

BUILD A SUCCESSFUL MASSAGE CAREER WITH BUSINESS DIVERSIFICATION

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Business diversification is an incredible benefit massage therapists have that is somewhat unique to our profession. Many massage therapists are unaware of this great opportunity and, therefore,

unable to take advantage of it. If you are not aware of the potential afforded to you through business diversification, you may make decisions and agreements with employers who could prevent you from being able to explore your options.

Because massage therapists have so [many options](#) when it comes to how they structure their careers, this article includes two special sections: “12 Steps on the Employment Path” and “7 Keys to Opening a Massage Practice,” in addition to discussion about how to diversify your business.

If you are a new or soon-to-be massage therapist, this article will help you understand your options. If you are already participating in the field, this article may enlighten you about more opportunities. If you’re an educator, please share this information with your students.

Types of Work & Workers

Our profession offers opportunities for massage therapists to specialize in various modalities and serve all types of people, and we can also have great success as generalists. We can perform our work as an employee, independent contractor or sole proprietor/entrepreneur in private practice.

If you wish to explore the potential of diversification, it is essential to first understand the differences between these approaches.

[An employee](#) is paid an hourly wage or annual salary. The employer has control over the details of the employee’s work. An independent contractor is a person who provides goods or services under a written contract. A sole proprietor is a person who exclusively owns a business. An entrepreneur has an idea and works to create a product or service people will buy, as well as a business to support that endeavor.

Are You Stuck?

Some massage therapists don’t realize they do not have to choose one operating method, but can instead develop a creative approach to business by blending many [types of participation](#).

Suppose, for example, you believe to be a massage therapist means getting a job and staying at that job for the duration of your career or replacing that job with another job when things don't work out. This isn't true—but why might you believe it is?

One thing that can get in the way of your understanding of the potential is what you believe to be true about the profession. Participation changes perspective. Your needs and attitudes toward this work when you are in massage school could be completely different 10 years into practice.

Additionally, we have deep cultural conditioning to deconstruct in order to begin considering the real possibilities. When we enter the school system, we are taught the normal thing to do is to get a job working 40 hours a week for a company. We also learn this by observing how successful people operate in the world.

Many people are attracted to this career because they don't want to have that lifestyle; however, they go to massage school, graduate, and search for a job from the same mindset and get a 30- to 40-hour-per-week job working for a company as a massage therapist.

Not to say that is bad, although working 40 hours a week performing massage will lead to burnout. Working full-time for one employer can be great for many people of a specific constitution, but if that outcome disenchant you, [you have choices](#).

What Massage Business Diversification Can Look Like

Being a massage therapist has never been a typical job that can fit into the usual job model—and diversification is a great way to create the dream career you envisioned when you were first attracted to it. If you so choose, you can be an employee, an independent contractor *and* a sole proprietor building your private practice as an entrepreneur—simultaneously!

If you stay within your [scope of practice](#) and honor the legal parameters for business participation, you can develop your style of massage, and you can also design your style of running your business. You can carve a path precisely as you see fit and refine your approach as you discover what resonates with you and what is not your cup of tea.

Many massage therapists find their perfect career balance is a blend of [various jobs and contracts](#), and some enjoy mixing in private practice work. Some massage therapists will use jobs and contracts as a buffer while they build their bridge to a successful private practice. Others only want one job at a spa or a resort, and others want to work solely in medical environments.

Some massage therapists want to avoid the hassle of building a private practice and managing their business. In contrast, others could never imagine working for someone else and love the challenge and success afforded by entrepreneurial effort. They can participate in various opportunities where they can collectively earn a good living through business diversification.

Knowing you can diversify creates freedom to explore and empowers your professional evolution and longevity.

In business, to diversify is defined as “to enlarge or vary its range of products or field of operation.” Essentially, it means to branch out. The ability to work in many different situations and discover the environments and working approaches that best meet your unique professional and personal style will support your pursuit of fulfillment in this work.

Here is an example: A massage therapist is offered a job working for a spa, resort or health club. It would be wise for them to confirm whether they will be a full- or part-time employee and that there is some flexibility to conserve their options to diversify. It is also prudent to consider signing any non-compete clauses in their employment agreement and ensure the deal does not prevent them from working for others or themselves, within reasonable limitations.

Then the massage therapist could explore other opportunities, perhaps working with a [chiropractor](#) or osteopath or in a hospital a few days a week. Further, the therapist could schedule one day per week to develop their private practice. As the practice builds, or they find they enjoy one workplace more than the other, they can strategically change things.

