

Are you employable?

What you need to know if self-employment is not your cup of tea

While many massage therapists assume they will work as self-employed contractors, the marketplace is presenting new challenges. With more competition, higher costs to entry-level practice and the demand for sophisticated business skills, massage therapists (RMTs) are increasingly forging a career in corporations brokering massage therapy services. RMTs require training to ensure they are work-ready, and strong candidates will need to display a number of qualities to be considered highly employable.

How employable are you? Do you have excellent qualifications? Aside from your RMT registration, what other transferable skills or value do you bring to the table? How about actual business experience in customer service and sales?

Large businesses that broker RMT services have multiple locations and considerable resources. They are looking for skilled practitioners with a team spirit, passion for service and strong customer service skills.

Many companies employ RMTs – LifeMark (CentricHealth), Massage Addict, GoodLife Fitness, Hand & Stone Massage and Facial Spa, and large spas like Elmwood Spa. These corporations invest capital, provide strong branding, strong marketing campaigns and operating systems, support staff and business expertise, and a long-term commitment to see the business grow and evolve. They have multiple locations and considerable resources, and are looking for skilled practitioners with a team spirit, passion for service and strong customer service skills.

The marketplace has changed. Although previously conducive to sole practitioners, the massage therapy market is increasingly asking for convenience, lower cost or better value. Many people feel safer with the recognition of a national brand and commercial site. Just



like 3-D printing is disrupting manufacturing, the Internet has disrupted media and publishing, and the smart phone disrupted just about everything, the way people access RMT services is being disrupted. Competition has become fiercer and we are challenged to adapt to these new circumstances. Consider that these large companies actually provide a solution to a chronic problem in the RMT profession – that of providing a well-managed, viable business to work in.

You might say, “I’d rather be self-employed.” Wonderful. Do you have the capital to finance a business start-up, and the money to keep it going until profitable? Do you have a network of contacts that will show up at your door to purchase services from you? Do you have real business experience and competence in accounting, marketing, customer service and operations? Do you possess the commitment necessary to work long hours and foster growth in your enterprise? If not, you may not have the resources to work for yourself. Four out of five businesses fail within five years of start-up – the main reasons being negative cash flow and lack of owner business experience/competence.

I’m not saying there is no place for pri-

vate practice. We will always need entrepreneurial types with specialized skill sets to serve niche markets. I’m saying that it’s harder now for a RMT to accumulate the resources needed to maintain a sole practice. Our profession can learn something from these businesses that broker opportunities for RMTs. Many of these corporations offer incentives and bonuses, comprehensive employee health and dental benefits, support staff, supplies, training and professional development opportunities, flexible schedules, a marketing team to help grow your patient base, and many more.

In addition, these businesses are already capitalized – no financial output required from the RMT.

EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE

In my discussions with owners/managers from several of these companies, I have heard criticisms and concerns about workplace readiness of massage practitioners. Concerns include:

- Practitioners see themselves as individuals and have trouble integrating into a team practice
- Practitioners demonstrate care for the client/patient, but are inattentive to the larger client/patient experience, e.g.

workplace cleanliness, freedom from clutter, first impressions

- Although well prepared in the academics of health sciences, regulatory requirements and basic massage techniques, practitioners are frequently untrained in critical skills of customer service, sales and promotion, and business operations.
- Practitioners fail to invest in their practices, running between several locations, being unavailable for more work at the primary location. One business owner said, “RMTs need to temper their expectations of growth, and learn to cultivate their practice in a primary location.”
- Practitioners solicit clients/patients from the business and steer them to the practitioner’s home practice or other location, extorting the established relationship and acquisition costs paid to acquire that client/patient by the primary business.
- Practitioners often don’t understand the principles of cash flow and profit/loss or the costs of running a sustainable business. They frequently demand financial terms that are not in line with the assets they bring (or fail to bring) to the business.

