





Career Growth for Sterile Processing Personnel

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Review the basics of career growth
2. Develop and implement a career plan
3. Explore growth tasks to improve skills and knowledge
4. Discuss attainable jobs in the Sterile Processing field

The Sterile Processing (SP) profession continues to evolve at a rapid pace. Innovative technologies are regularly introduced into the field and require well-trained technicians to properly process new items. Existing processes from other departments are also being sent to the Sterile Processing department (SPD) to relieve caregivers of these tasks and allow more time for patient care. New positions are created to keep pace with the evolving field, which provides opportunities to move up the SP career “ladder.” Closing the gap between technician and director requires SP professionals to learn and develop new skills. This lesson explores some of the positions available to advancing technicians and the skills needed to meet the requirements of those positions.

Objective 1: Review the basics of career growth

Professional growth starts on the first day of employment in the SP field and continues throughout a technician's career. New SP technicians may be introduced into the profession with or

without formal training. Technicians entering without formal training need to begin the learning process through intensive on-the-job training along with some formal classroom instruction. Even seasoned technicians will need on-the-job training to learn the processes used at a new facility.

After basic, entry-level training is complete, technicians have the opportunity to continue their learning process. Even if their facility does not require certification on hire, SP technicians may choose to invest the time to become certified. Certification is widely viewed as the first step in the process of moving up, and many facilities require certification for technicians to advance to team or shift leads. Courses to prepare for certification are available in a variety of formats, including self-study, in-person and online, and are offered by healthcare facility staff, independent instructors, and local colleges.

Once the first step in career growth, certification, is accomplished, it is time to plan for future goals and advancement. This process typically



depends on one's own motivation. It should be noted that not everyone wants to move up in their career. Some are happy in their current position, and there is nothing wrong with not wanting to move up from a technician position. Even for technicians who do not wish to pursue management activities, however, many facilities offer technical growth opportunities that do not require leaving the technician role or can blend it with minor management tasks. These positions include an instrument specialist for a specialty. There are also positions that require a high level of technical knowledge with good people skills, such as an Operating Room (OR)/SP liaison. These positions provide a vital service for both the OR and SPD. Obtaining the knowledge and skills needed for these positions can be a step toward supporting the SPD, other departments in the facility, and patients. Many find these roles to be both challenging and fulfilling.

Objective 2: Develop and implement a career plan

There are several steps to planning career growth. The first is to develop a viable plan. The plan does not have to be elaborate, just workable. Creating a plan that looks nice but is unattainable is worse than not creating a plan at all. Failing to plan and follow through on it can lead to disappointment when opportunities for advancement arise.

To begin developing a career plan, one must:

Identify a long-term goal and determine the job requirements for it. Applicable requirements can be found in job descriptions and postings. Do not be intimidated by the job requirements. Use them as a tool, a pathway to your goal. Accomplishing a long-term goal requires working through a plan of

small steps. For example, if the long-term goal is becoming an SPD director, additional experience and education will be required.

Perform a gap analysis. This is just what it sounds like. It is the "gap" between your current status and your long-term goal. What is needed to reach the goal? Perform a self-assessment and be honest. What are your current skills, education and experience, and what new qualifications do you need to reach the goal?

Knowing what is needed to fill the gap will help you develop plans to obtain the skills to transition from your current qualifications and to those needed for goal attainment. For example, the gap analysis between a relatively new technician and the goal of becoming a department director may look like this:

SP technician: Current

- High school diploma
- CRCST certification
- Basic SP system knowledge

SPD director: Future

- Bachelor's degree
- CIS, CHL certifications
- Extensive SP system knowledge

The gap between a high school diploma and a bachelor's degree is the credits needed to obtain that degree. The gap in the certifications is putting in the time and study to obtain the certifications. The gap between basic and extensive SP system knowledge is the time to learn, practice and become proficient in multiple departmental systems.

