

Dentists by the Numbers: Comparing Roles, Rewards, and Experiences

A comparative look at how today’s dentists work, earn, and grow.

Dentistry has never offered more paths to success — or more variables to consider. From solo practice ownership to DSO affiliation, the business of dentistry is evolving rapidly. But what’s really working? How do income, patient volume, technology investment, and career stage intersect? And which strategies actually move the needle?

To explore these questions, we surveyed more than 500 U.S. dentists to learn about their roles, practice settings, earnings, career stages, technology preferences, and more. The results reveal clear trends that distinguish high earners from their peers and offer insight into what it takes to thrive in today’s competitive dental landscape.

For this report we defined dentists earning more than \$400,000 per year as “high-earning” dentists, those earning more than \$700,000 per year as “very high-earning” dentists and “lower-earning” dentists are those earning less than \$400,000 per year. When looking at practice revenue, those bringing in more than \$3 million per year are considered “very-high revenue” practices, those bringing in more than \$2 million per year are “high-revenue” practices, and those bringing in less than \$1 million per year are “lower-revenue” practices.

The survey results provide a clear picture of the roles and priorities common to top performing dentists and practices, as well as the operational strategies most closely aligned with financial growth. With significant differences between high-earning and lower-earning practitioners, this report offers actionable insights for dental professionals seeking to optimize their practice performance and career trajectory.

The Ownership Advantage: Practice Setting and Income Potential

Traditionally, many dentists have also been business owners, and while large group practice models and corporate ownership continue to grow more prominent, the data shows owning a practice has a clear correlation to higher earning potential. High-earning dentists are predominantly practice owners, with 81% functioning as either sole proprietors or partners, compared to just 43.5% of lower-earning colleagues.

The ownership advantage becomes even more pronounced when examining specific practice roles. Solo practice owners represent more

Income by Practice Role		
	Earning >\$400,000/Year	Earning <\$400,000/Year
Solo Owner	53.2%	33.7%
Partner / Co-Owner	27.8%	9.8%
Associate (Employee)	10.1%	42.3%
Contractor / Locum	1.3%	4.7%
Other	7.6%	9.4%

than half of high-earning dentists and just one-third of lower-earning dentists. Dentists who share practice ownership as partners or co-owners make up 27.8% of the high-earners and just 9.8% of lower-earners. Associates comprise just 10.1% of the high-earners and 42.3% of the lower-earning dentists.

This pattern suggests practice ownership remains the most reliable path to significant income growth in dentistry, though it requires the assumption of additional business responsibilities and financial risks.

Working as a dentist at a DSO removes some of those risks and responsibilities, but part of the tradeoff is that dentists affiliated with DSOs face distinct earning limitations. Only 8% of DSO-affiliated respondents earn more than \$400,000 annually, compared to 14% in solo or small group settings. However, this income trade-off may come with benefits in work-life balance, as DSO dentists report more consistent schedules and standardized work hours.

Dentists tend to see their earning increase as they gain experience with just 3% of dentists in their first 5 years earning more than \$400,000 per year. That cohort increases to 19% of dentists with more than 10 years of experience. Once dentists hit that high-earning threshold, they are 56% more likely to report that their income is trending up.

Earnings Vs. Career Stage				
	<\$200,000	\$200,000 to \$400,000	\$400,000 to \$700,000	\$700,000+
New (<1 Year)	75.7%	21.6%	2.7%	0.0%
Early (1–5 Years)	61.1%	35.7%	2.1%	1.1%
Mid (6–10 Years)	38.8%	50%	10.0%	1.2%
Experienced (10–20 Years)	41.7%	41.7%	10.7%	5.9%
Veteran (20+ Years)	40.3%	40.4%	12.6%	6.7%

The data suggests that while experience generally correlates with higher earning potential, significant income growth often depends more on practice ownership and operational excellence than years of practice alone. Still dentists who report that their income is trending up share some common strategies as they are 33% more likely to leverage online reviews, 10% more likely to leverage search engine marketing, and 14% less likely to leverage insurance membership plans.

Staffing: Investment Strategy or Cost Center

One of the most significant operational differences between high and low revenue dental practices lies in their approach to staff compensation. High-revenue practices are more likely to pay above-market wages and treat staffing as a strategic investment rather than a cost to be minimized.

