

WOMEN SHAPING THE DENTAL LAB FIELD

Meet the women who are driving change and empowering the next generation of leaders

Using technology to craft dental restorations was once considered a man's profession. But those days are long gone. Today, women are on the rise in the dental laboratory space, not only in terms of numbers but also in terms of visibility as speakers and leaders.

"The dental lab business has always tended to be a male-dominated field, and to see women being spotlighted and recognized more than ever is exciting and long overdue," says Denise Burris, CDT, co-owner and co-founder of By Design Dental Studio in Atlanta, Georgia. Burris is also the immediate past president of the National Association of Dental Laboratories (NADL) and the 2020 recipient of the CDT of the Year award.

Female technicians, educators, and lab owners are stepping over barriers into new roles to lead the industry in innovation, artistry, and business. From mastering cutting-edge technology to balancing work and family life, these women are proving that success in the dental lab is not about gender—it's about skill, passion, and determination.

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Tracking the Visible Rise

Both personal accounts and industry data point to a growing female presence in the dental laboratory field. “We’re seeing more and more women enter the field of dental technology every day,” says Jessica Birrell (Love), CDT, the owner of Capture Dental Arts Laboratory and Capture Dental Health & Beauty Center in Draper, Utah, and an *Inside Dental Technology* editorial advisory board member.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that as of May 2023 there were 34,190 dental laboratory technicians in the US,¹ up 2.6% from May 2022.² Burris estimates that there were over 44,000 technicians in the country by the end of 2024, and she says that surveys from the Laboratories (NADL) and the 2020 recipient of the CDT of the Year award, approximate that one-third of working technicians are female. She predicts that the percentage of female dental lab technicians, as well as female dental lab owners, will only increase further.

“We’re in a really good place right now as far as women being seen in the lab space, and it’s very promising right now for women who are in leadership and ownership roles,” says Burris. “I don’t think it quite mirrors what we’re seeing with the high percentages of dentist and dental students being women yet, but we’re definitely on an upward trajectory in the labs.”

Anita Cranford, CDT, and Elise Holasek, CDT, who are twin co-owners of Identical Dental Lab in Norman, Oklahoma, note that many of the older, predominantly male technicians are now retiring and leaving the industry, while more women are entering the field.

Birrell says women are becoming more visible. “Definitely over the last 5 years, probably transitioning over the last 10 years, there’s been a pretty big shift,” she says. “I’ve noticed more women starting to get into the speaking network, sharing their

work online, and getting more involved in the dental community.”

Burris says many women working in labs are connecting online. “I would say over the past 10 years, women are probably a little bit more visible because of social media. Women are sharing that side of their lives more, and that shift really started happening with younger lab owners who were going into business,” says Burris. Women are sharing the positive sides of their profession with others and are finding support among other female dental lab technicians and leaders (see Celebrating Support and Mentorship on page 12) as well as generating interest for the next generation of technicians, she says.

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Among dental lab owners, women might be in the minority, but many are adding value and sharing their voice. “When I started, I was pretty heavily criticized for being a female laboratory owner among most of the dentists that I presented my laboratory to,” explains Birrell, who opened her lab 16 years ago. “That was a huge shock, as I didn’t realize the dental industry was so biased against women at the time.”

But Burris and others are hopeful for the future for female lab owners. “We’re seeing tremendous growth in women who are owners, especially in smaller 5-person-and-under labs. I think it’s really exciting to see that,” Burris says.

Craftwomanship and Work/Life Balance

The dental laboratory field is attracting many women, offering a rewarding balance of personal fulfillment and career growth. “Women appreciate this field due to the diverse choices available in many aspects of the profession. They can work independently, engage in high technology, constantly challenge themselves, be part of a continuously learning environment, and achieve professional growth,” says Anita M. Bobich, BA, CDT, an adjunct professor and former program administrator in the Department of Restorative Dentistry at Pasadena City College in California.

While there are many reasons that women may be gravitating more and more toward the field, one reason commonly named is that the role of a dental lab technician is perhaps more flexible and easier than others for finding a balance between work and career.

The eternal struggle for women is how to achieve the near-mythical work/life balance, to find a job where she can prioritize motherhood without sacrificing her career. In the dental lab space, many women are able to work out of their homes, designing and making ceramics from home, and they can structure flexibility into their schedule, especially as lab owners.

Birrell says that’s why she opened her own lab, so she could spend more time with her kids and provide for them at the same time, and she seeks to offer the same to women who work with her—the ability to work hours that match the needs of their family, around their children’s school schedules. She notes that this has allowed the women in her business to feel satisfied because they can be there for both their children and their work.

Cranford and Holasek similarly both brought their young kids with them to work at their lab, and they have allowed the same of their employees as well as hours that complement their family life.

