under these tenets, Trek Bicycle company has gone from \$1 billion to \$2 billion in sales in just a few years. You, us, we, can achieve the same if not more! 📌

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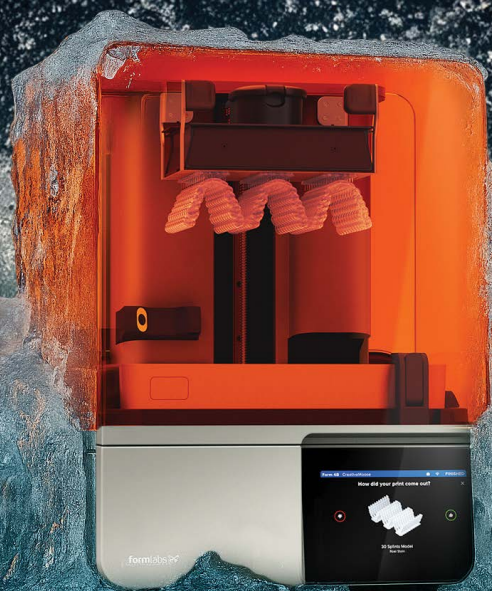
About the Author



Rene Silva is managing partner for OrthoDenco Labs, a dental laboratory specialized in orthodontics and functional orthopedic appliances. OrthoDenco is the second iteration of a venture that started almost 50 years ago, steeped in the tradition of a family of dental laboratory owners and operators. He oversees a team of almost 30 technicians

and staff with service across the continental U.S., Caribbean, and Latin America. Rene holds an MBA as well as a dual bachelor's degree in business administration and marketing from Florida Atlantic University, go owls! Additionally, he has multiple certifications in human resource management and marketing.

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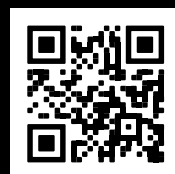
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Above: Recognizing 30-year CDT milestone recipients Felix Pages, CDT (second from left) and Raymond Curry, CDT (second from right) with NADL president Joe Young (left), and FDLA president Rick Sonntag, RDT (right)



Left: Recognizing 25-year CDT milestone recipient Nelson Quintero, CDT (left) with FDLA president Rick Sonntag, RDT



Right: Recognizing 35-year CDT milestone recipient Rodolfo Molina, CDT (center) with NADL president Joe Young (left), and FDLA president Rick Sonntag, RDT (right)



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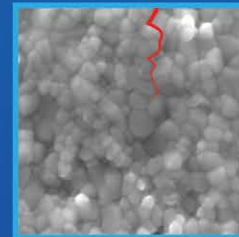


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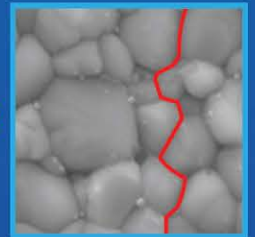
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A Collective Concern

Enja Dorjchuluun, MBA is the business operations manager at Sakr Dental Arts, based in Winter Park, Fla. She has learned all aspects of the laboratory business for 18+ years. For the last eight years, she has delved deeper into implant dentistry, hybrid restorations, and improving communication and workflow with doctors and staff. She believes FDLA provides the platform to make a collective difference in the industry.

Why did you originally decide to join the FDLA?

After nearly 20 years in various roles within a dental laboratory, I felt it was time to give back to the profession that has shaped so much of my life. I've seen how essential community, shared knowledge, and professional support are for both individual technicians and the industry as a whole. Joining the FDLA felt like a natural next step—an opportunity to stay engaged while actively contributing to the future of dental technology in Florida. I've always been passionate about helping others learn and grow, and through the FDLA, I saw the chance to mentor new technicians, support continuing education, and advocate for high standards in our field. Being part of an organization that values education, connection, and progress is deeply meaningful to me. I'm proud to be involved in something that works hard to uplift the dental laboratory profession.

What value do you receive out of being a member?

Education and advocacy. Most of us don't have extra time in our daily lives. Whether it is personal or professional, we're all busy managing day-to-day responsibilities. Sure, there are countless educational events and webinars available online—but who has the time to sift through them, register, and attend? That's where FDLA membership truly shines.

FDLA board members are dental technicians and lab owners who understand the real-world challenges you face in the lab every day. We curate high-quality, relevant educational opportunities tailored to your needs—and we bring them to you in convenient, accessible locations across the state. It's not just about education. There's real strength in numbers.

As members, we come together to advocate for the dental laboratory profession—both here in Florida and nationally through our work with the NADL. Being part of the conversation not only



impacts the future of the profession, it also enriches your skills, confidence, and perspective.

In what ways is the Symposium worth the investment of time and money?


The Symposium is absolutely worth it because it allows dental technicians to step away from the day-to-day routine and immerse themselves in the broader world of dental technology. Many of us work in small, focused environments, often with the same colleagues and doctors. That can limit our exposure to new technology and ideas. The

Symposium breaks that routine by bringing together technicians, lab managers, and industry leaders to share knowledge, discover new technologies, and learn from one another.

From hands-on demonstrations to expert-led seminars and informal conversations with peers, every interaction offers value. For bench technicians especially, it's a chance to sharpen skills, explore new tools and materials, and return to their labs with fresh insights and renewed energy.

More than just technical learning, the Symposium builds community. It helps attendees stay informed on industry trends, adapt to changes, and even spark new collaborations. In a fast-evolving field like ours, staying connected and engaged is essential—and the Symposium delivers that in a way few other events can.

As many state associations are dissolving, how do you see the FDLA evolving to meet the needs of Floridian dental laboratories?

Unfortunately, our industry is shrinking as many labs consolidate, technical schools close, and the willingness to pay for quality is diminishing. To fight this erosion, all the local laboratories must come together to address the issue as a collective. FDLA is the main platform for us to do that. That is why I signed up to be a board member. 

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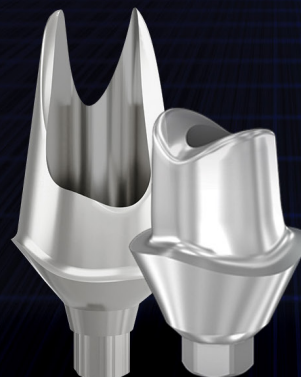


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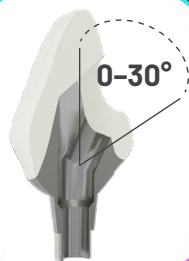
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