Very high-revenue practices are 4 times more likely to pay assistants more than \$30 per hour than lower-revenue practices. Among practices reporting annual revenues above \$1 million,

two-thirds pay hygienists more than \$40 per hour and assistants more than \$22 per hour. Just as high staff wages align with higher practice revenues, nearly one-third of practices with revenues of less than \$500,000 per year pay their assistants \$17 per hour or less.

Beyond the increased revenues, higher-paying practices also tend to experience smoother operations and provide a high-quality patient experience. Practices with above-average staff compensation report fewer struggles with patient retention and higher operational efficiency—demonstrating how making sure team members feel valued and secure helps drive practice growth.

Technology as a Practice and Career Growth Multiplier

High-earning dentists demonstrate a clear preference for advanced technology, viewing it as both a clinical enhancement and a business investment. High-earning dentists show a preference for digital dentistry with a focus on the diagnostic solutions and chairside fabrication technologies powering same-day dentistry, and this trend is even stronger among very high-earning dentists.

High-earning dentists are more likely than their colleagues to view 3D printers, CBCT imaging systems, digital radiography, chairside mills, and digital impression systems as beneficial to their practices. Very high-earning dentists are 70.8% more likely to use a 3D printer, 38.1% more likely to use CBCT imaging, and 25.3% more likely to use a chairside mill. These technology adoption patterns reveal strategic thinking about technologies that enhance efficiency and support high case volumes.

Despite industry buzz around artificial intelligence (AI), overall AI adoption remains low across all income levels and practice settings. However, high-income dentists are twice as likely to use treatment planning AI, suggesting an early-adopter advantage that may expand as AI tools mature.

Technologies Very High-Income Dentists Are More Likely to Use	
3D Printer	70.8%
CBCT Machine	38.1%
Chairside Milling System	25.3%
Digital Radiography	6.4%
Digital Impression System	-6.9%

Technologies High-Income Dentists Are More Likely to Select as Beneficial	
3D Printer	+42.8%
CBCT Machine	+35.2%
Digital Radiography	+22.0%
Chairside Milling System	+13.1%
Digital Impression System	+5.1%

Higher Patient Volumes and Improved Case Acceptance

Unsurprisingly, treating more patients leads to higher earnings, but the data shows that a steady flow of new patients is a key part of this connection, and high-earning dentists not only see more patients but also employ more sophisticated patient acquisition strategies.

High-earning dentists average 10.6 new patients per week compared to 8.2 for other dentists. In turn, very high-earning dentists are 3 times more likely to see more than 20 new patients per week than are dentists earning between \$400,000 and

\$700,000 per year, and they are nearly 4 times as likely to see more than 20 new patients per week than dentists who earn less than \$200,000 per year.

These trends also play out for the total volume of patients a dentist treats in a week. Half of all very high-earning dentists report treating more than 100 patients per week. Just 22.4% of dentists who earn less than \$200,000 per year report the same patient volume. On average very high-earning dentists treat 89 patients per week, compared with a 75 patient per week average for all other dentists.

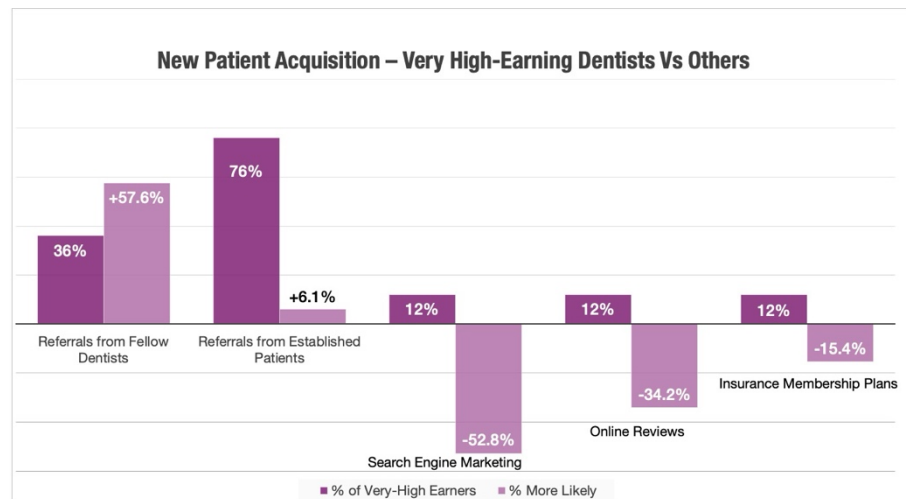
Percent of Dentists Seeing More than 20 New Patients Per Week By Income



Percent of Dentists Seeing More Than 100 Patients Per Week By Income



Referrals from patients is the most effective patient acquisition strategy for dentists at all earning levels, but very high-earning dentists are 57.6% more likely to also benefit from referrals from other practices.



