



Unearthing drivers of patient demand and practice productivity

CommBank Dental Insights 2024



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Foreword from CommBank Health

Welcome to the latest edition of the CommBank Health - Dental Insights Report, where we again put emerging operational and financial trends under the microscope. At CommBank Health we are committed to supporting dental practices navigate through prevailing challenges and opportunities, and enabling confident strategic decision-making informed by data and insights.

This year the impact of cost of living pressures on patient demand has emerged as the top issue, while increasing operational expenses and practitioner shortages are constraining profitability and growth.

The good news is that many practices are front-footed in addressing these challenges, and most are optimistic. Notably, regional practices are more confident than their metropolitan counterparts and are forecasting stronger financial performance.

To boost demand and the patient experience, dental businesses are mobilising multiple solutions to help patients easily find, access, and pay for appointments. This is supported by a focus on enhancing equipment and premises, including investment in clinical technology.

Streamlining systems and processes in search of internal efficiencies also remains a priority. This is contributing to a groundswell of interest in data-driven tools, including analytics, to better understand and optimise practice performance and evolving applications for Artificial Intelligence (AI).

These insights can help practice owners and managers consider which levers they can pull to increase or sustain patient demand and practice productivity. With external benchmarking identified the area of most interest to practices, we hope this report can help bridge that gap.



Albert Naffah
CEO CommBank Health
Commonwealth Bank of Australia

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Foreword from the Australian Dental Association (ADA)

I am most pleased to introduce the 2024 edition of Dental Insights, a report packed with valuable discussion of trends shaping the future of our profession. This year, we delved deeper into unearthing drivers of patient demand and practice productivity, examining key areas that impact your success and the well-being of your patients.

One particularly encouraging finding reveals a growing commitment to sustainable dentistry practices. The report shows a notable increase from 41% to 46% of practices having a focus on sustainable measures, demonstrating a positive shift towards environmental responsibility within our profession.

However, challenges remain. Payroll tax interpretations pose complexities for one in three practices, underlining the need for clear guidance and efficient management strategies.

Dental Insights 2024 serves as a compass, helping you navigate through the evolving landscape of dentistry and practice operation. By leveraging these

insights, you can optimise your practice, engage your patients more effectively, and build a thriving team.

Thank you to those ADA members who responded to the invitation to complete this survey. Your contribution to these results is appreciated.

I encourage you to delve into the report and discover the valuable information it offers. I trust that we can harness these insights to shape a brighter future for ourselves, our patients, and the dental profession.



Dr Scott Davis
Federal President Australian
Dental Association Inc.

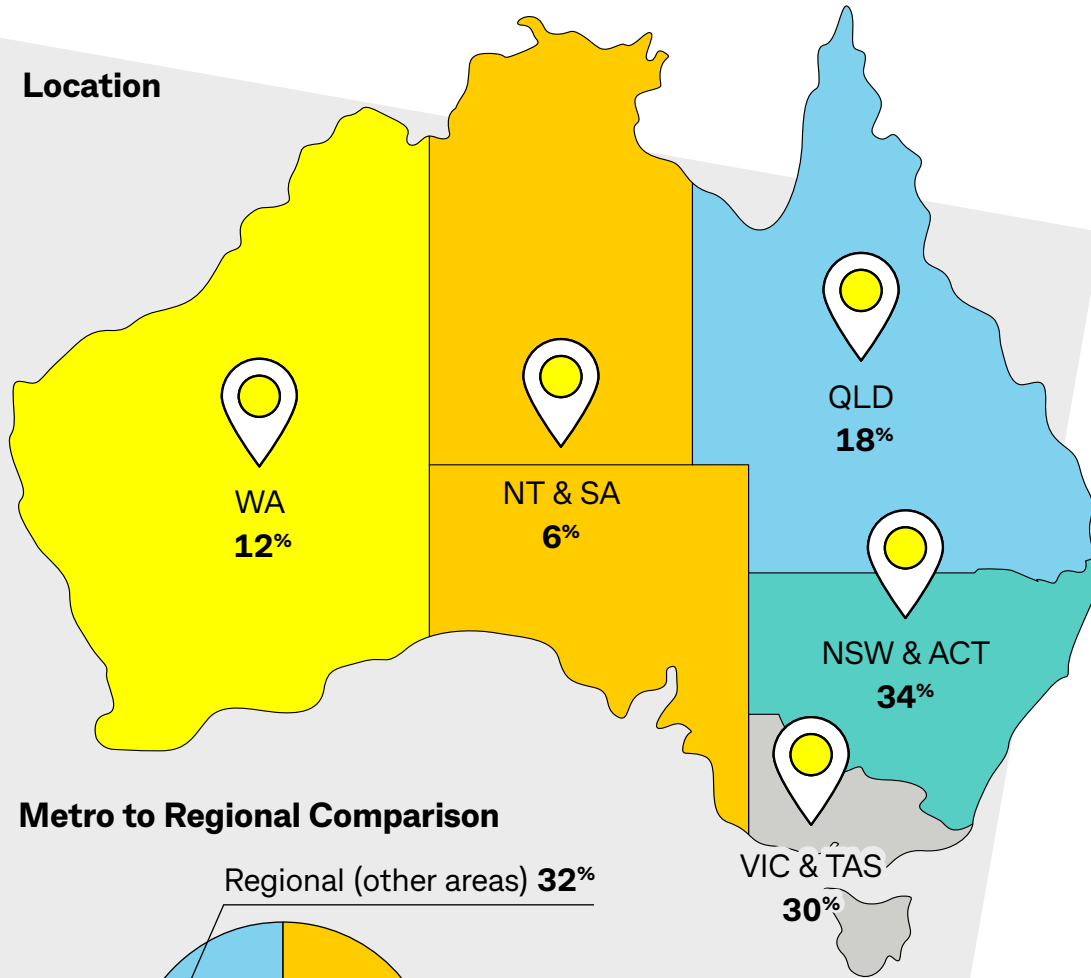
About CommBank & ADA Dental Insights

The 2024 Dental Insights Report is based on a quantitative survey of 414 decision-makers and influencers at dental practices across Australia. The survey examined practices' operational and financial performance, strategic priorities and outlook to inform benchmarking and planning activities among practice decision-makers.

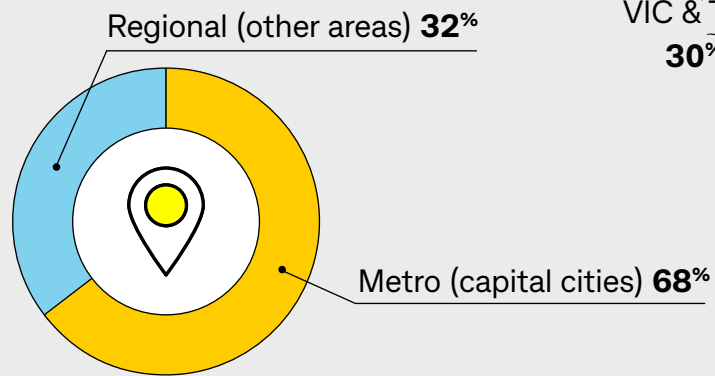
Fifth Quadrant conducted online practice surveys on behalf of CommBank Heath and the Australian Dental Association (ADA). The ADA supplied Fifth Quadrant with contact details that enabled it to conduct the research. The study of dental practices was conducted between 27 October 2023 and 17 November 2023. All references to practices in this report refer to those who participated in the survey, unless stated otherwise.

Respondent profile

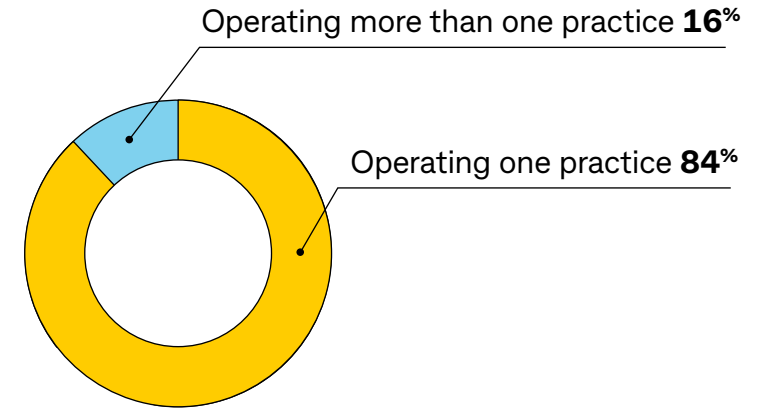
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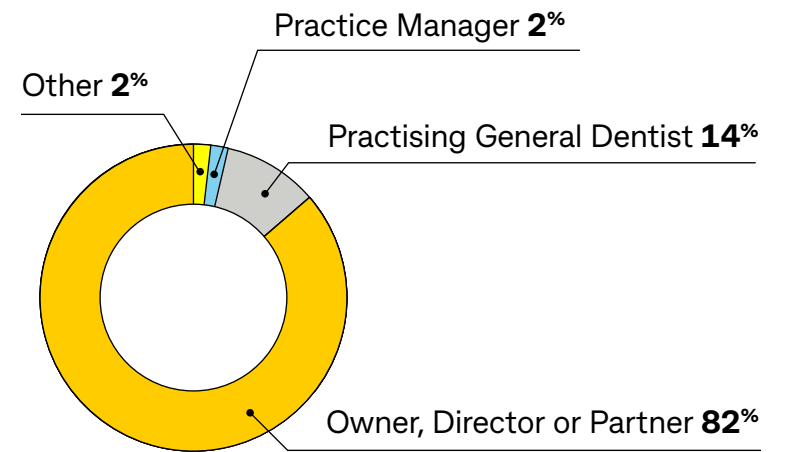
Metro to Regional Comparison



Number of practices operated



Role in the business



Key insights

Dental practices across Australia are navigating persistent challenges. Operating costs are expected to keep rising amid widespread concerns about higher living costs weighing on patient demand. However, most practice operators are optimistic and taking proactive steps to improve their performance and patient care.