Sometimes the employer/employee relationship does not work out and the employment is terminated. Following are instances that will definitely lead to work termination: complain to clients/patients about dissatisfaction with pay or workload, or press religious or political beliefs or personal issues while providing service; leave the therapy/spa room in a mess, and damage the quality and image of the business; discuss client/patient personal information in public spaces; steal, lie, cheat or harass coworkers or patrons; show up late, miss shifts, be unkempt in appearance and be unaccountable

Complaints about any relationship should be taken to the source – not vented through the client/patient who has paid to receive professional services. Remember that workplace hygiene and safety is the responsibility of all employees, and client/patient information should only be discussed in the confines of a private space. The offensiveness of the final two points is obvious.

EMPLOYMENT WORRIES

It is normal to expect RMTs to be cautious in seeking employment. They fear giving up autonomy or control over business variables, or they may be suspicious of the

intentions of business owners, particularly if they are not RMTs. Let’s address some of the common misconceptions.

Inferior pay – Practitioners are convinced they’ll earn less income if employed. Consider the Registered Massage Therapists’ Association of Ontario (RMTAO) income surveys of 2009 and 2013, reporting average gross income of \$39,100 direct hands-on care in 2013 and \$38,500 in 2009. These stats are largely reflective of RMTs who designate themselves “self-employed.” If you compare the net take-home pay (after business expenses taken off, remaining money to live from) of a self-employed RMT to a RMT employed in one of the corporations mentioned, in an apples-to-apples comparison you may be surprised who comes out on top. What matters is not what service fee is charged, but what you take home at day’s end to live off.

Further, many employed RMTs have access to equipment that lessens strain, while increasing work capacity, incentives and bonuses and providing higher traffic potential. While it’s true you can earn more working for yourself – will you, actually?

You must have sufficient amounts of the four Cs to launch and sustain a business.

Inferior skill – Another argument I’ve read on social media is the belief that RMTs who seek employment over self-employment are somehow defective. “They must be inferior if they’re working at someone else’s business.” I’ve met RMTs who have been eight, 15 and even 24 years registered that happily work as employees. They recognize the advantages to employment in these larger enterprises and prefer the resources and business savvy these large companies offer. I’ve personally received excellent care at several of these businesses.

Exploitation – Whenever you have to work with other people, in any type of business sector or workplace, exploitation is possible – even in small private practice settings. RMTs used to complain (and still do) about chiropractors and physiotherapists even before these large corporations entered the scene. Keep in mind, however, you are responsible for advocating for your own interests and to understand the full scope of your rights. Study labour laws, seek counsel from lawyer on contract negotiations, press the RMTAO and RMT schools to form functional relationships with major employers, utilize the experiences of others on social media.

By educating yourself and asserting your professionalism, you can take steps to dramatically reduce the chance of exploitation.

BECOME HIGHLY EMPLOYABLE

If a practitioner can bring value to the business in the form of high retention, drawing business in, supporting other team members and contributing in positive ways to the workplace, they will ultimately be rewarded with bonuses, premium shifts, employee benefits and opportunities for advancement. Unlike private practice, working for a corporation provides alternatives for generating income not directly related to hands-on care.

The best employees demonstrate friendliness but are not over-bearing, enthusiastic while empathetic, show initiative and competence but not arrogance, and are authentic and gracious in service. They recognize they are a part of a larger integrated team and strive to accomplish goals common to the mission of the business while supporting and encouraging fellow workers.

Here are some tangible ways of increasing your employability and value in a company:

- Dress appropriately, be engaging and do your research for your interview
- Be prepared with questions to ask about the business
- RMT designation is not a guarantee of quality – employers will often ask for a short demonstration of your skills and client/patient engagement – be willing
- Be prepared to commit to a trial and see how the relationship will work out
- Provide safe, warm and comfortable experience for your clients – always
- Empower patients/clients by letting them dictate comfortable and tolerable pressure, temperature and other experience variables

Our professional culture does a disservice in encouraging RMTs only to be self-employed. I encourage you to go and sit in interviews with as many of these corporations as you can, learn about what they have to offer. You might be surprised how attractive being an employee can be.



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