Identify short-term goals. Realizing that a long-term goal will not be reached immediately, it is necessary to determine the steps needed to reach it. Leverage your identified strengths and develop a plan to transition your weaknesses into opportunities. For example, the goal of obtaining a bachelor's degree will, most

likely, not be reached in one year. Instead, be specific about the requirements and break them into small steps, such as: to obtain a bachelor's degree, a total of 40 credits are still needed. Depending on one's obligations, it may be prudent to set a goal of one, two or three course credits per semester.

Actions to help you implement and achieve your career plan include:

Write down activities and resources to help you reach your goal(s). This is the beginning of your action plan. Be sure to include realistic timelines for meeting each goal. For example, do not state that a college degree can be obtained in three months if this process has not already been started.

Identify barriers to progress. List all barriers and potential solutions. If your current work schedule is not conducive to achieving a short-term goal, is it possible to change the schedule? If not, plan around the schedule. For example, take online courses rather than in-person classes. Family responsibilities are frequently a barrier. Is it possible to complete homework with school-aged children, or will you need help with childcare?

Measure progress. It is important to periodically measure where you are in your plan to determine if you are where you thought you would be or if you have waived from the goal. It is okay not to be where you planned. Just look at why and, if necessary, make corrections to get back on track.

Review your plan on a regular basis. Is your plan still applicable, or have you since changed your end goal? Review the plan now and adjust as needed.

Objective 3: Explore growth tasks to improve skills and knowledge

In today's fast-paced, dynamic SPDs, it is essential that each technician



is qualified for whatever position they are assigned. Even if there is no desire to move to another position, SP technicians need to continually improve their skills and take ownership of their career choice. If one's desire is to move to another position, however, gaining the necessary qualifications is essential. As previously discussed, determining the education required for the desired position needs to be planned.

In addition to pursuing formal education, other growth tasks can help one increase their knowledge base and competency level, including:

On-the-job-training—No matter how long you have been an SP technician, there is always more you can learn. Honing your knowledge of instrumentation is an important skill that is very marketable. One of the best ways to learn more about instrumentation is through on-the-job training. With management's approval, collaborating with or shadowing a co-worker who is more knowledgeable in an instrument specialty is one of the most effective ways to learn about instruments and how they function. On-the-job training is also effective for most of the functions in the SPD, including some supervisory skills. Be sure the person doing the training is qualified in that specialty. Not everyone is highly skilled in every section of the department.

Online training—Today, much information can be obtained from attending online courses. It is important to verify that the source is reputable and the content is pertinent for the education desired. Select the online process that best fits your learning style. If you are a self-starter, taking an on-demand course where classes can be attended anytime may be the best method. Many people, however, need more structure, so a class with required attendance times may be a more efficient way to obtain the needed knowledge.

Working with a mentor—Finding a mentor who can guide one through the process for a specific position is a very effective learning method. A mentor can help make the connections to obtain a desired position and coach their mentee through the learning experiences that are needed for advancement. There are no rules for an ideal number of mentors; however, do not try to work with too many different people or on too many different skills at the same time. Mentors may be found in the SPD, elsewhere in the facility or even offsite.

Teaching others—Sharing one's knowledge reinforces it while also helping others learn and grow. Everyone has their own preferred way of learning, which may be challenging to a preferred teaching style but will also allow one to practice management skills and develop different ways to relate to people. *Note: Do not attempt to teach someone a skill that you have not yet achieved.*

Conferences—Conferences usually offer the most up-to-date knowledge of multiple topics. This type of event also allows one to meet people in various positions who have the knowledge to assist with their learning needs. If a vendor show is included with the conference, medical supply companies may also offer training.

Chapter meetings—Local chapter meetings provide the opportunity to meet with others in SP and related fields. Some chapters offer educational sessions as well as business meetings.

Networking—Networking is the process of talking to and sharing ideas and experiences with others. It can be a valuable tool for learning about other facilities and professions and gaining more technical and managerial knowledge.

Job searches—As strange as it may sound, looking at job search websites can be educational. These sites not only

list the open positions but the skills and education needed to attain those positions. It is not unusual for one to find a new title or position when searching job postings.