Operational and financial drivers

Performance outlook

A mixed outlook for appointment volumes and broadly anticipated operating cost increases are set to keep margins under pressure. Even so, 60% of practices are confident in future conditions, with regional practices more optimistic.

Top challenges

The impact of cost of living pressures and economic uncertainty on patient demand is the most common challenge, now cited by 78% of practices. That is followed by increased staff costs and overheads and those relating to talent shortages.

Opportunities to improve performance

70%

are prioritising at least one initiative to **acquire new patients**

Practices are adopting different strategies to find and keep patients with a focus on improving practice visibility, convenience, and affordability. Top tactics include increasing marketing activity, improving the clinic experience, extending services and opening hours and offering payment options.

52%

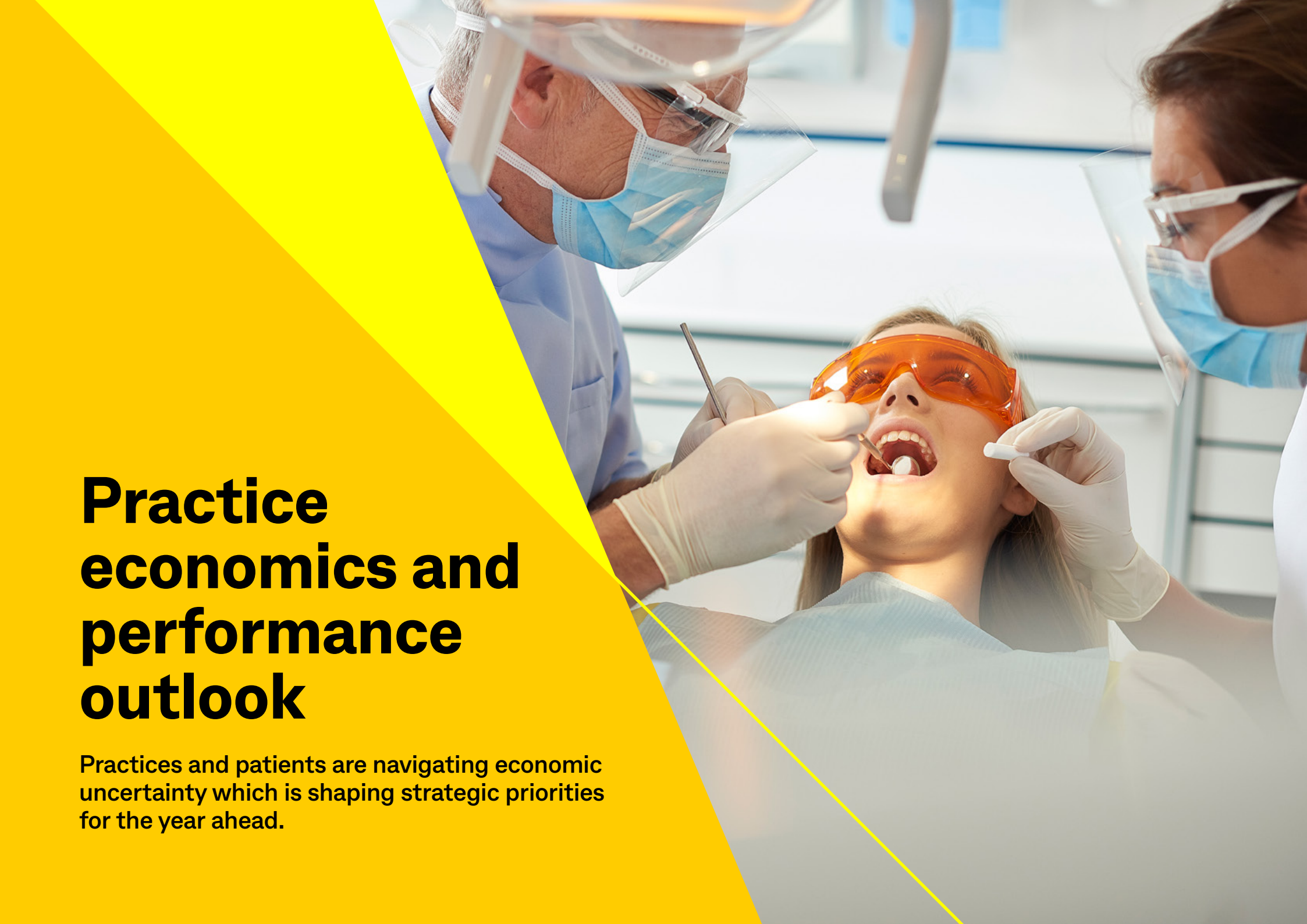
are prioritising at least one initiative to **drive efficiencies**

Changing systems and processes to drive productivity and reducing costs are top priorities for practices. Technology investment has a role to play in driving both clinical and operational performance, and interest is building in data-driven tools, including applications for analytics and AI.

47%

are prioritising at least one initiative to **attract and retain staff**

While staffing challenges appear to have eased, talent shortages are constraining capacity for most practices. A focus on a positive, flexible workplace culture and offering competitive remuneration are the most cited differentiators among practices.



Practice economics and performance outlook

Practices and patients are navigating economic uncertainty which is shaping strategic priorities for the year ahead.

The state of the dental sector's financial and operational health

Like their patients, Australian dental practices are navigating a dynamic economic landscape. CommBank's upcoming Patient Experience Insights Report confirms that many dental patients are taking steps to reduce health expenses amid cost of living pressures. The same inflationary drivers are keeping operating costs elevated for practices, with notable rises in business insurance, payroll, and premises-related overheads.

Even so, 30% of dental practices report higher monthly revenues than 12 months ago, and 39% believe they remain unchanged. A further 31% have experienced a decline. Practices in regional locations are more likely to have recorded revenue increases (42%) than those in metropolitan areas (25%), and fewer have seen turnover decline.

Average weekly appointment numbers have also climbed from 88 in 2022 to 96 in 2023. However, practice teams appear to be doing more with less to service this patient demand, with full-time equivalent staff and contractor numbers declining moderately year-on-year.

At the same time, the number of unutilised clinical working hours each week has grown, particularly among practices in metropolitan areas and those experiencing revenue pressures. This is just one factor making attracting patients a top strategic priority, as well as presenting an opportunity to fine-tune acquisition and appointment scheduling strategies.

Drivers of changing practice economics



Monthly revenue
(12-month change)



Operating costs
(12-month change)



Number of dental chairs



FTE staff and contractors
(Current)



Patient appointments
(Weekly)



Unutilised work hours
(Weekly)



Average days open
(Weekly)

	31% (Decreased)	2% (Decreased)	44% (1-2 chairs)	54% (1-4 staff)	60% (1-99 appointments)	40% (0-5 hours)	15% (<5 days)
	39% (No change)	15% (No change)	41% (3-4 chairs)	31% (5-10 staff)	28% (100-200 appointments)	26% (6-10 hours)	56% (5 days)
	30% (Increased)	83% (Increased)	15% (5+ chairs)	15% (11+ staff)	12% (200+ appointments)	34% (11+ hours)	29% (6-7 days)
Average practice	-	-	3.1 chairs (-0.1 chairs from 2022)	6.2 staff (-0.3 staff from 2022)	96 appointments (+8 appointments from 2022)	14 hours (+3 hours from 2022)	5.1 days (+0.1 days from 2022)

Optimism outshines uncertainty, led by regional practices

Across the dental sector, practices remain divided on the outlook for the year ahead. While most express confidence in business conditions (60%), 40% remain uncertain or concerned. Reflecting their anticipated outperformance on multiple metrics, regional practices are more optimistic (net 45% positive) than those in metropolitan areas (net 7%).







This sentiment is supported by more regional practices expecting employee numbers and capital expenditure to grow in anticipation of higher patient numbers and revenue. They are also more likely to expect cost increases than metropolitan peers, albeit with less impact on profitability.

Irrespective of location, most practices expect cost increases, while the number expecting meaningful increases in revenue or patient numbers have fallen year-on-year. This is weighing on profit projections for many practices, particularly metropolitan ones.

Despite this pressure, one in two practices are now growth-oriented in the year ahead, compared to 47% in 2022. That uplift is driven only by regional practices (41% to 51% year-on-year), with no movement in metropolitan practices (49%).

