The Biggest Mistakes Physicians Make in Transitioning to a Non-Clinical Career and How to Avoid Them

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Introduction: SEAK has had the pleasure of introducing thousands of physicians to the numerous non-clinical career options available through our annual Non-Clinical Careers for Physicians Conference. We have learned that physicians have a desire to explore their options for a number of reasons, including:

- Having a more predictable schedule with no call, nights, or weekends;
- Being able to spend more time with their family;
- Burnout;
- Frustration with EHRs, authorizations, reimbursements, and the state of medical practice in general;
- A sense of boredom after doing the same thing for many years;
- A physical disability that prevents them from safely practicing medicine;
- Not making enough money in clinical medicine;
- Just not enjoying the practice of medicine; and
- Being ready to retire from medicine, but having a desire to keep working in a role other than a clinician.

We have also learned three important facts:

1. There is a lot of opportunity out there.
2. Transitioning to a non-clinical career is eminently feasible.
3. Physicians attempting to transition often make avoidable mistakes which make their transitions either fail or far more difficult.

We have prepared this white paper to help physicians avoid common mistakes in career transition and help them successfully transition.

Mistake #1 Believing there is nothing out there for you.

This is a serious, but common mistake. What we tell physicians attending our conference is the following:

“When you arrive, you may be thinking that your biggest challenge is finding something you might be qualified for. When you leave, you will realize that the biggest challenge you have is that you have identified numerous potential non-clinical careers and your biggest challenge will be deciding which one(s) to focus on.”

To give you a sense of the tremendous breadth of opportunities out there for physicians, these are just some of the “traditional” non-clinical areas we have covered in our conference – each one presented by a physician who has successfully transitioned to the field either full time or part time:

1. Administration
2. Advertising
3. Author
4. Coaching
5. Communications
6. Consulting - Solo
7. Consulting Firms
8. Contract Research Organization (CRO)
9. Corporate Health
10. Disability Insurance
11. Disability Reviews
12. Drug Safety
13. Educational Administration
14. Entrepreneurship
15. Expert Witness
16. Federal Government
17. Financial Analyst
18. Financial Planner
19. Freelance Writer
20. Health Insurance
21. Health IT/Informatics
22. Hospice Medical Director
23. Independent Medical Examiner
24. Insurance Broker
25. Inventor
26. Investments/Hedge Fund
27. Lab Director
28. Lawyer
29. Life insurance
30. Locums Tenens
31. Medical Boards
32. Medical Device Companies
33. Medical Editing
34. Medical Necessity
35. Medical Science Liaison (MSL)
36. Medical Spa
37. Mock Boards Examiner
38. Non-Profits
39. Patient Safety
40. Pharma
41. Physician Advisor
42. Principal Investigator
43. Public Health
44. Public Speaking
45. Question Writing
46. Real Estate
47. Restauranteur
48. Social Security
49. Startup Advisor
50. Startups Entrepreneur
51. Teaching
52. Telemedicine
53. TV Reporter
Mistake #2 Inertia

By far, the most common and serious impediment to a successful non-clinical transition is inertia. If you want to transition to a non-clinical career that is best for you; this usually doesn’t just happen on its own. You will need to have the motivation, discipline, and drive to do your homework, pound the pavement and make it happen. A successful non-clinical career transition is going to take some work. It won’t happen unless you find the drive and time to start the process and then follow through on what needs to be done.

Mistake #3 Thinking you are going to be making less money

For many physicians, especially those in primary care¹, your first non-clinical job may well pay more to start than your current clinical position. This will be especially true if you take into account how much you are being paid per hour in a non-clinical 40 hour, 9-5 job with no nights, weekends, call, or unpaid evening paperwork. Factor in as well the fact that a growing number of positions offer, and even encourage, work from home, and you will in effect be making even more per hour. Also keep in mind that in the non-clinical world your income is not artificially limited by what some insurance bean counter or government bureaucrat says you are worth – so the sky can really be the limit as you progress in your career. Even if you do have to take an initial pay cut, physicians who take their non-clinical careers seriously often see their incomes grow over time to far more than they would have been making had they stayed in clinical medicine.

Mistake #4 Waiting too long

We have had many hundreds of physicians on our faculty who have transitioned into non-clinical careers. When asked, the most common regret these physicians report is that they should “have left clinical medicine sooner” as they are so much happier now. If you are unhappy as a practicing clinician it is usually a mistake to keep delaying action on a transition to a non-clinical career. It is unlikely that things are going to change and you are going to all of a sudden start to love practicing clinical medicine. The extra procedures you do or additional patients you see are not likely to better prepare you for a non-clinical career.