Burris says labs can offer advantages for working mothers in terms of striking a balance. “I think that we’re seeing that it’s a flexible career, especially for younger women, in terms of raising their families and being able to set their own hours and their own pace, and I think that’s playing a large role in it,” says Burris.

“Being a dental technician is a fantastic opportunity—going part time, full time, opening your own lab in your house, designing from home—there’s so much freedom in our industry right now. There are so many opportunities on the table, and I think it’s a great fit for females,” says Jillian Swafford, the owner of Oaks Dental Designs in Pikeville, Tennessee.

Birrell suggests that women are drawn to the industry because it combines artistry, technology, attention to detail, and a desire to help people. “I feel like women have a natural gift toward dental technology; they have a natural talent towards creating, problem solving, and often can juggle multiple tasks well,” she says. “I feel that women have so much heart, love, and compassion, and that’s such a beautiful balance to bring to something that used to be such a male-dominated profession.”

“Women often introduce a softer perspective to the industry, making them more relatable—maybe that’s the mom side of us,” Holasek says. Her sister Cranford adds, “We think that’s what has helped change the focus to culture and relationships; we speak from the heart.”

Education of the Sexes

Unlike in the industry as a whole, in restorative dentistry programs, women now outnumber the men. According to a 2022-2023 survey by the American Dental Association (ADA) of accredited dental lab technology education programs, the amount of enrolled female students was more than double that of male students, with 262 females to 110 males.³

In 2022, female graduates of accredited programs also outnumbered men, with 110 women graduating versus 64 men.

Erin Popov, CDT, TE, program director of the Restorative Dental Technology Program at Durham Tech in Durham, North Carolina, and winner of the 2023 NADL Educator of the Year award, says that two-thirds of the students in the 2024-2025 class are women. In her time at Durham Tech, the ratio of women to men has usually favored women, with the numbers of female students at least double that of men over the past 2 to 3 years.

At the New York City College of Technology, assistant professor Laura Andreescu notes that over the past 5 to 10 years, the ratio has changed in the

Department of Restorative Dentistry to be more predominantly women. “More women are inclined to come into this field because they feel they are supported,” she says. “Now women have a bigger role not only in the marketplace, but in our industry altogether. We are more involved, and that’s a good thing.”

Andreescu believes that these students are poised to succeed. “This is something that I found very interesting: The female students are not afraid to ask questions because they have this curiosity about how things work. They ask questions like ‘How can I improve this?’ or say ‘I didn’t understand this,’ so I think that creates a good dynamic in the classroom,” she says.

“As much as possible, we encourage our students, and especially female students because women tend to be a little shyer to speak up and to be more proactive and collaborate,” Andreescu adds. “Collaboration between women in the industry is very important, not only because we share a common goal but also because it’s a support network.”

In terms of the faculty, Popov says that she was the second female instructor

Breaking Barriers, Building Futures

Women have been shaping the future of dental technology for years—and now, we’re taking it to the next level. As champions of Women in Dental Technology, we proudly celebrate a new milestone: the appointment of Kulzer North America’s new president, **Regiane Marton**, a visionary leader dedicated to innovation and inclusivity in our industry.

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when she was hired in 2015 and became the first female program director in 2021. She is still only one of two full-time female members in her program.

Andreescu notes that currently, of the five full-time faculty members in the New York City College of Technology Department of Restorative Dentistry, two are female, but a majority of the adjunct professors are female. “Many years ago, this was a field where it was very hard for females to break in and make a career out of, but little by little it’s transforming,” she says.

The ADA survey shows that by 2023, the ratio of faculty members in all accredited programs was similar to that of the New York City College of Technology’s program with a 3:2 ratio among 94 faculty members.³

“My greatest hope is for myself and other women to serve as positive role models for our female students. They need to see that women can be successful in this profession,” Bobich says. “It was the perfect choice for me, and if I had to make the decision again, I would choose it without hesitation.”

Stepping Up Into the Spotlight

Burris, who has helped plan many association meetings, says that she thinks there are equal opportunities for both men and women for lecturing and presenting. “We’re very mindful during planning with how we can best represent all aspects of the dental lab field,” she says. “Because of that, I see a lot more frequent requests for women to be part of that. And I think that’s bringing women out of the shadows a little bit more, as it has gotten some traction.” Burris expects the percentage of female speakers will only continue to grow and balance out the number of male speakers.

Birrell believes such a change is only possible because the men in the field are supporting the women as much as each other.

“Only in the last 2 years have I seen a

shift in these speaker ratios at conferences,” Popov says. “So I believe a bit of representation is on the rise.”