Relationship-

based acquisition is the preferred strategy of these very high-earning dentists as they are 52.8 % less likely to use search engine marketing and 34.2% less likely to count on online reviews than dentists who earn less than them.

High-income dentists don't just see more patients—they close more cases by focusing on communication and visualization. Their success in getting patients to say yes to proposed treatment includes a mix of chairside presentation technology and buy-in from their team.

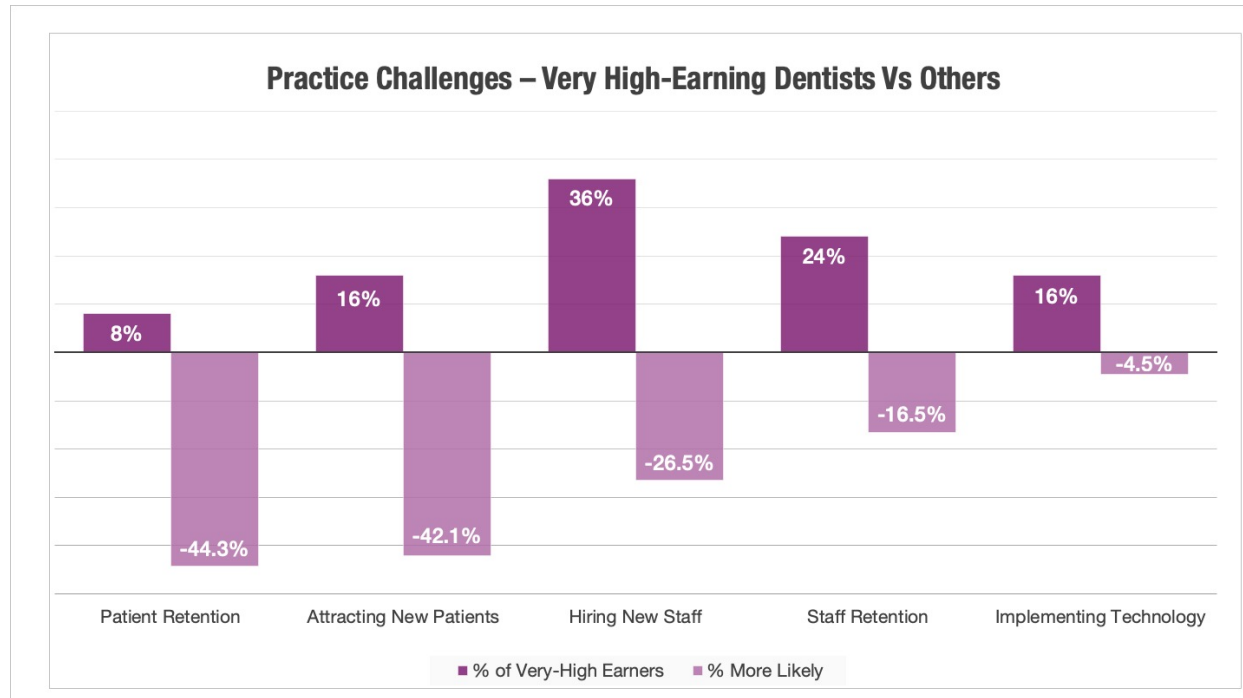
Compared to lower earners, dentists making over \$400,000 annually are 106% more likely to be using digital smile design technology. They are also 42% more likely to invest in training the front desk staff in value communications skills and 37% more likely to employ structured treatment plans for consistent presentation of every case. However, high-earning dentists are 8% less likely to offer patient financing options.

Operational Challenges for Different Practice Profiles

Different practice settings face distinct operational challenges, with clear patterns emerging around staffing, patient attraction, and technology implementation. There are also distinct difference between the challenges faced by high-earning and lower-earning dentists.