Mistake #5 Blindingly running back to school

One of the most common questions we face in counseling physicians on non-clinical career transitions is, “Do I need to go back to school?” The short answer to this question for most physicians is “no” as this can be a six figure, multi-year mistake. Getting an MBA or other graduate degree can impart serious and helpful knowledge. It also can look good on a resume and can help open some entry-level doors for a physician². However, getting an advanced degree, even if done online, can be extremely time consuming

¹ If you are a neurosurgeon making a seven figure income it is not going to be easy and may not be reasonably possible to replace that income in year one. But if you are in the $150,000-$200,000/year range, you are going to have a very good chance of success in year 1.
² An MBA from a top B-School like Harvard can REALLY open doors.
and expensive and is often just not worth it. Once you get started in your non-clinical career, your success and advancement will typically depend almost exclusively on your performance and not whether you have an MBA or other advanced degree. The real question is whether you need the MBA or other advanced degree to get your foot in the non-clinical career door or excel once you get started. For many positions, the answer will be no for the simple reason that for many jobs, like being a medical director working on utilization reviews, what you learn in an MBA will have little to no relevancy to what you do. We suggest figuring out what you want to do first, and only then deciding if going back to school makes sense.

**Mistake # 6 Thinking networking is a dirty word**

Many non-clinical jobs are found through networking. Physicians should understand that done right, networking can actually be fun. You get to connect with a lot of people and you can learn a great deal about a career, industry or organization. It is best practice to set aside a certain amount of time each week for in person, telephonic or e-mail/online networking. You should also be on LinkedIn, which can be a great networking tool.

**Mistake # 7 Being discouraged by rejection**

Physicians are accustomed to success. They were typically at the top of their class in school and generally have been successful at most everything they have done. It can be quite a shock when a physician starts applying for non-clinical positions and is rejected over and over again. Persistence and a thick skin are key attributes. We have worked with numerous physicians who responded to ads and were rejected from many of the jobs they applied for. They kept at it and eventually found their first non-clinical position.

**Mistake # 8 Restricting yourself to “traditional” non-clinical careers in pharma, insurance, administration, etc.**

In working with physicians we are forever amazement by the diverse talent we routinely come across. If you have passions and talent completely outside of clinical medicine, don’t be afraid to set your own path that leverages these skills. There are numerous examples of physicians who have been wildly successful in careers that really have little, if anything, to do with medicine such as Jerry Punch, MD (ESPN sportscaster), the late Charles Krauthammer (Fox news commentator and syndicated columnist), Dr. Bon Arnot, reporter of CBS News, Ken Jeong (physician actor) and numerous medical doctors who got into politics. Don’t be afraid to follow your dream!

**Mistake #9 Lack of self confidence**

We have been shocked at the number of physicians we run into who are doubtful of their value to society outside of being a clinician. This is a real head scratcher to us. As a physician you are intelligent, hardworking, responsible and driven - real one percenters in terms of talent. When you unleash these assets in the non-clinical world you will likely be a rock star without working nearly as hard as you did in clinical medicine.

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3 This is not of course one-size fits all. For example, if you want to be a lawyer, you need to go to law school. Similarly, if you want to rise through the ranks to hospital or health system senior management, an MBA would probably be very helpful in both landing your job and excelling at it.

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Mistake #10 Assuming you will have to relocate

For many jobs, you certainly will have to go into the office. However, more and more non-clinical positions for physicians now offer work-from home including in insurance, pharma, and government. In fact, a growing percentage of our faculty each year is home-based.

Mistake #11 Thinking you are too old for a new career

At one of our Non-Clinical Careers Conferences, a physician asked one of our faculty members the following question, “I am 62 years old and looking to do something different for the next 10-15 years before I stop working, would you consider an old fart like me?” The answer came from a physician who was responsible for hiring dozens of physicians at a large insurance company, “Absolutely. Look, in today’s environment, it is typical for people to stay in a job two years or less on average. Given that fact, what do I care if you might retire in a few years? If I can get 2 good years out of you, I've made a good hire.”

Mistake # 12 Thinking they must finish their internship and residency to have a viable non-clinical career

There is no question that in many ways, having Boards will broaden your opportunities for non-clinical work as some of these jobs require Boards. On the other hand, we have seen numerous examples of highly successful physicians who found out early on that a clinical career in medicine was almost certainly not for them. Physicians who have left clinical medicine during their internships and residencies have gone on to hugely successful careers and each year our faculty features multiple highly successful physicians without Boards. Transitioning during or before residency also has the advantage of it being highly unlikely you will take an initial pay cut. Additionally, it is easier to think out of the box, follow your passion and take the less travelled path.

Mistake #13 Not doing your homework before you transition

It can be a serious mistake to jump into the first non-clinical opportunity that presents itself without thorough due diligence. You do not want to end up in a job you turn out to like even less than your current clinical position. Physicians making a successful career transition realize that, done correctly, the transition to a non-clinical career may take 6 months to several years to find the best fit. It is important to weigh all your options, do your homework, understand what you are getting yourself into, and give yourself the best chance of success.

---About SEAK, Inc.---

SEAK was founded in 1980 and is an ACCME accredited continuing education company. SEAK is proud to support the financial success and quality of life of physicians. Our focus is on teaching physicians how to supplement their clinical income through lucrative home-based work (consulting, writing, expert witnessing, file reviews, inventing, IMEs, and life care planning), educating physicians about the numerous non-clinical career options available to them, helping physicians become better negotiators, and assisting physicians who have been sued for malpractice to prepare for their deposition and trial.

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