

# A practice- building *partnership*

**Laura Horton** shares the details of her collaborative journey towards clinic ownership at Dental Smiles Flagstaff

**L**aura Horton's recent announcement on the business social media platform LinkedIn about her foray into practice ownership reverberated with 149 positive reactions from her professional network. While the step might seem like a monumental leap, for Laura it's a natural progression in a career spanning two decades.

Her narrative is one of unwavering enthusiasm for a profession she embraced as a dental nurse in 1996. She became a treatment coordinator (TCO) in 2004 and a practice manager in 2005. By 2007, she was managing two sites.

Since then, she has transitioned into building her own robust business, Horton Consulting, which helps dental practices thrive with a blend of business development support and treatment coordination implementation.

Her grassroots experience and understanding of the unique position of the TCO have helped her develop a well-respected business model. So, with a hugely successful career that continues to flourish, why diversify now?

## BROUGHT TO LIFE

Laura's latest career move is no surprise to those who know her well. When she wrote that LinkedIn post – 'How often have I said I wish I owned a clinic? How many people have said I should open a clinic? Well, here it is: I'm partnering with three excellent dentists to bring this clinic to life in 2024!' – many acknowledged her innate ability to make her dream a reality.

The seed was planted last year when dentist, colleague and friend Andy Sharpe contacted Laura about his new clinic acquisition – Dental Smiles Flagstaff in Colchester. Andy and his dentist sister Katy already owned Dental Smiles Chelmsford in Essex and Dental Smiles Takeley in Bishop's Stortford with fellow dentist Daniel Golebiowski.

This new clinic was intended to support a better work-life balance for Katy as it was strategically located closer to her home. However, unforeseen circumstances, including Katy's son's health challenges, delayed progression.



**Laura Horton**

Laura has over 20 years' experience in dentistry, working as a dental nurse, practice manager and treatment coordinator. She has been helping other practices achieve success through Horton Consulting for 14 years. Laura has recently taken the leap into practice ownership and is soon to open Dental Smiles Flagstaff.



Laura explains: 'Andy called me. They had bought a building to convert into a practice for Katy so she could be closer to home for the children, but they were in a bit of a situation. Her son has cystic fibrosis, and he'd been in hospital for many months and was very poorly. It had delayed the start-up and progression of the clinic, and they were now thinking of bringing a partner into the clinic. He asked if I knew anyone.'

### PIVOTAL MOMENT

Laura had a history of consulting with the team, so she understood their business operations. The chemistry and synergy with Katy, Andrew and Daniel, as well as their business ethos, had left a lasting impression.

She says: 'I worked with them for a year on a consultancy basis until the pandemic. I'd been supporting their manager, Jo, and helping to implement roles, and I got to know a lot about how they ran their businesses – and was impressed.'

They were working smartly, and I already had great insight. We had remained friends and, as the practice was close to home, my family had moved to their practice as patients.'

Her decision to partner with them marked a pivotal moment.

'I'd always considered owning a practice, but it was a project I'd delayed because I wanted to be a present mother to my son. Having already purchased the building – it was once a minor oral surgery clinic closed for many years – they had plans for how the practice would be built.'

### A CLEAR PATH

And so the path seemed straightforward, albeit laden with the burdensome steps required for financing and setting up the practice.

One area remained a deal breaker for Laura – the space to accommodate treatment coordination.

'They hadn't factored into the plans a consultation room. Interestingly, they'd never worked with treatment coordination in the way I implemented it, so we discussed a need for a TCO room and agreed to convert one of the surgeries.'

Happily, the trio had a robust and long-standing relationship with their bank manager, which meant arranging finance was simple.

Laura explains: 'So many things that would probably be typical headaches have been relatively simple to action

because of their existing clinics and robust relationship with the bank. We are staying with the same brand, which has many benefits, including centralising finance and compliance.'

### CURATING A TEAM

For Laura, the most challenging part of this process has been waiting and grappling with the slow pace of bankers and lawyers.

'Time is crucial,' Laura says. 'Delays mean accruing interest on bank loans. We've planned to open two surgeries initially and expand as needed.'

'Choosing your team is vital, especially in partnerships. A comprehensive partnership agreement is non-negotiable. Few have these agreements, causing problems down the line.'