Among the speakers at LAB DAY Chicago, held in February, male speakers outnumbered women by more than 4:1, but the numbers have been increasing over the years. Additionally, the meeting included an all-female panel discussion focused on empowering female business owners.

“There are certainly more opportunities for women in the industry now than there used to be. Increasingly, companies are hiring women to lecture and represent them, valuing their insights and contributions,” Cranford says.

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Stephenie Goddard

The Playing Field Beyond the Lab

Women are making strides across the dental laboratory industry, with expanding opportunities beyond technician and lab owner roles—and they remain committed to achieving even more.

Allison Raver opened up her distribution company, The Ratava Group, based in Tampa, Florida, about 15 years ago and has found a welcoming, fair arena in the dental space and success in her work, but she is also looking for women to be more visible to each other as well as to the rest of the industry.

“There are very few women-owned dental distribution companies in the United

States. Some have affiliates in Europe and they’re an extension or annex of that, but truly 100% female-owned distributors are probably few and far between. I’m happy to say that my company is completely woman-owned and I’d like to see more of these types of companies in our field,” Raver says.

Regiane Marton, who recently took on the role of President for US and Canada at Kulzer, following her success as the manager of Kulzer Brazil, believes that there is still a lot of room for growth of female industry leadership representation, both in the United States and globally. She, and other employees at Kulzer, try to raise up other women who have passion for their profession. She stresses that while female leadership is advancing quickly, embracing its nuances is key to sustaining success and achieving equity—something she demonstrates through her own journey.

The CEO of Glidewell Dental in Newport Beach, California, Stephenie Goddard notes that many dental companies are creating more opportunities and initiatives for women in dentistry fields to collectively strengthen the future of the industry. “Lasting change doesn’t just come from opening doors—it comes from ensuring access to the necessary tools, resources, and support,” Goddard says. “When we empower individuals to walk through those doors, we hope they will go on to create new opportunities for others as well. It’s a beautiful ripple effect.”

Glidewell Dental, which has created a professional development program for female dentists called Guiding Leaders—for leadership training, business education, and mentorship—is among companies that are leading the charge for women’s empowerment in the larger dental industry. The Women in Dentistry Rise breakfast has been held yearly at the Midwinter Meeting in Chicago for the past 11 years; this year it was hosted by Dentsply Sirona and Argon. Other initiatives include the Women’s Leadership Network from Henry Schein, an employee resource group created in 2017 to enhance opportunities for women in the company. Additionally, Straumann has created the Women Implantology Network for a global community of women across various roles in implant dentistry to foster support and mentorship.

Beyond the initiatives of these companies and others, there is also the Women in DSO

group that was founded in 2019 by Dr. Aman Kaur to advance and empower female leaders in dental support organizations.

"There are plenty of opportunities in the industry, it's up to us to take them," Swafford emphasizes. "It is up to us to step forward and say 'consider me!'"

Social Support

"I think that social media has given us many more connections on how we can be involved, telling us who is out there doing what, and it gives us courage to reach out to those people and say, 'I need to be a part of this. I want to be a part of this. What can I do? How can I get involved?'" Burris says.

The biggest testament to the success of social media for sharing the joys and benefits of the industry, as well as learning from each other's challenges, is the Ladies of the Mill group. On Facebook, the group has become popular among female dental technicians as a place for empowering and encouraging colleagues and passing on knowledge and support in an open and welcoming space.

Co-founders Swafford and Christina Heaslip, who reached out to each other following an article in *Inside Dental*

"The mission we set out to do 5 years ago was to illuminate this space in the industry for women to feel welcome, comfortable, and empowered, and to be able to let them share their knowledge."

Jillian Swafford

Technology about Heaslip's lab, explain that the group started as a way to connect with other technicians and lab owners across the country and beyond, to fill a gap they felt was missing from many live events.

"We went to a summit where there was only one woman speaking, and we wondered, 'Where are all the women at?'" says Heaslip, who is also the owner of Digital Dental Laboratory in Ellijay, Georgia.

In 2021, Swafford and Heaslip brought the group to life with a summit that was attended by about 75 people plus vendors. Heaslip and Swafford emphasize that there is no technique taught during their summits; instead, the meetings focus on topics of business management, empowerment, leadership, and more.

"The mission we set out to do 5 years ago was to illuminate this space in the industry for women to feel welcome, comfortable, and empowered, and to be able to let them share their knowledge. That mission—we got that," Swafford says. "We can look at Chicago now, and we can look at different shows and webinars around the country, and these leading women in dentistry now have a seat at the table."



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CELEBRATING SUPPORT AND MENTORSHIP

WOMEN BY NATURE often find it hard to brag about themselves. When asked about their greatest professional accomplishments, almost everyone interviewed struggled to name one achievement or another, but instead they spoke of the pride they had in their business, their journey, and how their own success has helped others. “The biggest achievement is when I make an impact in somebody’s life and help them choose a career or advance their career, especially when we are talking about women,” says Laura Andreescu.

