

Thinking About Your First Physical Therapy Career Move? Here's My Advice for Recent Grads.

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DREAM PHYSICAL THERAPY JOB, TAKE ONE.

Back in 1997 when I was graduating from physical therapy school, the prevailing wisdom was to start out at a hospital, learn as much as you could, and then go into private practice – if that was your goal (as it was mine).

So that's exactly what I did.

I was initially rejected from my dream job working for a global leader in orthopedics based here in NYC. Feeling disappointed, I continued the interview process at other hospitals.

A few weeks later, I came across another PT job posting at that same leading hospital that previously rejected me. While in the process of interviewing for this position, I was simultaneously offered a staff therapy spot at a competing private hospital. After years of grad school, I was excited to get my first PT job – even if it wasn't my first choice. So, I accepted the offer and began working there immediately.

I remember how great it felt to actually have a real full-time job. I also remember how exhausting it was standing on my feet all day when I wasn't used to that as a student. But that was really the only negative. Other than that, I loved it.

Looking back, I now realize that this was not an ideal path. In fact, it was a bit of an inexperienced and immature move. I later came to understand just how important culture truly is in a practice setting, and how little time I gave myself to absorb the lessons I could have learned at the private hospital.

The private hospital was an extremely fun and energetic place to work. I was even fortunate enough to work alongside a good friend of mine from physical therapy school, Craig. I remember the two of us always laughed a lot on the job, which for me created an environment that was both personally rewarding while at the same time, helping our patients heal.

Who could ask for anything more?

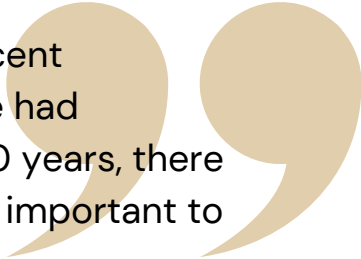
DREAM PHYSICAL THERAPY JOB, TAKE TWO.

After only one month on the job, that large orthopedic leader – my dream employer – came back into the picture. This time, they called me directly to tell me I'd been accepted as a staff therapist.

I was shocked and excited. While I really liked working at this private hospital, I knew I ultimately wanted to practice in orthopedics. With that dream in mind, I felt there was no better place to start than at this leading organization.

So I decided to tell my manager that I would finish out the rotation, and then I accepted the other offer.

Based on conversations I've had with recent graduates, and from the experiences I've had throughout the industry over the past 20 years, there is no doubt that fit and culture are more important to today's PT's than ever before.



TURNING A MISTAKE INTO A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

It was a very different feel at this major institution. While the staff was extremely talented and offered superior clinical learning opportunities, the atmosphere was more rigid and hierarchical. There could not have been a starker cultural difference in the day-to-day atmosphere.

Looking back, I realize that this was not an ideal path. In fact, it was a bit of an inexperienced and immature move. I later came to understand just how important culture truly is in a practice setting and how little time I gave myself to absorb the lessons I could have learned at the private hospital.

Some important takeaways come to mind when I think back to how these first two jobs of mine can relate to the futures of recent graduates today. Based on conversations I've had with recent graduates, and from the experiences I've had throughout the industry over the past 20 years, there is no doubt that fit and culture are more important to today's physical therapists than ever before.

Keeping that in mind, here's some advice I would give you when making your first – or next – PT career move.

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO SIZE UP A PRACTICE'S CULTURE

1

Plan to Stay and to Commit

Now that I am on the other side, I realize how disruptive it can be to a practice when someone commits to a job and then changes their mind the moment something else comes along.

It has happened to me once or twice as a practice owner. Training a PT takes resources, time, and effort. It is a huge commitment from the practice itself and should be appreciated by the therapist. I still believe you have to do what you feel is best for your career, but a deeper understanding of the impact of your decision and how it affects others is vital.

Additionally, from the new therapist's personal perspective, if he or she jumps ship too quickly, they probably haven't had the chance to fully absorb the lessons to be learned from the position. And they most certainly haven't given themselves a fair chance to see what the culture of the organization is like both in terms of relationships with patients and colleagues, as well as managers. So make sure you give the culture a chance to grow on you. If you quickly leave one opportunity to test out another, have you really learned what either company is about? Have you truly given your initial position a chance to become a part of your life?

The lesson is clear: do your due diligence to ensure you are fully able to see if the culture is a fit for you before starting a new position.

Don't just automatically assume your dream job is actually your dream job – or better yet, your dream career – until you've observed and researched as much as you possibly can about the potential fit.

2

Shadow Before Committing

Before you commit to a position, it is critical you have an understanding of the culture you are about to join. Culture may at times be unspoken, but it is deeply ingrained in any institution, public or private.

Spending time at the potential clinic or hospital before accepting a position is of the utmost importance. I didn't even know this was an option when I was first starting out! If the practice doesn't allow you to shadow them, I would question why. Shadowing allows you the chance to see if a clinic is the right fit for you and if you're the right fit for the clinic using real-life situations with real patients and in conversations with the current team.

3

Ask Yourself Specific Culture Questions

To me, this is the most important thing you can do. It will reveal to you how your co-workers will be, and how they'll treat you. Make sure to ask yourself the following questions about the company's culture:

- *Does the culture feel right on a gut level?*
- *Can you see yourself going there day in and day out?*
- *Does the company seem like a fun place to work?*
- *Do patients seem to be getting better and enjoying themselves at the same time?*
- *Does the atmosphere fit your personality, or does it feel like fitting a square peg into a round hole?*

What are the top 3 things I'm looking for in a company culture?

4

Ensure The Company Is Proud of Its Culture

Do some basic, initial research on their culture. Take special note of the company's website, for instance. Does it list their vision, their values, and their mission? If so, do they connect to who you are as a person?