To grow or maintain revenue and manage escalating cost pressures, practices are seeking new patients and internal efficiency gains. These are two priorities in the search for greater practice productivity.

12-month confidence and growth outlook

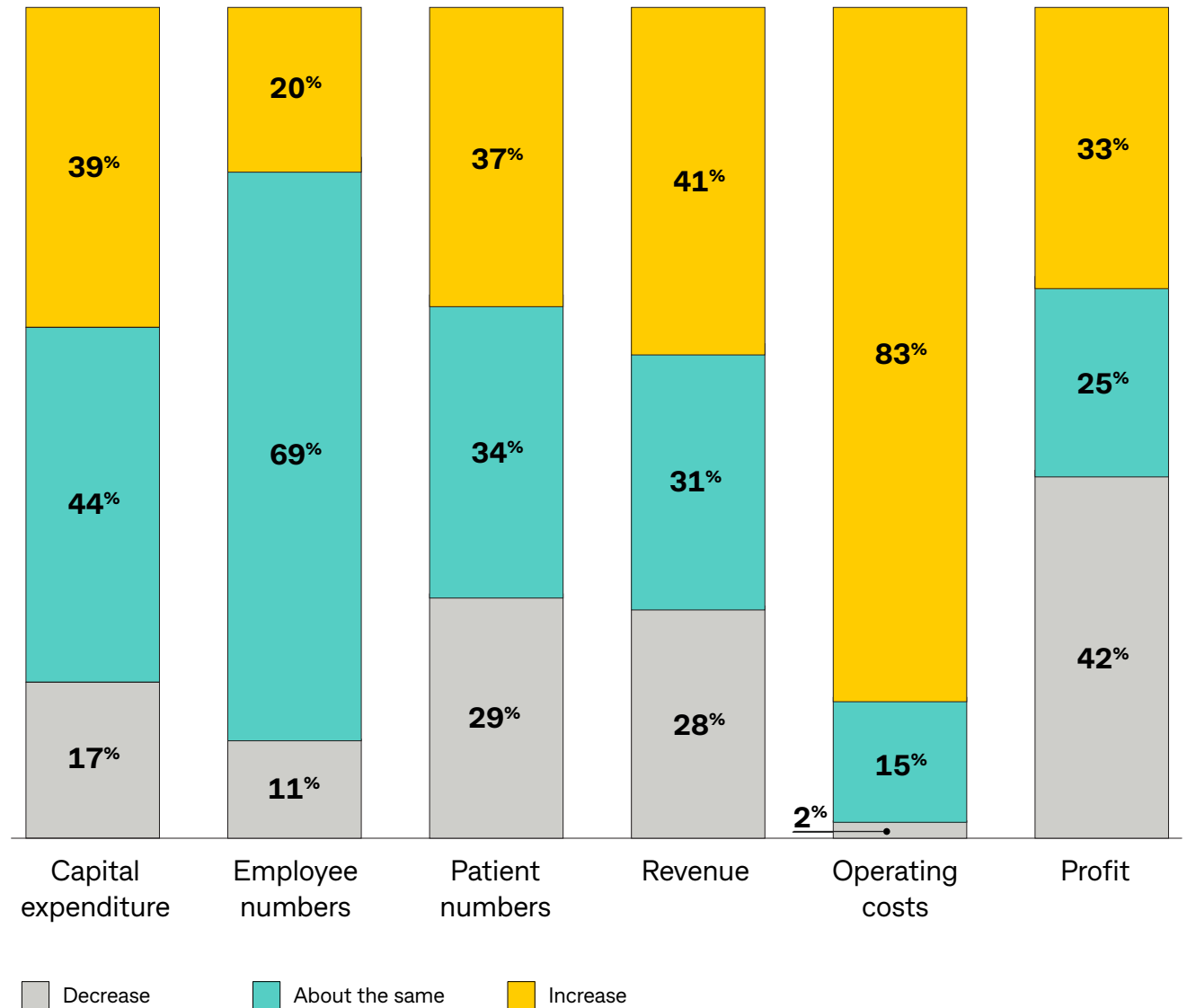
Net confidence in business conditions	Approach to Business
 <p>all practices +19%</p>	 <p>focused on growth 50%</p>
 <p>regional practices +45%</p>	 <p>maintain revenue 41%</p>
 <p>metro practices +7%</p>	 <p>downsize or close 9%</p>

Operational and financial performance indicators

Expectation among all practices over the next 12 months and net expectations by location

Net expectations by location, over the next 12 months

Metro	+19%	+4%	+4%	+9%	+77%	-13%
Regional	+26%	+20%	+15%	+21%	+86%	-2%



Driving patient demand and efficiencies top the priorities list

Above all challenges facing practices, the impact of cost of living pressures and economic uncertainty on patient demand stands out. It has risen year-on-year to become the most common concern (78%). The upcoming CommBank Patient Experience Insights Report will reveal this view is not unfounded. That study shows that almost one in two dental patients have delayed or canceled appointments in the past year, with the most common reasons being cost-related.

As a result, dental practices are planning initiatives to acquire new patients in the next year, with investing in sales and marketing activity now the equally highest-ranked business priority (33%). This is more prevalent among metropolitan practices (38%) compared to regional peers (23%). Many also intend to upgrade equipment and premises to enhance care, services, and the in-clinic experience.

As we have already seen, rising costs are expected to continue, and only one in five intend to expand staff numbers in the next 12 months, a figure that has decreased from the prior year.

Many practices confirm that rising payroll and fixed costs and attracting and retaining qualified staff are among the more persistent challenges they face.




In response, streamlining systems and processes to drive efficiencies and cost-reduction measures remain top priorities. These are closely followed by employee engagement initiatives and hiring intentions across roles, which is a greater focus for regional practices more likely to be experiencing staffing constraints.



Payroll tax in focus

New applications of existing payroll tax legislation have implications for practices' financial performance, and management and compliance are a challenge for one in three. The most commonly cited obstacles are understanding relevant rulings, knowing what to include in reporting and obtaining advice.

Challenges and business priorities over the next 12 months

Top challenges	 <p>Cost of living and economic uncertainty impacting patient demand (78%) and growing or maintaining patient numbers (52%)</p>	 <p>Increasing costs of payroll (64%) and fixed overheads (63%) and keeping up with new technologies (26%)</p>	 <p>Finding and keeping qualified staff (62%) and maintaining work-life balance (53%) and positive mental health (51%)</p>
Top business priorities	<p>70% are prioritising at least one initiative to acquire new patients</p>	<p>52% are prioritising at least one initiative to drive efficiencies</p>	<p>47% are prioritising at least one initiative to attract and retain staff</p>
Tactics to achieve objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in sales and marketing approaches (33%) Invest in new equipment to improve care and offer new services (29%) Invest in upgrading the practice (24%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapting systems and processes to drive efficiency and productivity (33%) Restructuring operational costs or reducing debt (33%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employee engagement (30%) Increase number of dentists or specialists (22%) Increase the number of assistants, hygienists, technicians or therapists (21%)

Norlane Dental Aesthetics and Implants

Case Study



Prioritising investment in clinical technology, dedication to continuous improvement, and a sharp focus on personalised patient care affords Norlane Dental a positive outlook, says Dr Rashi Gupta.

Dr Rashi Gupta, owner of Norlane Dental, is no stranger to conquering a challenge. Transforming an ageing dental clinic purchased in 2011 from a paper-based operation to a digital one and then navigating two Covid lockdowns merely hints at her determination.

More recently, Norlane Dental moved from its original three-chair practice in the backstreets of Geelong to an eight-chair clinic on the main road. It is located in a service hub with a preschool, medical centre, and a café. After just four months, the benefits of expansion are more than “exceeding expectations.”

However, the key to this success runs deeper than a high-spec, modern fit-out and convenient location. According to Rashi, it stems from an unwavering focus on delivering a better patient experience, given that “patient expectations are rising, they want more convenience, more transparency, and they push us for better customer service.”

From here, Rashi is evaluating the best pathway to scale up the practice further by attracting more patients and practitioners, using reproducible systems for service consistency and efficiency, and investing in cutting-edge clinical technology.

Multi-channel marketing activates patient demand

Norlane Dental's recently appointed in-house marketing team seeks to bring the positive patient experience to life in multiple channels to support patient demand. A strong digital focus includes a website with online bookings and extensive social media use, showing team videos, and 'before and after' patient transformations so patients see "friendly faces" and "peer achievements" before arriving.

Newsletters, editorials, radio interviews, as well as patient reviews and recalls are all aimed at engaging what Rashi describes as "four generations of patients coming through the doors." And it's making an impact, especially amid increased competition from corporate dental practices.

The foundations of personalised care

Rashi says that easy-to-follow, repeatable systems are crucial to delivering consistent service quality and personalised patient care. Rashi believes that "culture is so important to attracting patients, but it all begins with staff. How we approach support, efficiency, and positivity contributes to the patient experience."

For Norlane Dental, offering a personal touch relies on shared commitment and responsibility with "everybody knowing their job and doing it to a T." Rashi says it can be as simple as reception staff ensuring each patient walks out with a treatment plan and next appointment, to "every patient being followed up by the nurse who was with them through the treatment".