12 Steps on the Employment Path

1. Sign a non-compete only with the advisement of a mentor or lawyer and be sure to keep your options open.

2. Don't give up your option to exit a job for a sign-on bonus. Some companies offer sign-on bonuses when they are having issues with employee turnover and retention. Do your research and remember your value.

3. Shop your resume around. Go to many interviews and see if you can get two to three job offers so you can compare and make the best decision for you from a place of empowerment.

4. Have a job that is not massage-based to provide some income while job-hunting so you are not coming from a place of desperation. Coming from desperation will prevent you from practicing the discernment necessary to make wise choices for yourself as you are accepting employment.

5. Scrutinize [independent contracts](#) with expert advisement before signing. Some companies avoiding tax responsibilities dodge requirements to provide appropriate benefits by offering independent contracts rather than employment. If you are expected to work as an employee, you must be classified as one, and the employer must provide the appropriate conditions. Pay rates should vary from employment to contract labor.

6. Be clear on the tipping policy and clearly understand what side work you must do, such as laundry and other housekeeping tasks beyond room setup and cleanup. Question pay rates for these duties.

7. Provide massage therapy as a part of your interview only after being informed of the compensation package.

8. Refrain from fulfilling any coupons for less-than-usual compensation.

9. Do not provide free massages at any employer's recruitment or marketing events. You do not need to pay for your employer's marketing.

10. Confirm that you are not expected to wait on-site for a massage to be scheduled for little to no compensation. Your time should be compensated.

11. Make sure you have plenty of [time between sessions](#) to practice appropriate self-care and enough time to practice hygienic standards to turn over a room, to ensure the proposed schedule is manageable.

12. Always factor in your commute time as you determine if a job is a good match for you. Time, gas, and wear-and-tear on your car have value.

7 Keys to Opening a Private Practice

1. Ease into [practice-building](#) by bringing in income from other jobs while developing your clientele.

2. While you should refrain from signing a strict non-compete agreement, be ethical. Please recognize that the person or company you are working with or for has invested considerably to build their clientele and do not take clients directly away from them. If you wish to continue to work with your former employer's client as you branch out and hang your shingle, meet with the employer. See if you can negotiate fair compensation for the client/s you wish to continue working with in your private practice.

3. Don't specialize yourself out of work. For example, suppose you are going to start a private practice and want to specialize in a type of massage and serve a specific demographic, such as athletes. In that case, it is wise not to alienate other potential clients with your marketing. Do advertise the specialization, but not to the exclusion of other types of clients.

For example, "Specializing in Athletic Performance and Therapeutic Massage" would be language that would not eliminate your ability to work with all types of people. At the beginning of building your private practice, you need to serve all types of clients and provide a variety of adaptive bodywork to generate the income necessary to make your business work. Down the road, you can refine your client list based on your specialization.

4. Don't overtrade. This is something massage therapists often do at the beginning of their career. As part of your business planning and budgeting, decide [how many trades](#) you will offer. Whether for laundry, dental care or haircuts, don't trade yourself out of the actual cash you need to manage your life.

5. Don't oversell gift certificates, and put that income in your savings account so you are not cash-poor when the gift certificate clients book their sessions.

6. Take your vacations during the tax and holiday season, historically when massage therapy business slows down. This time is also the best time to promote gift certificates.

7. Don't undercut competitors to generate business. This conduct borders on unethical and can hurt the public perception of the value of massage. When setting your rates, start on the higher end rather than the lower end. Research the rates in your region. It is far more challenging to raise your rates than to provide a special discount.

Explore Business Diversification

One beautiful benefit of practicing massage through a business diversification model is that if one working scenario is unsatisfactory, the massage therapist can create an exit strategy and not devastate their income stream.

Regardless of how you approach this career and run your business, please know you deserve to be fulfilled and fairly compensated for your work. You should be able to have a comfortable lifestyle as a massage therapist and earn a living wage.

Explore your [business diversification](#) options, be discerning and creative—and accept only what you deserve.



About the Author

Jill Kristin Berkana is a school founder, curriculum architect, continuing education provider, and director of the [Berkana Institute of Massage Therapy](#). She provides business consultation services, mentorship for her 400-plus graduates, and advanced training in Mindful Expressionism; she also serves as an expert witness involving massage therapy misconduct.