Interviews—Interviews can also be very educational. Much experience can be gained by interviewing for a position, even if it is not on one's goal list. Information about the job and facility can be easily obtained during the process. The more interviews attended, the more comfortable one can become with the process. Opened-ended conversation, interaction with multiple people in different positions, and self-assurance are just a few of the skills that can be built and educational experiences that can be obtained by participating in the interview process.

Objective 4: Discuss attainable jobs in the Sterile Processing field

Job titles and responsibilities vary at each healthcare facility, so it is important to verify both before applying for a position. In general, SP positions are as follows:

Technician—Almost every facility employs technicians; however, depending on the region and facility size, the job responsibilities may vary from an entry-level technician to an expert. A technician requires multiple skills, including knowledge of or experience in each area of the department. This position frequently requires certification in the field either upon hire or soon thereafter.

Specialist—This position is usually a step up from the technician role. Specialists require expert knowledge in either an area of the department, like decontamination or instrument assembly, or an instrument family, such as orthopedics or cardiovascular surgery. This position usually requires



a strong knowledge of case cart system management as well as updating count sheets and preference cards. Specialists may train newer technicians within their specialty. For this role, many facilities require instrument certification.

Lead—Lead technicians are usually in charge of an area or specialty. In some facilities, this title is an initial step into a leadership role, as the lead is usually responsible for the functions of their area for a shift. Strong knowledge of the area and how it interrelates to other areas of the SPD and user departments is usually required. Training on how to interact with different personalities, communicate effectively and develop basic leadership skills may be required. In addition, many facilities require instrument certification for this role.

Liaison—Also called a coordinator, this position usually works between the SPD and the OR or other major areas, such as Endoscopy Labs. Usually seen as a minor leadership role, each liaison works closely with their user departments, assessing daily needs, troubleshooting problems, and anticipating changes. They then communicate with SP, following through to ensure the user departments' needs are met. This position requires a high technical skill level, strong knowledge of all areas of the SPD, clear communication skills, and the ability to multitask and change direction quickly. A certification in leadership may be required.

Educator—This role is responsible for the education of all SP staff. Experience in all areas of the department and effective communication and planning skills are required. Educators must be comfortable speaking to groups of people. Assessing and documenting staff competencies is usually required. Some facilities also require the educator

to assist with performance appraisals and employee disciplinary measures. Thorough knowledge of standards, guidelines and regulations is necessary. Certification in instrumentation and leadership and a bachelor's degree may be required.

Shift supervisor—As the title states, this position is responsible for the operations of an entire shift. This includes staffing, production, troubleshooting and coordinating all functions necessary to accomplish the shift responsibilities. The shift supervisor is usually responsible for staff assignments, evaluations and discipline and may also assist with the departmental budget. Effective communication, planning and facilitating skills are required. A comprehensive knowledge of standards, guidelines and regulations is necessary. Certification in instrumentation and leadership may be required as well as a bachelor's degree. In some facilities, this position is responsible for all management responsibilities and functions as the manager or director of the SPD.

Manager—This position usually determines the departmental goals and objectives and is responsible for the entire operations of the SPD. A manager's responsibilities include planning, budgeting, employee discipline, and operating in accordance with all regulations, standards and guidelines. Managers may also be responsible for departmental education. They must be able to communicate with all levels of staff within the healthcare facility. Instrument and leadership certifications and a bachelor's degree are required. The manager operates as the department director in many facilities.

Director—In addition to the SP manager's responsibilities and educational requirements, a director

may be responsible for overseeing multiple departments.

Additional career paths—SP-related positions outside of healthcare facilities are also available. Many vendors employ people with SP experience as clinical educators, and colleges may hire SP professionals as instructors.

Conclusion

The field of Sterile Processing offers many career possibilities. With a commitment to self-growth and education, a technician may spend their SP career providing sterile, functioning medical devices to the facility's patients. With a willingness to advance into a new and more complex position, a technician may have the ability to move into more varied and complex roles, including the responsibility for multiple departments and the people within them. 