"A practice management system can send automated messages, but this is personalised; it's about humans, being in touch with the patient and providing quality care."



Innovation meets changing patient expectations

Norlane Dental is at the forefront of emerging technologies. Rashi is an early adopter of clinical equipment and digital tools that increase efficiencies, shorten patient wait times and drive better patient results.

Rashi says that an on-site 3D printer and X-ray technologies are just some of the technologies speeding up patient procedures. The prospect of same-day crowns and implants or bridge and denture repairs is very well received by patients, as opposed to waiting multiple days.

In addition, the upcoming launch of a General Anaesthetic service will take its well-used Sedation Dentistry offering one step further; fully sedating patients will be highly attractive to those struggling with dental anxiety.

Adopting a continuous improvement mindset

Rashi explains that professional development is vital to the continuous improvement mindset of the practice. Retraining or upskilling staff helps the practice adapt to changing dental practices and patient demand. "We sponsor courses to upskill staff," Rashi says. "For example, we recently sponsored one of our long-term nurses for a two-year dental technician course, enabling her to help set up and work in the new in-house lab. We consistently invest in trainees within our organisation to develop their skills over time."

Individual training is supported by whole-of-practice development. Rashi explains that she "mentors dentists in complicated cases, but we do professional courses all the time so that we are always aligned to global best practices".

Steady navigation of sector challenges

Of course, Norlane Dental is not immune to typical sector challenges. Rashi says that the upward pressure on operational costs is a constant, but the clinic's strategic responses make a difference.

For instance, using digital tools and social media marketing to drive demand and diversify its services into high-growth areas of dentistry. To help patients navigate cost of living pressures, Rashi also offers tailored payment plans to give patients clarity, flexibility, and comfort. These are just some strategies working together to address persistent challenges.

www.norlanedental.com.au



Patient engagement

To acquire new patients and better serve existing ones, practices are focused on awareness, convenience and patient support.



Boosting demand and experiences across the patient journey

Practices are implementing dual strategies to counteract the potential for subdued demand and enhance the overall patient experience. This includes marketing activity to appeal to new patients, offering new services and convenient access, and payment options to help patients navigate affordability issues.

While one in three are prioritising investment in sales and marketing in the year ahead, 81% of practices have some form of sales and marketing budget. On average, practices spend 3.5% of annual turnover on marketing, which is higher for practices focused on growth (4.0%) and in metropolitan locations (3.7%) that tend to be more competitive.

To attract and retain patients, practices engage in a range of digital and non-digital activities. The more common tactics include periodic appointment reminders,

a well-designed website, and visible external signage, all of which have grown in the past 12 months.

In addition, making the practice more easily discoverable through search engine optimisation and paid search have become more popular.

Growth-focused practices are more active in every category compared to those seeking to maintain revenues. They are particularly focused on digital initiatives, which can be instructive given their stronger intentions to grow patient numbers.

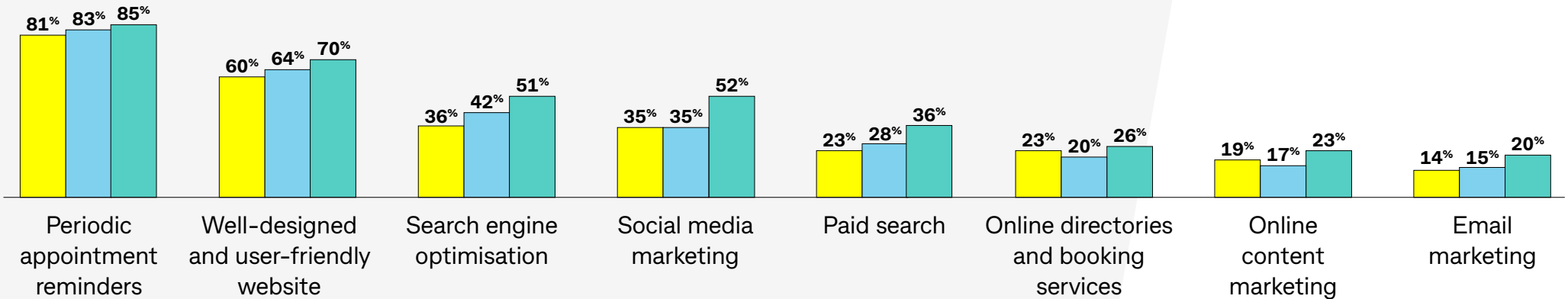
This includes far more growth-oriented practices seeking to engage patients through websites, social media marketing and search-related enhancements. They also use online search directories and booking services, digital content, and email marketing more frequently.



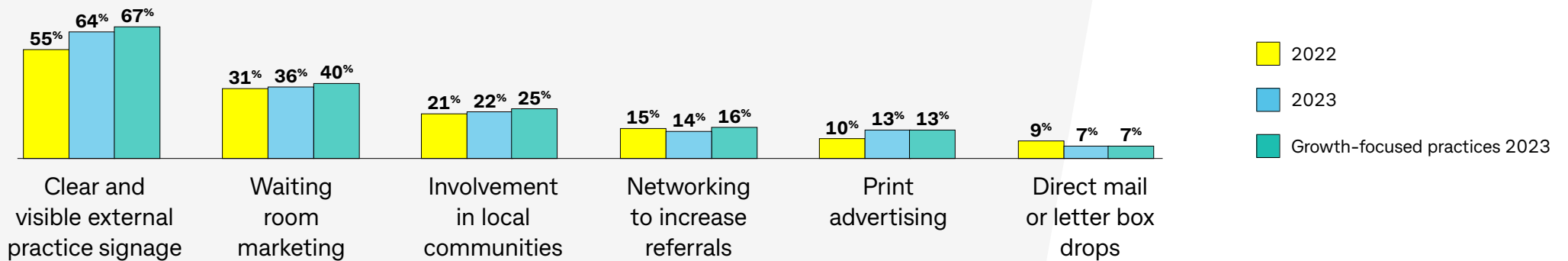
Activity to attract and retain patients

Year-on-Year comparison and growth-focused practices

Digital activity



Non-Digital activity



Boosting demand and experiences across the patient journey (cont.)

Alongside marketing activity and measures to engage patients, practices are looking at other avenues to meet patient needs and grow organically. This includes an incremental uplift in new services offered, with cosmetic dentistry, orthodontics and sleep dentistry increasing most from 2022. The latter is set to grow fastest in the next two years.



Addressing complications from dental tourism

In the past year, 79% of dental practices have treated patients who have presented with complications after receiving overseas treatments. With an average of over five patients per practice, the most commonly reported issues are crowns and bridges (82%), implants (75%) and cosmetic dentistry (40%).

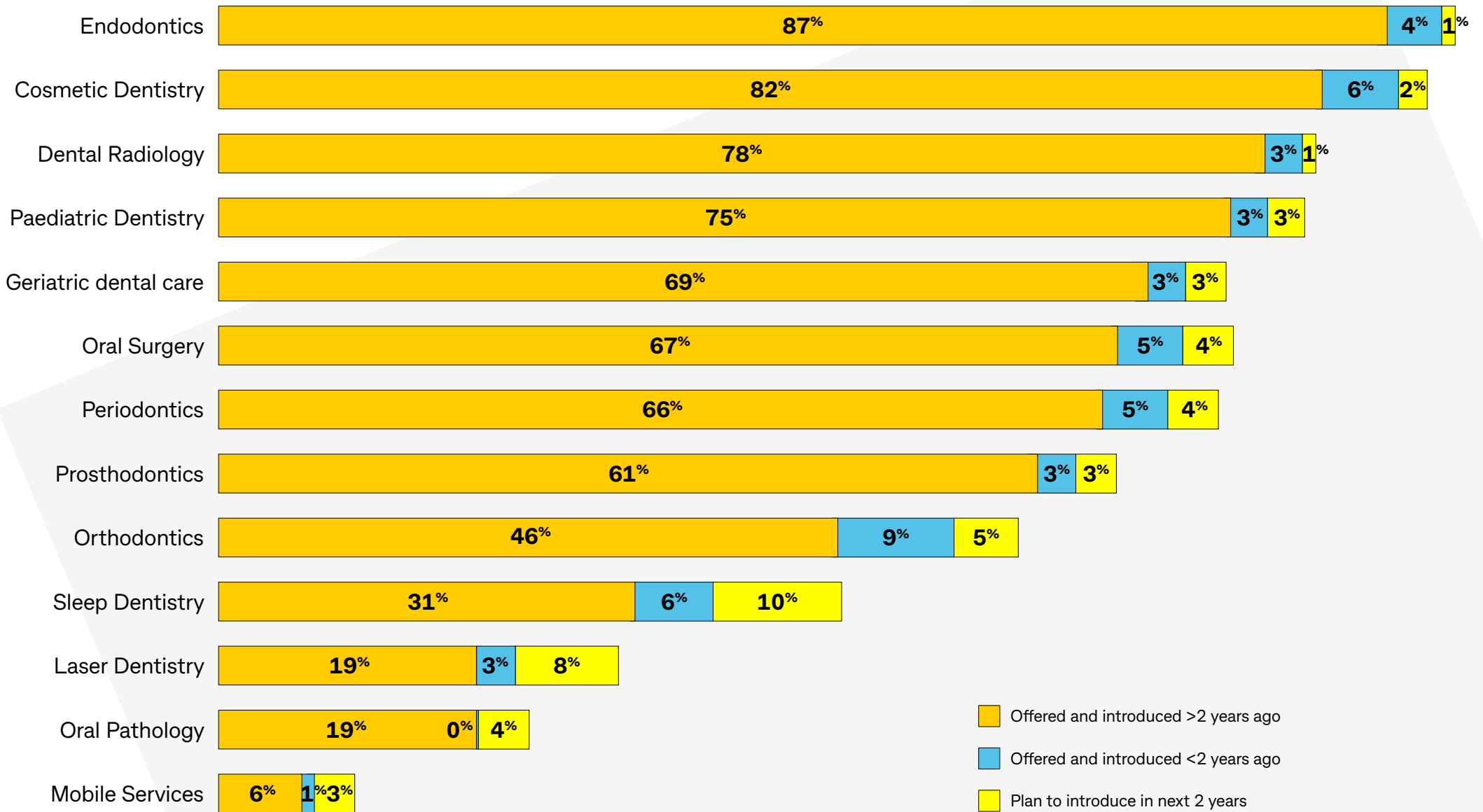
To improve patient access and convenience, many practices are also extending clinic opening hours. Almost two in three (64%) offer appointments after 5pm and 54% before 9am. Many also offer Saturday appointments (46%) and emergency and on-call appointments (29%).

