

# IN FOCUS



## Why are optometrist vacancies in the UK so difficult to fill?

Recent research has revealed vacancies for optometrists are often open for long periods of time. **Zoe Wickens** asks optical recruiters and employers why

According to new data from job site Indeed, optometrist vacancies actually appear to be the hardest in the UK to fill, with more than two thirds of job postings remaining vacant for approximately 60 days (*Optician*, 08.02.19).

On the list of vacancies that remained unfilled for more than 60 days on Indeed, optometrists came out on top (68.79%), ahead of solicitors (51.4%), surgeons (46.32%) and software engineers (41.8%). The role came in second place in terms of the highest average salary at £50,000, with first place going to software architects at £70,000.

Luke Elias, managing director of specialist recruitment firm Vivid Optical, reacted to the findings by saying: 'I must say that I am not surprised – optometrists are few and far between. Some of the vacancies we are working on have

been open for over five years and there are even some towns in the UK with six or seven optometrist positions available.'

Alan Gregg, head of Specsavers recruitment services, added: 'The Indeed report is certainly interesting and in part does reflect

**“People seem to prefer to work as locums, mainly because their revenue can be higher and they can enjoy the flexibility of being self-employed optometrists.”**

how hard it can be to fill an optometrist role. It's worth pointing out that recruitment challenges are not a new thing and the picture is not necessarily the same for all regions. In some areas, it does take time to employ the right person but for example university cities like Plymouth, London and Birmingham have a

healthy supply of graduates coming into the industry.'

*Optician's* own data on this subject showed that optometrist adverts on the Optician Jobs website generated 47% of advert views but just 27% of applications during the past 12 months,

showing that candidates were actively looking at adverts, but were not committed to submitting applications.

### ADVERTISING FOR JOBS

Nicki Clarke, optical and audiology recruitment manager at Network Open, has used a variety of ways to advertise for optometrists,

including her own website, *Optician* and other job boards. Clarke acknowledged that it is hard to fill optometrist roles and that it was not always due to a lack of trained optometrists or people being reluctant to move for a job, but rather that there was a shift towards people wanting to do more locum-based work as opposed to having a permanent job.

'Response is low. People seem to prefer to work as locums, mainly because their revenue can be higher and they can enjoy the flexibility of being self-employed optometrists,' she said. 'As long as I have done optical recruitment it has been hard to place optometrists in permanent roles, but we do get the odd one happening from time to time. I do use LinkedIn Recruiter a lot and can be more successful than other adverts.'

When asked if they were doing anything differently with job adverts to try to gain some interest, Clarke said: 'Not really, apart from

trying to get across to my clients they do need to increase their salaries for employed optometrists. As a recruiter you cannot just rely on adverts you do need to look for candidates yourself, such as referrals, CV boards, LinkedIn and My Database.'

**PROBLEMS WITH RECRUITING**

Lawrence Jenkinson, dispensing optician at Lawrence Jenkinson Opticians in Yorkshire, started a recruitment process for a new optometrist in October 2018 via one agency that was unsuccessful in sourcing any candidates. A second agency managed to source one candidate in mid-January, but the practice unfortunately could not afford the salary expectations.

Jenkinson said: 'We advertised recently in *Optician* and in *Optometry Today*, as well as on our local optometric committee website. This last week we have received two further applicants: one who saw our advert in *Optician* and one from *Optometry Today*. One applicant is a locum optometrist and the other may want to be employed. We haven't yet carried out interviews.'

He continued: 'One could speculate that the increasing numbers of high street chains are



said, we have been unable to get any regular Saturday optometrist cover for the best part of two years.'

**THE LOCUM EFFECT**

Niall Dorgan, director of Enhanced Clinical Services (EOS), has advertised for two optometrist positions in London and Essex in the past 12 months, with both recruitment campaigns appearing in *Optician* and *Optometry Today*. EOS received 12 applications for the London position but none for the one in Essex.

'We have been trying to recruit an optometrist for the Essex

newly qualified optometrists wishing to move out of cities. This may leave very few optometrists left, resulting in the same optometrist base who have lived in that area for many years making the job market very static, with established practices holding on to their staff and established self-employed optometrists working in a group of practices that they have built up over several years. This static market may actually be one reason why new optometrists are reluctant or unable to move into an area due to a lack of opportunities.'

Dorgan agreed that there seemed to be a shift towards people wanting to do more locum work for flexibility rather than having a permanent optometrist post.

He said: 'It's for tax reasons and the National Insurance benefits of being self-employed. Also, there is greater flexibility and a greater perceived financial reward from locum rates compared to a salary. In a job-rich environment, there is no need to seek job security. The difficulty of recruiting, especially outside of main urban areas, will have a greater impact on smaller independent practices. Continually increasing salaries and locum rates are not a sustainable proposition even for multiples, however this would impact on the independent sector far sooner. There may also be an impact on hospital optometry and the potential for recruitment there where salaries are capped by the NHS.' ●

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attracting most of the available optometrists, whether employed or locum, by advertising attractive salary packages and facilities with which small independents cannot compete. I am, however, of the opinion that there is increased locum activity because of the flexibility of working and the potential for greater incomes, particularly for Saturday working. Again, one suspects that the chains are offering larger salaries for weekend working than the independents can't match. That

position for some time but with no success. Both roles were part time, and this may make it more difficult outside of a large urban area as people will not move for a part time position. We also recruited for another London based optometrist last year, but successes do seem to depend on the area,' Dorgan said. 'London is very easy to recruit in but in Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk where we work it is very difficult. There may be a number of reasons for this, but I believe it certainly has to do with the number of young

**VIEW FROM  
ABDO**

It's a time for celebration and reflection at ABDO. This month 20 years ago Sir Anthony Garrett CBE joined ABDO taking up the post of General Secretary. There has been much change in the Association during the past 20 years and Tony has been instrumental in this successful journey.

Shortly before Tony joined the organisation Thurailingam Pavanakumar, known as Pavan, had taken up the post of chief finance officer. They very quickly formed a working relationship which continues to this day. Credit to all that has been achieved must be attributed to both these great men and the team they have recruited to work alongside them.

Twenty years ago, ABDO did not employ any dispensing opticians, a stark contrast to today when most of the senior team are DOs, along with two optometrists.

Since joining ABDO Tony and Pavan have overseen the relocation of the Association's HQ to 199 Gloucester Terrace from Hurlingham. The move provided the Association with prestigious Central London offices co-owned with FODO and the FMO. The BCLA now also occupy the building.

We have seen the formation of ABDO College at Godmersham, Kent, which opened its doors to students in 2001. Today 50% of all student DOs train via blended learning at ABDO College. Credit must be given to Jo Underwood, principal of the college since the start, and her incredible team.

Most recently we have seen the opening of the National Resource Centre in Birmingham, the new home for ABDO examinations and training. ABDO has also seen many organisational changes, importantly the move from an ABDO council to the current nationally elected board.

While we reflect and celebrate, I know Tony and Pavan are always forward thinking. Watch this space.

**Clive Marchant**  
ABDO president