5

Read Their Online Reviews

What type of online reputation does the practice have? Do they seem to have an established community with their patients? Read the good and the bad reviews, and pay attention to how the company and its therapists

respond to all of them. Is it even their therapists and directors who are responding? Or is it a template response from a PR agency? Truth can be revealed to you in how they respond to a bad review just as much as how they respond to a good one. Do their patients seem to be loyal? What else can you glean about the relationships they have built?

6

Assess Their Mentoring Opportunities

A mentoring program is crucial for a new grad. Are you being thrown into the fire? In and of itself this isn't bad—but not all practice settings offer adequate support.



We use the equation of Development = Challenge + Support to outline our mentoring philosophy at Spear!

7

Question Their Clinical Ladder

Is there a way for you to develop, internally, from a new grad to a seasoned therapist? Is there an opportunity to learn from more experienced therapists? Is that a practice value? If this is important to you, then you

should seek out a program that is developed and formalized so that you can grow into a top clinician.


8

Ask About Their Leadership Training Program(s)

A practice should have a way of training and developing not only your clinical skills, but also your leadership skills. These are skills that will enhance your success — both as a clinician, a leader and more importantly

as a human being. At Spear, we have created and implemented a year-long program which has been a huge success; each of our clinical directors have risen up the ranks after formally completing it.

Through this home grown, focused platform we develop newer team members to become the future leaders in our company. Other companies have their own version of a leadership-training program as well. If it is your goal to learn the skill sets that are inherent in leadership and management, then a clear pathway to that goal is immeasurably valuable.



Are you starting a physical therapy career, or just getting a physical therapy “job”?

This leads to the next important factor. It's important to differentiate between job growth and career growth. A 'job' is a short-term approach to paying bills and getting by.

A career, however, is a foundation for growth and enjoyment that lasts a lifetime. It becomes a part of your reputation in your community and how you make a name for yourself through the great work you are doing.

To find that career you are proud of, you may consider the following steps before accidentally jumping into 'just a job.'

9

Ensure The Practice Hires From Within

Are leaders and directors hired from within the company, or does the company consistently hire from the outside? When a company heavily emphasizes internal development and hiring as positions become available,

that is a clear indication of its commitment to its team – and that will be you! If the company has training programs like mentioned above, and its staff tenure is long and growing, then you can feel more comfortable that the company and its managers will treat you with respect and support you towards personal and career growth.

10

Learn About Your Future Coworkers

Besides the cultural fit that we mentioned above, what do you also know about your future co-workers? Does the employer have the right number of co-workers for your comfort?

Are they all spread out, working in a large environment, or is it an intimate setting where you can easily learn from the more experienced therapists? Whether a practice has the right type of team members who can help your career is something only you can answer.

LESSONS LEARNED

As you can see there are many different factors that go into finding the right fit. Don't just automatically assume your dream job is actually your dream job – or better yet, your dream career – until you've observed and researched as much as you possibly can about the potential fit. If you take my advice and ask the right questions, I am hopeful that you won't end up working somewhere for two months before jumping ship, like I did.

Best of luck to you on your search.



Dan Rootenberg is the CEO of Spear, the only two-time National Practice of the Year award winner. Dan co-founded Spear in 1999, working out of a small treatment room in midtown Manhattan armed with a singular vision for combining clinical excellence with a five-star customer service experience in the PT industry. Spear has since successfully grown to 40+ locations throughout NYC, Westchester, and NJ, employing over 700 people. Dan's focus on organizational leadership has resulted in several honors and recognitions from business, medical and academic institutions.

Dan is an EY Entrepreneur Of The Year® New York finalist, National Entrepreneur of the month winner, and an Olympic Team medical coordinator. Spear has been named to the Inc5000 list of the

fastest-growing private companies in America seven times, received Columbia University's Award for Leadership in Clinical Education, and has been named by SmartCEO magazine as a Future50 company five times. In 2016, Dan was awarded the American Physical Therapy Association's Jayne L. Snyder, National Practice of the Year Award. Earlier that year, Spear was the first private practice to ring the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange. Spear was also chosen to appear in Chase Bank's National Ad Campaign, *Mission Main Street*, as a thriving small business committed to serving community interests. As a New York City-based company, Spear experienced the devastating effects of the pandemic in March 2020, losing roughly 80% of its patients early on. Relying on their on-the-ground crisis leadership experience, Spear saw the challenge as an opportunity to give back freely to the community, support its team members, innovate, and adopt new technology. Spear was recognized for its efforts by, again being named the National Practice of the Year at the WebPT Ascend conference in 2020. Dan served on the American Physical Therapy Association's COVID-19 Advisory Committee and was awarded the 2020/2021 Board Service Award for extraordinary contributions to the APTA's private practice section. Dan currently serves on the boards for both the HSS and Mount Sinai rehab networks.

Prior to becoming one of the premier sports physical therapists in NYC, Dan played pro baseball on three continents. In the summer of 2021, Dan traveled to the Olympic Games in Tokyo as the team PT and medical coordinator for Israel's baseball team and has worked with the team for the past decade in Major League Baseball's World Baseball Classic tournament. Dan received a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Binghamton University in 1994, along with a Master of Science in Physical Therapy from Touro College in 1997. Dan earned his Clinical Doctorate in Physical Therapy from the EIM Institute of Health Professionals in 2010, winning the Capstone Project Award for business development. Dan also served on the Board of Directors of Peter Stuyvesant Little League and the Bonnie Youth Club, two organizations devoted to teaching children lifelong values, self-worth, and responsibility through baseball. Dan has made numerous guest spots on Sports Talk radio, and was featured in the award-winning documentary *Holy Land Hardball*. Dan lives in NYC with his wife and three children.