Finally, to provide flexible payment options for patients, over two in five (42%) dental practices offer payment plans or Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) services to patients. This rises to 52% among regional practices compared to 39% in metropolitan areas and is more widely used by growth-focused practices.

Practices are split when it comes to presenting payment plan options to patients when discussing treatment costs. While 46% do and 10% say it varies, 44% do not raise these options upfront.

Past and expected adoption of services across practices

Services offered by all practices



Spotlight on inclusive oral care

The dental sector strives to ensure all patients and communities have access to care and the opportunity for positive oral health outcomes. That includes building cultural competency and catering to a diverse patient base.

According to practices, 70% have dentists who can speak languages other than English, which is higher for metropolitan-based practices (76%). While this enables in-person discussions, fewer provide information and collateral to patients in different languages (28%).

Almost one in three practices are also involved in delivering oral health services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients, rising to 44% in regional areas. Many of these practices feel they have adequate support to deliver culturally appropriate care despite lower levels of familiarity with the relevant primary health programs.

Practice perspectives

“The first thing communicated to staff when they join the practice is that every patient must be treated equally. It is a requirement that everyone feels respected when they enter the practice.”

“We’re a multicultural team; we have New Zealanders, Australians, First Nations peoples, Filipinos, Indians and Chinese staff, so patients can be booked in with a dentist who speaks their language, and if not, interpreters can be arranged.”

Dr. Rashi Gupta

Norlane Dental Aesthetics and Implants

“We have a philosophy that local people should look after local patients, and we ensure we hire our support staff locally. Not only does this make local patients feel supported, but it’s also part of how we give back to local communities, alongside charitable work and volunteering.

“On-the-job training isn’t just about clinical skills; it’s about the social side too and understanding what patients need irrespective of their backgrounds. It’s important that we train all our staff to be competent in both.”

Jeffrey Gao

Experteeth Dental Group

Digital dentistry

Investment in equipment and technology is set to continue as practices search for efficiencies, insights and the quality of care.



Equipment and technology investment intentions remain robust

Many practices are prioritising investment in new equipment and devices to improve the quality of care and streamlining systems in search of efficiency gains. Despite anticipated cost pressures, more than one in three practices (38%) plan to increase investment in clinical technologies in the next 12 months. This is as high as 48% for growth-focused practices and 46% among those in regional areas.

Compared to 2022, investment intentions are strongest for computer-aided design and manufacturing software (CAD/CAM), particularly among regional practices. Chairs and treatment units, and sterilisation equipment are the next most likely to attract budgets.

For technologies relating to patient engagement and operational management, 30% expect to increase spending, and 64% will

maintain existing investment levels. Again, growth-focused practices say they will be investing more (35%).

Improving websites to attract new patients and enhance the patient experience is most likely to be earmarked for investment. Practice management software, payments and claiming solutions, and systems integration have all edged up year on year, driven higher by regional practices.

When asked about the barriers to investing in technology, the most commonly cited were high post-implementation costs and a lack of time, budget and financing.



Clinical technology

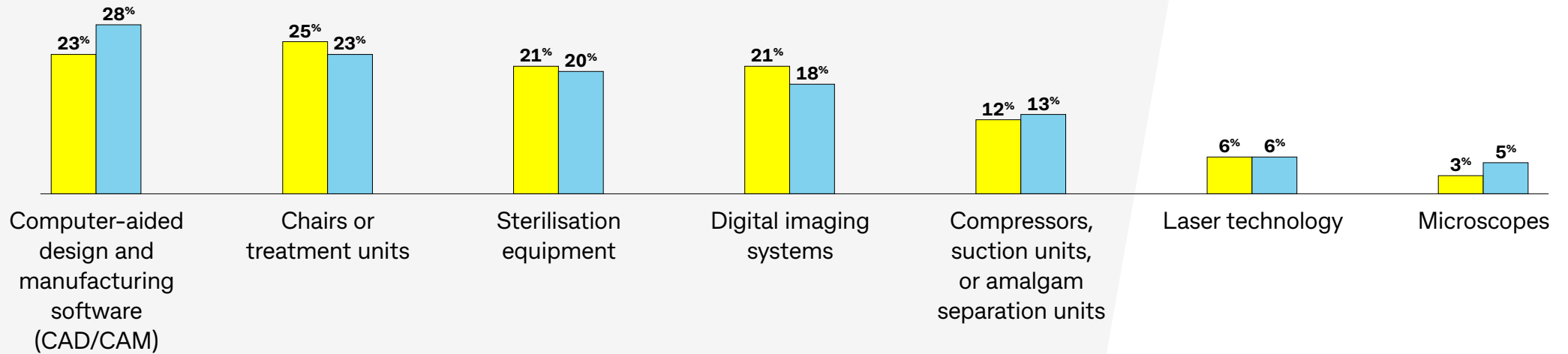
12 month investment outlook among all practices

2022

2023

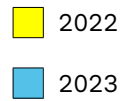


60% are investing or upgrading at least one area, down from 63% in 2022

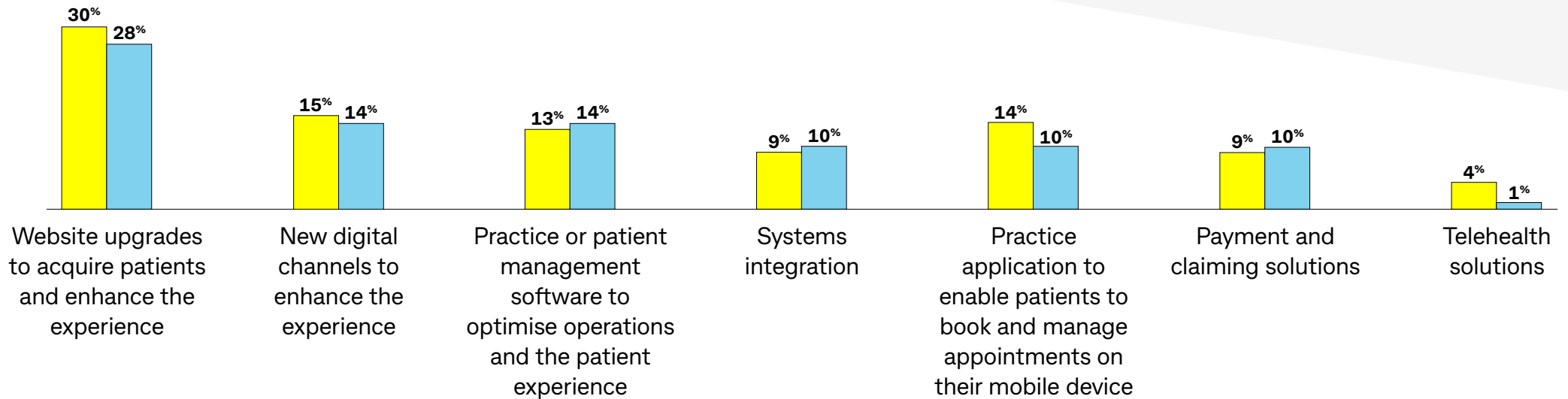


Practice technology

12 month investment outlook among all practices



44% are investing or upgrading at least one area, down from 50% in 2022



Practices seek data-backed insights to fine-tune performance

In pursuit of efficiencies and productivity, many practices are planning to streamline systems and processes. This is where data analytics often plays a valuable role in understanding performance and pinpointing opportunities to grow and fine-tune operations.

While just under one in ten practices said practice intelligence tools for data and insights are a priority in the year ahead, far more are already collecting and analysing data. A closer examination reveals inefficiencies that the right technologies can address.