Similarly, Stephenie Goddard says, “What brings me the most pride isn’t the title or the milestones; it’s knowing that something I did or said helped someone else reach their own destination.”

Yet women are quick to exalt the accomplishments of others and are eager to name their own mentors and guiding stars. “I would not be the woman I am today without the women in my life,” Erin Popov, CDT, TE, says.

RENATA BUDNY, CDT, TE: “She is a fantastic teammate who is always ready to jump in and get things done. This kind of dedication is what I truly admire, and I love working with women like her.”

– Anita M. Bobich, BA, CDT

“She was my mentor and we collaborated very well. We have kind of the same vision in terms of helping and growing our students to be more involved in their education and for female students to take charge of their careers and education.”

– Andreescu

RITA ACQUAFREDDA: “She was so supportive of me when I came into the industry. I will never forget the kindness and mentorship she offered me. And I don’t think she did it intentionally...she is just that person.”

– Goddard

VICKI THOMAS: “She is really putting herself out there to inspire and help others. She is awesome.”

– Elise Holasek, CDT

MARINA CAPONIGRO: “If you just watch her, you don’t even have to be in the dental industry to get her energy. She has fire in her belly, it’s amazing.”

– Christina Heaslip

SARAH ANDERS: “Talk about a trailblazer. When I met her she was the most senior female executive I knew, and she set a path for others to follow.”

– Goddard

DENA LANIER: “Dena has always been a person that has her eye out for other women in our profession. If

she saw that you had any interest, if she sensed any kind of desire to get involved in bettering our DLT community from another woman, she was instantly pulling her in. And she saw that potential in me; she encouraged me, she stuck her neck out for me to get nominated to some of these roles that I’ve been in throughout the years. She is just a woman’s woman.”

– Denise Burris, CDT

EMILY VALENTINE: “Watching that story unfold with mother-daughter is cool to see, and now she’s living up to her mother’s name and doing it, and it’s incredibly humbling to see that.”

– Christina Heaslip

TAY HARVEY: “I think she is phenomenal. She is a true go-getter, she’s inspirational, she’s educated, and I’ve always respected her.”

– Allison Raver

LAURA KELLY: “She is truly an inspiration in the dental lab space. She was one of the first technicians to achieve accreditation from the AACD and served as a member of the president’s advisory council.”

– Goddard

DORA RODRIGUES: “Everyone knows Dora. She is out there trying to empower women and she serves as an excellent resource for anyone seeking support.”

– Anita Cranford, CDT

AMY MOORMAN: “What I love and appreciate about her is her constant sense of calm, her drive for change in the dental industry, and her strategic mindset. She is truly a force and will do amazing things for our industry.”

– Goddard

Heaslip is most proud to see other women who, like her, are a part of laboratories owned by both husband and wife, that are embracing their confidence and learning to stand alongside their husbands, as well as in front of, in the public eye to support their business.

The summit has been growing on a yearly basis and will now be headed by a CoLLABoratiOn with Nowak Dental Supplies, as Heaslip and Swafford recently announced during the LAB DAY Chicago meeting. They both hope that this and other summits can help women grow personally and professionally.

Looking to the Future

Many women are excited by the growth the dental laboratory industry has made over the last decade in moving away from being a male-dominated field to be one that is more accepting and welcoming of women in all areas. Others, however, still feel that there is more room for growth and greater representation for women among the leaders, speakers, and changemakers of the industry. And many women, like Raver, are looking for further avenues for women in

the dental fields to connect, communicate, and lift each other up.

“As more women step into key decision-making roles, I believe we’ll see a shift in how leadership is approached, with a stronger emphasis on collaboration, mentorship, and long-term growth,” says Goddard. “With continued professional development opportunities, mentorship programs, and industry support, the future looks promising for the next generation of women in dentistry.”

“We all bring different talents to the table—male, female, type A, type B. I think when we can all join together, it makes our industry better,” Swafford says. “We challenge each other with our different visions, and we push each other with different drives. I think it is changing how the industry is growing, with the influx of women, into a much more honest field. Looking forward to what’s in the future is just to see an expansion of what’s already happened. The shift has already happened; the goal is to keep it going.”

The rise of women in the dental lab industry is not just a trend—it is a transformation. With more female technicians,

lab owners, and industry leaders making their mark, the future of dental technology is more diverse, innovative, and inclusive than ever. As these women continue to push boundaries, support one another, and redefine what leadership looks like in the lab, one thing is clear: the industry is better for it. And this is just the beginning.

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