



## Why you earn little as a contract massage practitioner

**A** discussion I attended on Facebook illuminated a common complaint among massage practitioners . . . they thought they were paying too much rent.

One worker felt unfairly treated working at a franchise and receiving just 40 per cent of the proceeds. A sympathetic yet indignant colleague chimed in that receiving even 55 per cent was not enough compensation. Despite other contributors assuring the first chap that he wasn't so bad off, one could perceive his communication purveying a sense of helplessness and being taken advantage of. "You are worth more," the sympathetic practitioner espoused, while the first lamented he couldn't understand why franchises or spas (or rehab clinics for that matter) are "just in it to make as much money as they can."

Being an enthusiastic student of trends in the massage industry, I notice this chronic and common complaint that massage practitioners feel exploited for their hard work. They seem to feel that, although not an owner in the business, they should share amply in the profits . . .

after all, they're providing the service, right? Yet, there are two vital pieces of information missing from the perspective of both these therapists. These two critical elements, properly considered, ensure a business is vital, can continue to operate and will provide employment positions to practitioners. Without these considerations, the business will sink like a leaky boat. These two elements are cost and risk. Let's examine these in detail.

### THE QUESTION OF COST

What does it cost to run a spa, franchise or rehab centre? The business owner must finance the lease, renovations, utilities, promotion, equipment and furniture, administrative staff, taxes (business income, property, etc.), linen, lubricants, signage and marketing materials, office and cleaning staff . . . in a larger facility these costs run thousands of dollars every month. Therapists arguing percentage points seem oblivious to the fact that the business *must* cover its operating expenses and profit margins. Businesses must profit to build contingency in emergencies and capital for expansion and as a reward for risking assets to start the business.

### WHAT RISKS ARE INVOLVED?

Business owners take risks to open a business. Long-term lease promises are made, and considerable investments of time, energy, money and people are siphoned into the business before a dollar of profit is earned. Statistics show four out of five businesses fail within five years. Consider the position of a business owner who has lost all of these resources to a failed business . . . would you take that risk without being paid for it? If you're a business owner you should be paid for taking that risk and creating opportunity for practitioners who don't have business savvy or investment dollars to open a business themselves.

Let's make an important distinction. The more (educated) risk you take, the greater your potential earnings. If you have a lower level of education, and/or a job where everything is provided for you when you show up for work, and you share no financial risk for the business's success or failure, you're going to earn minimal wages. No matter how hard you work, you are not shouldering the risk the owner is, and so your reward will not be as great. Low risk equals low earnings . . . it's true in the stock market and it's true in industry.

### SEIZING BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

What spas and franchises and rehab clinics have done is to seize the opportunity and popularity of massage therapy, to recognize the lack of business savvy and organization in practitioners of this therapy, and to understand the needs of the marketplace for affordable, quality care available in high-traffic areas. One massage franchise corporation was recently bought by a financing company . . . savvy investors know a marketplace opportunity when they see it! Massage is a multi-billion-dollar industry and, despite the protestations of practitioners who feel exploited, spas and rehab clinics will continue to effectively serve the marketplace.

### WHAT CAN RMTs DO?

But isn't there something that can be done about this? Well, maybe. First of all, let's consider that franchises, spas and rehab clinics employ thousands of practitioners that would be starving otherwise. Practitioners, by and large, don't have investment capital or business savvy to make a go of it on their own. These businesses provide an essential service – i.e., an opportunity for employment – to those with passion for massage, but a pittance for sustaining a business.

Second, let's get a reality check on massage's position in the world. In North America, our highest education is community college or private vocational, with various levels of education declining from there. Health disciplines with greater public credibility and access to health-care funding – such as physicians, nurses, physiotherapists and occupational therapists – have degree level programs and ample evidence-based practice. Degree-level education and evidence-based practices are key to open doors for funding and access.

Without a college education – or masterful sales, athletic or entertainment skills – you can expect to make minimum wage of \$7.25 in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> to \$9.50 in my province of Ontario,<sup>2</sup> Canada. With a college diploma you may expect \$18 – 21/hour<sup>3</sup> and with higher education possibly more. Physiotherapists, with a masters degree requirement in Ontario, earn \$30-38.49/hour.<sup>4</sup> Massage Therapy is classified under *Other Technical Occupations in Therapy and Assessment* and lists a wage average of \$18.94/hour.<sup>5</sup> This figure is slightly higher in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

The truth is, our hapless practitioner *does not* deserve more, and various Canadian and U.S. statistics on massage practitioners back up what most of them experience . . . incomes are typically between \$10,000 and \$30,000 year gross. Yes, there are exceptions where therapists are making more or even considerably more, but they're applying different models and you should study them if you want to get different results than you're getting now.

The main problem, often, is not that rent is too high, but that practitioners are not trained in how to command their own incomes. Through proper incentive/reward structures, practitioners can have the benefits of working for a spa or rehab centre *and still* make a good income. My advice is to act *as if* you're self-employed. Bring value to the business by increasing your skill set, get out and promote the business, sell the retail offerings of the business. With the risk largely shouldered by the business, you can leverage your talents and make an excellent income. You'll deserve more when you become more!

For article with references, please visit [www.massage-therapycanada.com](http://www.massage-therapycanada.com)

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