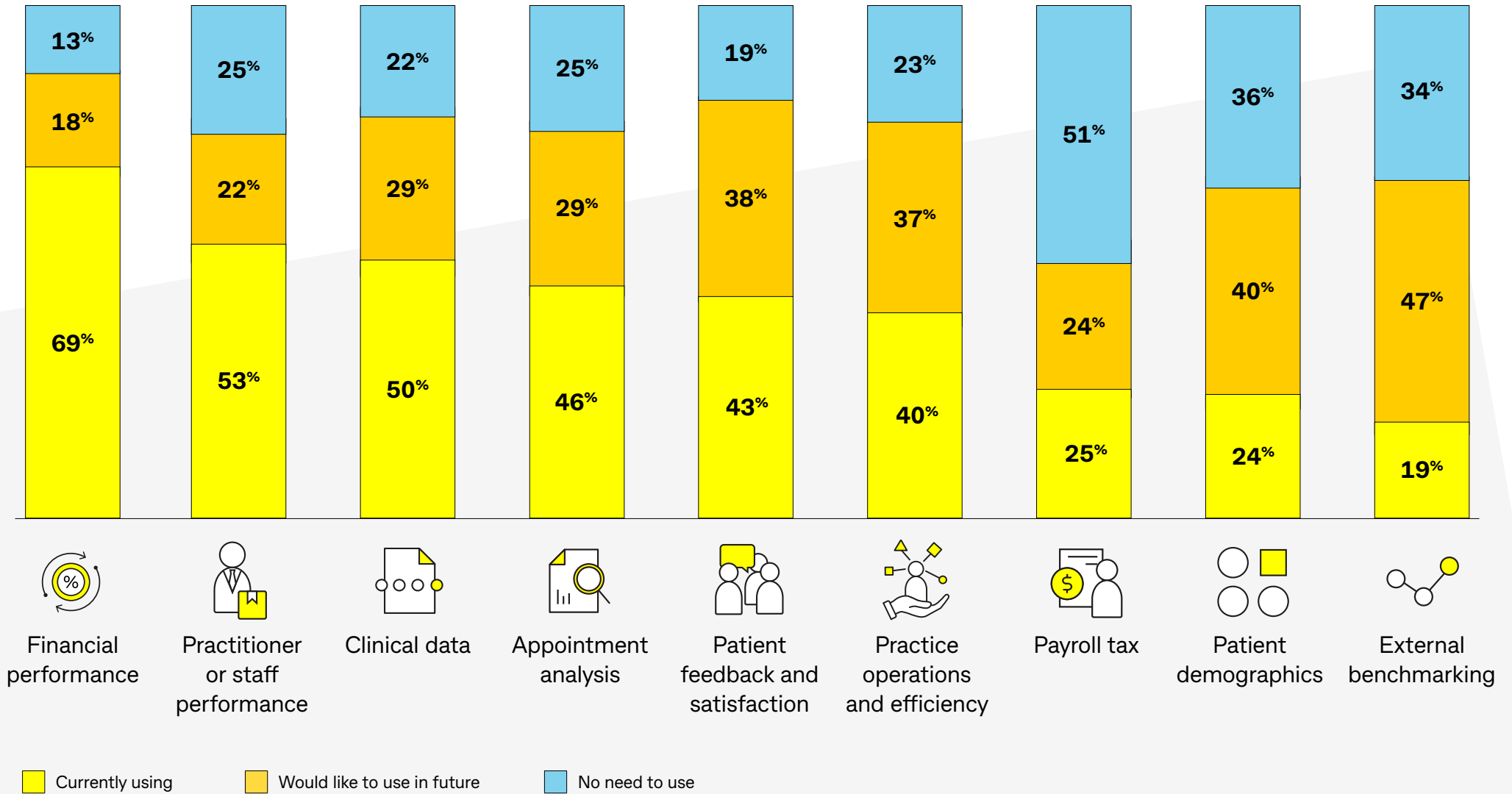
When asked which tools enable data analytics and insights into practice performance, almost 40% said they use manual processes such as spreadsheets or nothing at all. Many are using a combination of practice management and accounting software, which may help explain the focus on systems integration among some practices.

Many practices are also collecting and analysing data across their operations. The most common sources include those relating to financial performance (69%), staff metrics (53%) and clinical data (50%). While fewer are currently benchmarking practice performance and analysing patient demographics and feedback, these are the areas of greatest interest to 47% and 40% of practices, respectively.



Analysis used to assess practice performance and optimisation

Usage among all practices



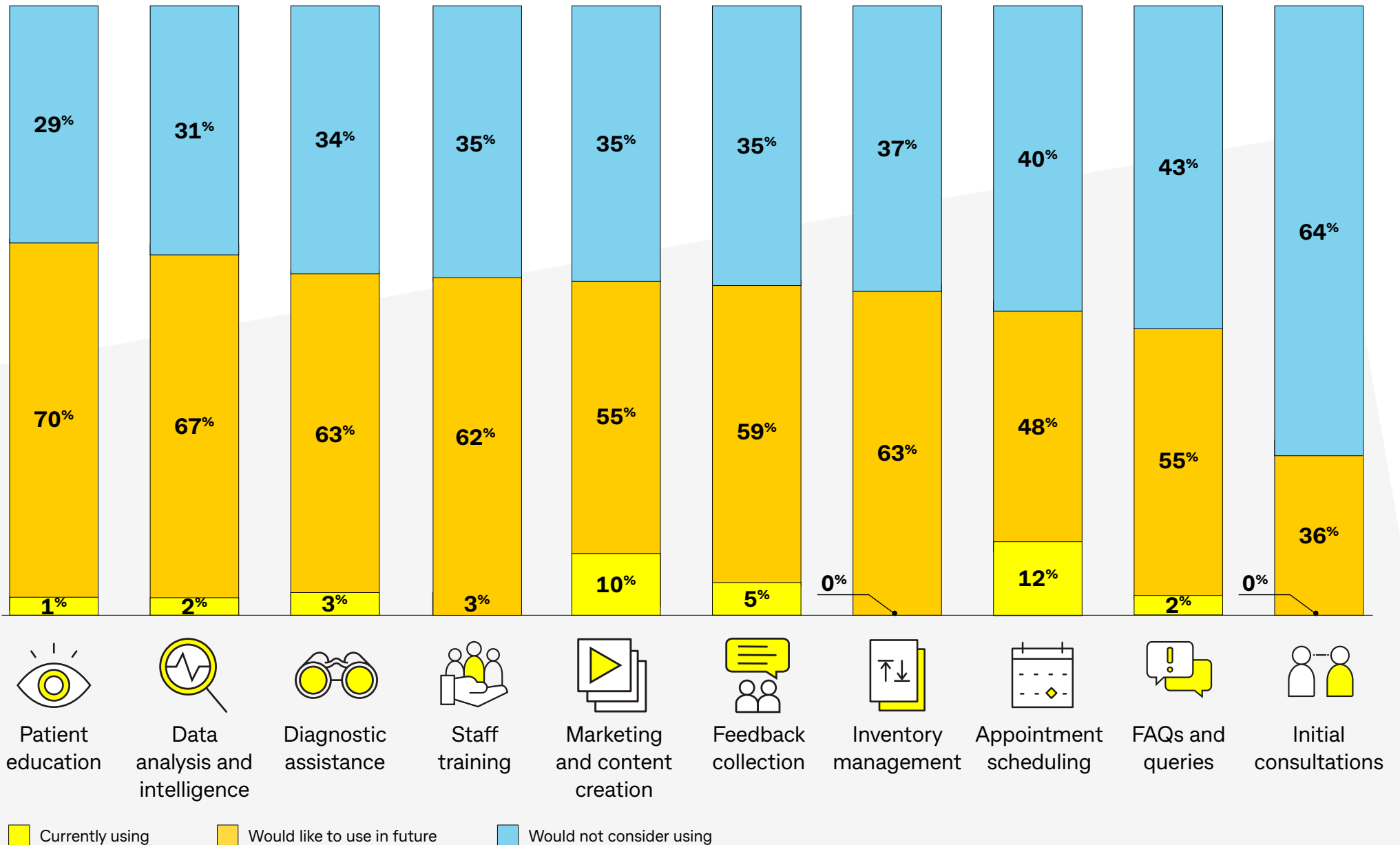
Interest in AI builds despite early stages of adoption

As the healthcare industry better understands the maturing applications for artificial intelligence (AI), usage is expected to grow. For dental practices, adoption is in the formative stages, with 12% currently using AI for appointment scheduling and 10% for marketing and content creation. Very few are using it in other areas. However, 70% would consider using AI for patient education purposes. Two in three are also interested in using it to support data analysis and intelligence, and 59% for feedback collection, supporting the desire and opportunity for more efficient data analysis.

CommBank's upcoming Patient Experience Insights Report shows patients across the health industry are most comfortable with AI being used for appointment scheduling, and many are open to AI-assisted education, particularly younger patients. For example, using AI to better explain conditions and treatments and summarising medical notes. At the same time, 76% expect AI recommendations to be validated and used transparently. As AI adoption picks up, these comfort levels and expectations are worth keeping in mind.