For DSOs attracting new patients is a bigger challenge when compared to other settings. Solo practices are 34% less likely to report difficulty with retaining staff than DSOs or small groups. For those small groups implementing new technology is 66% less likely to be a challenge, but hiring new staff is 17% more likely to be an issue to overcome.

When it comes to clinician income, very high-earning dentists generally report fewer challenges than colleagues. This is especially true with the key tasks of attracting new patients and retaining existing patients. Very high-earning dentists are 42.1% less likely to see attracting patients and 44.3% less likely to see patient retention as a challenge. They are also less likely to see staffing or technology issues as problems.



Finding the Right Work-Life Balance

The relationship between income and work-life balance is nuanced and working more hours is not always a requirement to achieve the highest earnings. The number of dentists who spend more than 40 hours a week treating patients is low, but high-earning dentists are 44% more likely than their lower-earning peers to work those long hours. Still, very high-earning dentists generally take more time off than their colleagues.

Dentists working in small group practices are the most likely to work more than 40 hours per week—more than twice as likely as solo practitioners. Dentists working in a DSO are the most likely to work a standard 31-40 hour week, and the least likely to work more than 40 hours per week. That regular schedule and an average of 16-20 days off per year for DSO dentists demonstrates that one tradeoff for their lower earning potential is a consistent work-life balance.

Dentists earning the most money also find a good balance with their schedules. Very high-earning dentists work approximately 33 hours per week seeing patients which is only slightly above the average of 30 hours for dentists at lower income levels. Very high-earning dentists also are 63% more likely to take more than 20 days off per year, averaging 22 days as compared to 17 days off per year for other dentists. Only 4% of very high-earning dentists take fewer than 10 days off compared with 23% of their colleagues. This pattern suggests that very

high-earning dentists have built practices with sufficient systems and staff to maintain productivity while supporting extended absences.

Career Longevity and Exit Planning

Income levels also influence retirement planning and career longevity decisions. High-earning dentists tend to target a slightly earlier retirement with an average planning to exit their career between the ages of 56 and 60. Lower-earning dentists find themselves more likely to be planning around retirement beyond the age of 65.

Practice setting also impacts dentists' plans for their retirement. DSO-based dentists are the most likely to plan on exiting the operatory at an earlier age. One-quarter of DSO dentists is planning on retiring before reaching the age of 55, and they are also 4 times more likely to plan on either retiring or moving into a non-clinical role before the age of 50.

Key Takeaways

The dental profession presents clear pathways to financial success, but these require strategic thinking beyond clinical excellence. The most successful practitioners combine an ownership mindset with technology adoption, team investment, and systems thinking to create practices that deliver superior patient outcomes while generating substantial income.

The highest earners have built practices that work more effectively, allowing them to achieve superior financial results while maintaining better work-life balance than their peers. Some of the key lessons they can impart to colleagues include:

Picture of a High-Earning Dentist

Dentists who earn more than \$400,000 per year are more likely to:

- Be practice owners
- Have 10+ years of experience
- Run high-revenue practices
- Invest in advanced technology
- Work slightly longer hours
- Compensate staff above the median range
- Leverage case acceptance strategies like digital smile design and front-desk training
- Devote time to building a reputation and online presence
- Be seeing continued growth in income

Technology Investment Pays Off

High earners are far more likely to adopt cutting-edge solutions they view as clinically beneficial and driving practice growth. These most often include advanced imaging and diagnostic solutions along with 3D printing and other chairside production tools.

Communication Is a Revenue Lever

Strategies such as standardized case presentations, digital smile design visualizations, and optimized front desk training are strongly associated with higher income and operational performance.

Reputation and Referrals Make a Difference

Dentists with upward-trending income rely more on patient reviews and peer referrals than other marketing and patient acquisition strategies.

AI Adoption is a Missed Opportunity

While the hype around the technology continues, AI is underused in practice. Early adopters skew slightly toward high earners, suggesting there is a competitive advantage for those dentists working to find the best use cases right now.

Staffing Is the Universal Pain Point

Whether solo or DSO, dentists of all types cite hiring and retention as top concerns — especially as they scale or try to maintain work-life balance.

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