Article reprinted from Impact, *March 2009, with the permission of the Private Practice Section, APTA.*

Finding the Right First Job

By Michael M. Gilbert, PT, DPT

Executive Summary

The author offers his perspective as a new DPT graduate on finding the best job opportunity. While money is important, professional autonomy, continuing education, and a feeling of ownership are also elements critical to the match between employer and new graduate physical therapists.

New physical therapists face many challenges when it comes to finding that first job. It feels like finding the right first job is the most important decision a new graduate will ever make. For the graduate interested in an outpatient-based career, many jobs are available in a variety of settings, such as physician-owned physical therapy services, corporate physical therapy, hospitals, health systems, traveling agencies, and private practices. Students faced with high tuition bills and looming loan repayment often look for the high-paying jobs with some sort of loan forgiveness and possibly sign-on bonuses. They look for these jobs while insurance carriers reduce reimbursement, making it harder for employers to meet the compensation needs of new graduates.

While money can be a prime motivator, other factors motivate as well. Many physical therapists graduating with DPT degrees are looking for practice opportunities, not just "jobs." Some students may just look at the big companies, but others will look for a practice where they can make an impact on the business, the community, and the profession, and get rewarded for their efforts in the process.

DPT graduates feel that they are bringing a high-level skill set to an organization and want to be able to utilize their skills in an autonomous manner. There are still physical therapy companies out there that want their therapists to conform to old treatment ideas espoused by an entrenched clinician who may not necessarily be up-to-date on evidence-based practice. That doesn't mean that the experienced clinician is not getting good outcomes, it just means that he or she may not be open to new ideas that the new graduate can offer. For a new graduate, not being allowed to be an independent practitioner could be a huge deterrent to taking a job with a practice. This does not mean that a new graduate would not want to learn more in such areas as manual therapy, where more experienced clinicians may excel. What it means is that many new graduates are looking to refine their skills in effective treatment strategies backed by evidence in an autonomous setting with an appropriate level of mentoring. Continuing education is another area that a new graduate examines carefully. Allowing clinicians to develop their own continuing education strategies to fit their interest and then cultivating that interest would be motivating and valued as a benefit.

From my perspective, the most important elements of a job opportunity include autonomy, feeling of ownership in the practice, and owners who believe in the future of physical therapy and are willing to try new ideas. I have been fortunate and blessed in my entry into the profession. I believe that my education prepared me tremendously for the rigors of entering practice on my own, whereas during student internships you are heavily supervised, and rightfully so. I have the knowledge to continuously seek new treatment approaches and evaluate their effectiveness through our ever-growing body of literature. I also have found my ideal practice opportunity. I took a job right out of school with a large company, and found that it was not the opportunity that I was looking for because it did not fit me philosophically. I am now with a private practice that has an outstanding group of clinicians, a cutting-edge approach to treatment and promotion of physical therapy, and the autonomous atmosphere I have always desired. My current practice demonstrates the model that I believe will take the profession to the next level as we enter into a more direct access environment and *Vision 2020*. I have the feeling that I am an integral part of the practice and not just a worker for the business owners. This feeling drives me to want to be the best physical therapist I can be. I believe that many new graduates are looking the same kind of opportunity I have found. ■

Michael M. Gilbert, PT, DPT, practices with Madden Physical Therapy in Harrisburg, PA, and can be reached at gilbert.michaelm@gmail.com.