'My partners have been nothing but supportive of TCO-led experience and many other out-there ideas. They have put complete trust in me as I have them. One thing we have agreed on from the start is full transparency and openness at all times, as I could not bear conflict down the line. It is better to handle situations in the here and now without emotion.'

But recruiting 'hasn't been a low point, thankfully', she says. 'We've found an amazing dental therapist and two promising dental nurses, streamlining the process.'

'Andy's been outstanding, leading the building project despite managing two clinics. Katy's managing the CQC application, which has been a bit challenging. Daniel has been managing the financial aspects of the loans, finance agreements, cash flow forecasting, etc. It has been real teamwork. Overall, it's been a journey of highs and a few frustrating lows, but the progress is exciting.'

### BALANCING ACT

Family support has always played a significant role in Laura's career, particularly in balancing parenting and her business commitments. She was therefore meticulous in planning her involvement, ensuring her dedication to the new practice didn't compromise her roles elsewhere.

'I didn't tell my parents about my plans for quite a while – in fact, not until the company was formed and all the legal documents had been signed. I was very mindful of not wanting to worry or overwhelm them.'

The practice is also 40 minutes from her son's school.

Laura explains: 'The school has excellent wraparound care. My husband and I work full-time and will continue to do so. And my parents will be there, particularly during the school holidays, to help us. So, nothing will change except Harry's school days, which will potentially be a bit longer when I'm in the practice. My team at Horton Consulting was thrilled for me, and I am lucky to have that circle of trust.'

### GUIDING THE PATIENT JOURNEY

Laura will focus on critical aspects of the new clinic, such as budgeting, cash flow forecasting and, of course, the patient experience. Her vision includes a patient-centric approach, where every team member plays a crucial role in fostering strong patient relationships.

She plans to work as the new practice's treatment coordinator three days a week for 18 months to two years.

'It would be silly for me not to because I know I can convert patients through the experience I can offer – so that's important. We already have a virtual treatment coordinator in

## About the build

The building was a dental clinic and last operated as a Mydentist minor oral surgery (MOS) clinic until it closed in 2021. It has been refurbished to improve the flow and accessibility of the space, including equalising the floors that were originally on multiple levels.

The consultation suite has undergone the largest transformation – raising the floor and installing a window have made the room seem brighter and larger. An orangery has also been built to house the patient lounge, replacing an old conservatory.

Situated in a conservation area, planning permission for the practice was a challenge, with objections raised to proposed signage. The building exterior currently features temporary signage and the application has been extended until the end of January 2024, just two weeks before the practice opens.

## SPOTLIGHT

place, and that person will work within all of the processes and automation I have for clinics.'

She adds: 'The plan is to spend 12 days a month in the clinic as a TCO and one day a week lecturing at events and working with clients. The patient experience will be TCO-led, with Katy as the clinical director and principal dentist.'

'It's exciting because I've been leading patient experiences for over two decades. We aim for a high-level patient journey where everyone involved in their care, from dental nurses to the front-of-house team, connects with patients.'

'We also plan to support local schools, starting with my son's school. Oral health education is my passion, especially ensuring kids avoid tooth decay and loss. That's why working with children is close to my heart.'

### UNWAVERING SUPPORT

It seems this desire for progress is embedded in Laura's DNA. So where does this strength to smash those glass ceilings spring from?

'Without a doubt, Dr Ash Parmar stands as the most remarkable man I've ever had the honour of knowing. His support – and his wife, Jyoti's – has been unwavering.'

Laura's last employed role saw her working with Ash at his hugely successful practices, Perfect Smile Studios in Hornchurch and Hertford, just before launching Horton Consulting.

She says: 'Ash was the one to see something in me, believe in me, mentor me and bring out the best. He taught me to react differently to life's ups and downs. He taught me about the power of a positive mental attitude and the law of attraction.'

The Parmars were keen to support Laura again and helped ensure every detail of her new partnership was meticulously covered.

'Their excitement was palpable, yet their initial concerns centred on my protection and the proper execution of our arrangements, given their unfamiliarity with my partners – it was a truly heart-warming gesture,' Laura says.

'Opening this practice wouldn't have been possible without Ash encouraging



me to establish Horton Consulting, which led to me meeting Andy, Katy and Daniel. It's all thanks to his unwavering support – and the doors he opened for me. I remain eternally grateful for the opportunities he has given me. He's truly a remarkable individual. I live day to day by his example. Changing the way you think really can change your life.'