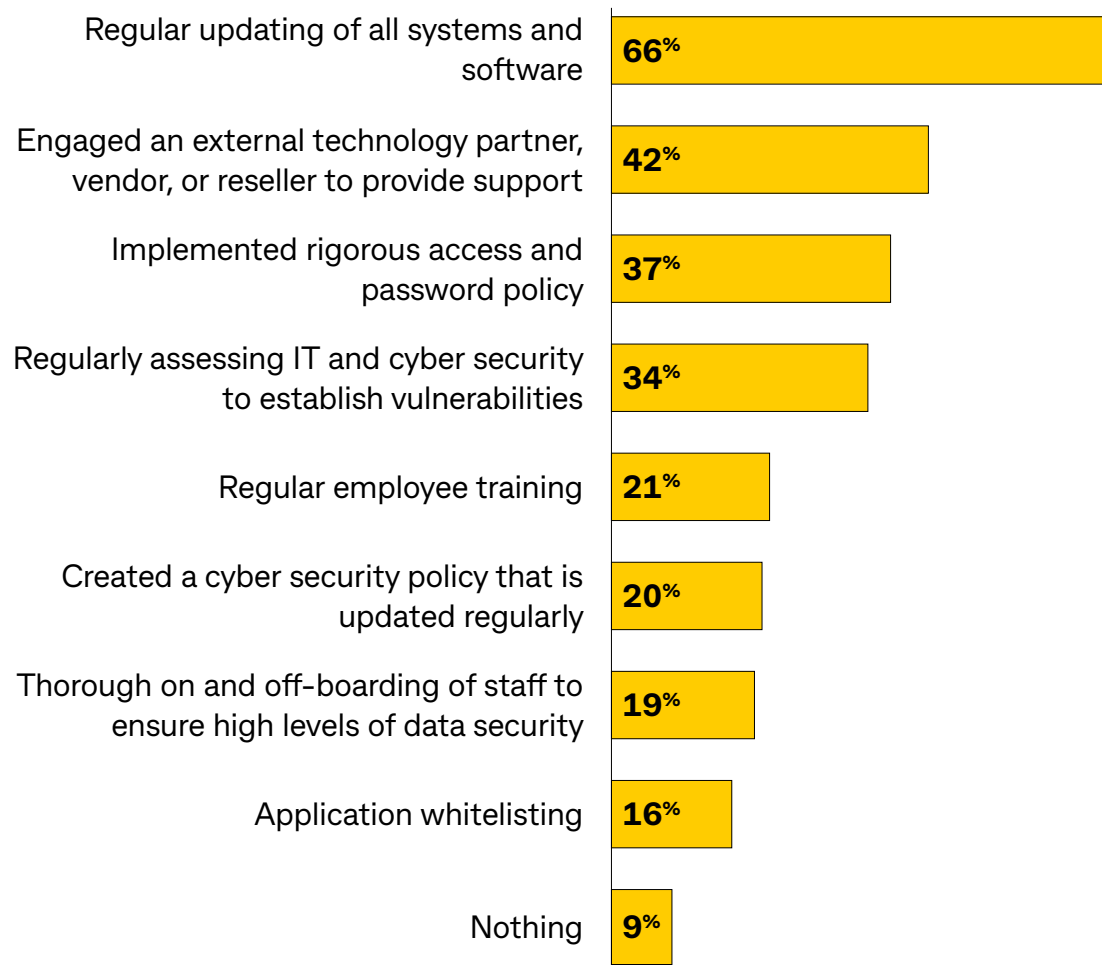
Adoption and potential use of AI in practice applications



Strengthening practices' cyber defences as risks grow

Measures taken to minimise risk of cyber attacks

Actions taken among all practices



As more practices begin using and exploring data-enabled tools such as analytics and AI, a vigilant approach is required to ensure data privacy and cyber security.

That comes into sharper focus when considering that 29% of dental practices report being a victim of some form of cyber attack or breach. That figure climbs to 42% for larger practices.

Malicious behaviour by external hackers (15%), employees using personal devices (12%), and social engineering of employees (10%) are the most common reasons.

While practices that have experienced a cyber attack are putting more safeguards in place, many protective measures are yet to be widely adopted.

Across all practices, two-thirds regularly update systems and software, and 42% have engaged third-party assistance to provide advice and guidance.

One in three undertake regular assessments to identify vulnerabilities, and around one in five update internal policies or offer frequent employee training.

Experteeth Dental Group

Case Study



The ability to treat every patient as an individual while providing superior resources, education and support to its teams has been an enabler of continued growth for Experteeth Dental Group, says Dr Hong Chang.

Experteeth Dental is a private Group of practices with a difference. Founded by Chief Operating Officer Jeffrey Gao and Chief Clinical Director Dr Hong Chang, patient-centred care and operational efficiency are a central focus.

The Group has been on a steady growth trajectory, expanding from three clinics in 2017 to a 32-strong network today. It operates across NSW, Victoria, Queensland, and Tasmania, with a heavy presence in regional areas.

One factor that sets the Group apart is that it's owned by qualified dental professionals. So, as a truly independent network, clinical outcomes and patient care are at its core, and returns are reinvested in the business.

"We are proven, we have emerged strongly from COVID, and we are growing. We have the best of both worlds because we can tailor services to every patient and access the resources and buying power of a larger organisation. It's helped us build patient loyalty and a leading position," Jeffrey says.

Using proven Standard Operating Procedures supports a uniform "treatment philosophy," however, Experteeth Dental encourages dentists to develop their own style. "At a high level, we unite as one," Hong says. "But we don't control the details of how our dentists treat patients; we leave that up to them."

Education as a differentiator

A significant driver of new patients for Experteeth Dental is word-of-mouth referrals, making a high-quality patient experience essential. Jeffrey and Hong agree that to achieve this, education for both the Group's teams and patients is paramount.

Experteeth Dental has a hybrid education model for practitioners, combining regular webinars with in-person training, which will soon be held at a central training hub in a new Sydney Head office.

Hong emphasises the importance of on-the-job training in patient management, saying, "We train our dentists to develop their clinical skills, but when someone comes in for a treatment, a good dentist makes you feel at ease."

For the Group, good patient communication is a key component of education, particularly teaching dentists how to educate patients about their dental complications and treatments. Hong says that amid cost of living pressures, it has become more important to "help patients understand that without early intervention, it will only become more expensive down the track".

Driving a digital revolution

Incorporating new technologies into practice operations is not new to Experteeth Dental, having quickly adopted communications tools to operate remotely and cloud-based platforms to share information across practices. However, increasing investment in clinical technology is driving what Jeffrey refers to as part of a "digital revolution".

For instance, using specialised scanners to create dentures transforms a traditional five-step process into a two or three-step procedure, reducing production time from three months to two weeks.



Instead of creating a mould and physically sending it to Sydney, the scanner takes it, digitally sends it to the lab, and the design is returned to the regional location for 3D printing. According to Hong, this greatly enhances the patient experience and reduces costs.

Jeffrey adds that the Group has a defined approach to navigating the typical barriers to technology uptake, such as capital investment, learning curves to use new devices and machinery, and adapting to new ways of working.

“Our advantage is that we have scale, so we can bring the costs of acquiring new technology down across the Group,” Jeffrey says. “We have the capital to invest in technologies that provide material benefits to patients and run necessary courses to train up our teams.”

Gaining operational insights through data

The Group is increasingly looking at data analysis to improve its operational performance. While Jeffrey says this isn't unique in the sector, where the Group differs is the type of data they look for and actions they take.

“When other practices look at their numbers, they're often more profit-driven,” Jeffrey says. “For us, we're more operational efficiency driven. That's the difference.”

Jeffrey explains that the Group uses insights from its cloud-based Practice Management System to identify opportunities to streamline patient scheduling, team rostering, workflows and expenditure needs.

Hong says it is valuable to ensure that practices can meet the demand from patients and make resourcing decisions accordingly, particularly in regional locations. “Using the data available, we can see early if a dentist is accumulating a backlog of patients, so we know we need more dentists in that location.”



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Thriving workplace

Practices are putting culture at the forefront of their plans to attract and retain talent, but financial incentives are a differentiator for many.

Persistent talent shortages keep focus on workplace culture

According to practices, talent shortages in the dental sector remain a top challenge. Most practices continue to say that access to skilled staff is inhibiting their ability to operate at full capability and grow (68%). While this figure has fallen from 75% in 2022, the decline is driven entirely by metropolitan practices. For regional practices, 76% continue to be constrained by access to staff, with no year-on-year change.

Regional practices also find recruiting for most roles far more difficult. This includes 59% of regional practices that say finding dentists is very challenging compared to 24% of metropolitan practices. Similar differences are seen for dental specialists (49% vs 20%) and dental prosthetists (47% vs 14%).

Practices are undertaking a range of initiatives to navigate recruitment and retention hurdles. The top areas of focus are nurturing a friendly and supportive workplace culture (80%), flexible working arrangements (48%) and higher remuneration packages (44%). Regional practices are more active in most areas than metropolitan practices, with more paying higher salaries and regular bonuses and offering continuing professional development opportunities and team bonding opportunities.

How practices differentiate to attract and retain staff Initiatives undertaken by practices by location



Spotlight on sustainable dentistry

More practices have adopted a strong or moderate focus on sustainable dentistry practices in the past year, increasing from 41% to 46%. This may be supporting a slight uplift in perceptions that the dental sector is responding well to the opportunities and challenges of sustainable dentistry. However, the prevailing view is that there is more to be done to adapt, with two-thirds of practices saying that the sector is not responding well.

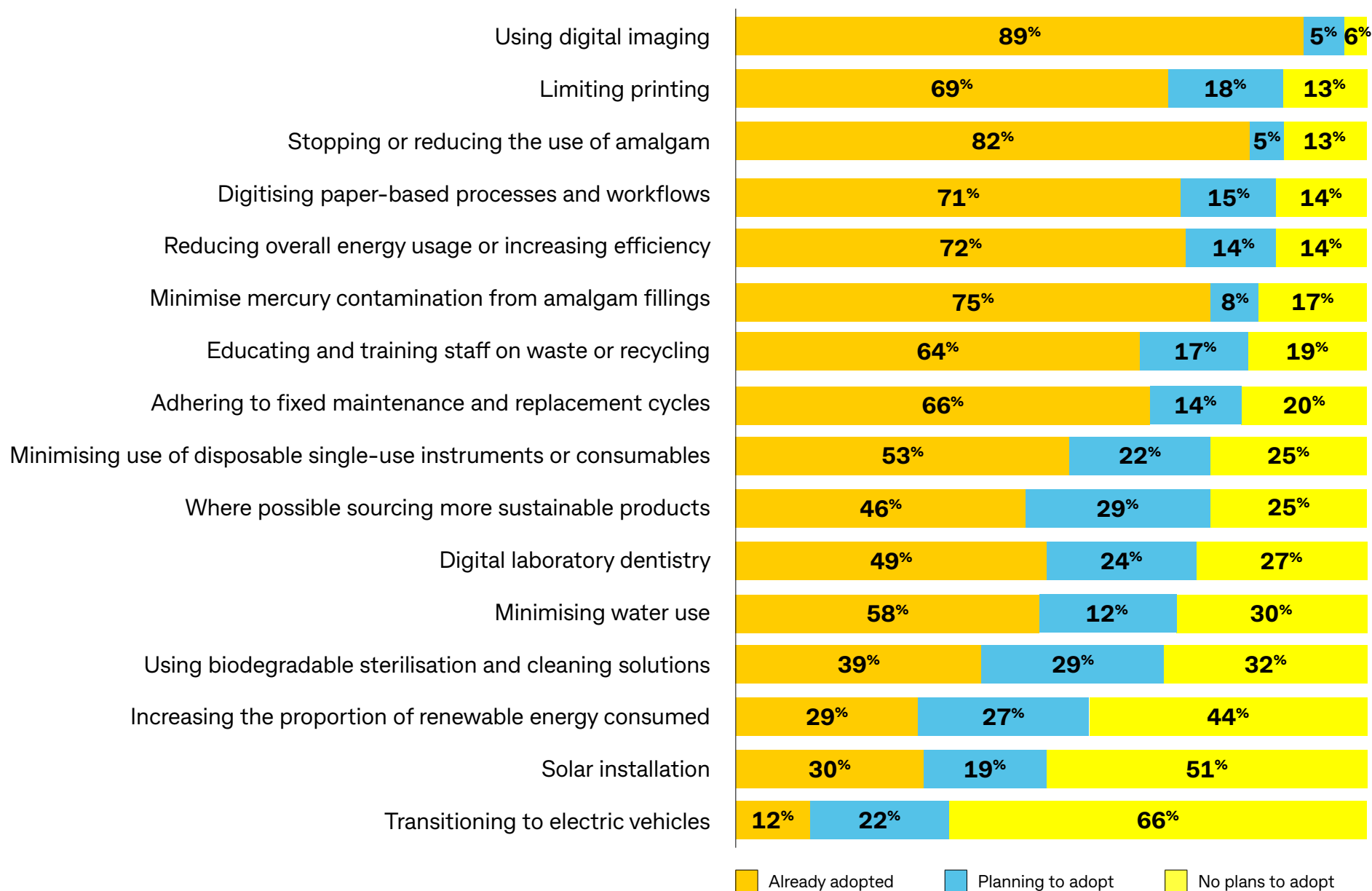
That may help explain the rising adoption of a range of sustainable dentistry initiatives. Using digital imaging and reducing or stopping the use of amalgam remains the most popular measures, edging up year-on-year. Over the past year, the fastest-growing initiatives have been adhering to fixed maintenance and replacement cycles, now used by an additional 22% of practices, and minimising water use, adopted by an additional 15%.

Many practices have plans to implement more sustainable measures. Those expected to accelerate most are using more sustainable products where possible, employing biodegradable sterilisation and cleaning solutions (both 29%).



Adoption of sustainable initiatives

Use and intended use among all practices



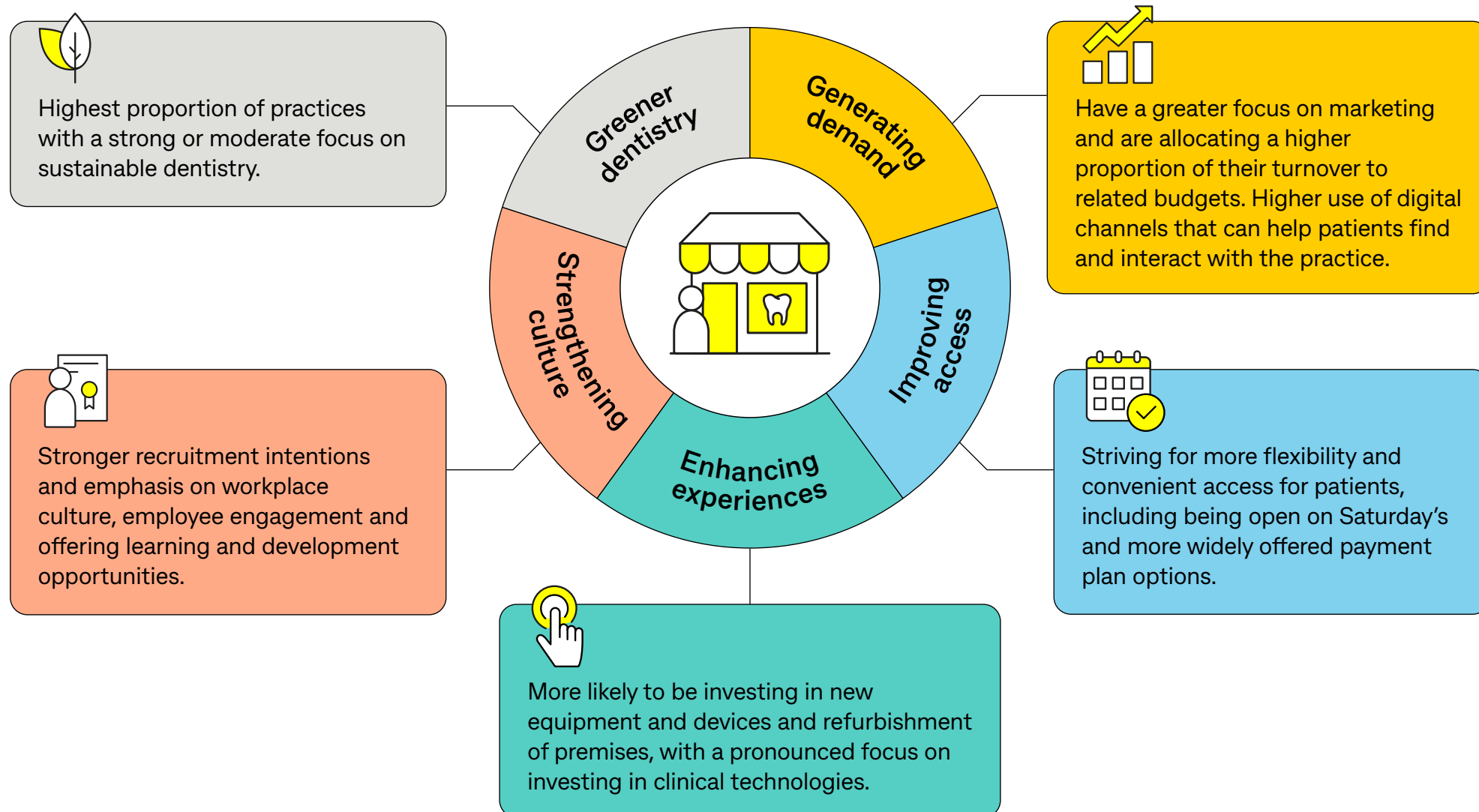




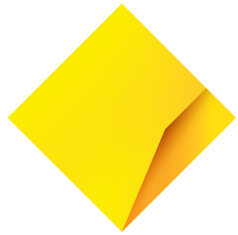
Summary

Tactical emphasis among growth-focused practices

Dental practices focusing on growth in the next year are more likely to acknowledge the sector's challenges and be planning to address them. They have the greatest focus on increasing patient numbers, driving efficiencies, talent acquisition and retention, and looking at their strategies relative to other practices can be instructive for any decision-maker.







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