

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

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## **Asking Themselves The Wrong Question**

Many physicians considering a transition to a non-clinical career ask themselves the following question: “How am I going to replace my current income?” This is the wrong question to ask. For the vast majority of physicians, the correct question to ask is “How much money am I losing by staying in clinical medicine.” By almost any metric (training, hours, stress, talent, value of service) most clinical physicians are grossly underpaid. Many experienced physicians also face the frustrating situation whereby their income is level and even declining.

Physicians in non-clinical careers commonly earn far more in the short and long terms than those physicians who are in clinical medicine. Non-clinical positions have the benefit of salaries that are not in effect set or limited by the government or an insurance bureaucrat. In addition, it is much easier to leverage oneself in a non-clinical career than a clinical setting where your earning are limited by how many procedures or patients can be crammed into a day. Finally, unlike clinical medicine, the sky is really the limit in terms of the earning potential of a physician.

## **Waiting Too Long**

We have interviewed dozens of physicians who have transitioned into non-clinical careers. These transitions typically result in better pay, less stress, and far more regular hours. When asked, their most common regret these physicians state 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. (This is true even for interns and residents) 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 patients you see are not likely to better prepare you for a non-clinical career. Waiting even longer makes the conversation you need to have with your family even harder since your clinical career will be further along. Finally, waiting too long can make relocation more difficult if your children are getting more established in their school and community.

## **Not Asking For Help & Mentoring**

Mentoring can be very helpful to a physician seeking a career transition. Most physicians who are in non-clinical careers can easily empathize with a colleague looking to make a similar transition. You will be surprised how giving and helpful your colleagues will be if you humbly ask for help and advice. A mentor that can point you in the right direction, facilitate networking, answer questions, and help you avoid common mistakes can be invaluable. Physicians seeking a non-clinical career should actively seek the help and mentoring of their colleagues.

### **Thinking that an MBA is required.**

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 is “no.” Getting an MBA can impart serious and helpful knowledge. It also looks great on a resume and can help open some entry-level doors for a physician. However, getting an advanced degree, even if done online, can be extremely time consuming and expensive. Once you get started in your non-clinical career your success and advancement will depend almost exclusively on your performance, and not whether you have an MBA. The real question is then, to be answered, is whether you need the MBA to get your foot in the non-clinical career door. For many positions, the answer will be no. Look at the positions you are considering transitioning to and determine for yourself whether the time and expense of getting your MBA is warranted. Do not use getting an MBA as an excuse to delay your career transition. Bottom line – an MBA can be very helpful, but is very expensive and is not a requirement for many successful transitions.

### **Not Networking**

Most 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 networking.

### **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 for many of the jobs they applied for. They kept at it and eventually found their first non-clinical position.

### **Inflexibility**

The more flexible you are, the more opportunities there will be for you. We often get calls similar to this, “I live in rural Kansas and need a new career where I work close to home (at home preferable) and have no initial loss in income. I can not relocate because of family concerns and I have no interest in going back to school. I hate anything to do with medical-legal work, managed care, or the government. These are the reasons I am miserable. Can you help me?” Are there non-clinical careers for such a person? Sure, but the opportunities are going to be far more limited. Inflexibility in terms of willingness to modify your lifestyle, initial salary and willingness to relocate makes a non-clinical career transition much more difficult. Physicians must be prepared to at least consider trade offs.

### **Not Realizing the Breadth of Opportunities Available**

There are many traditional non-clinical career paths available to physicians. These include:

- Pharma (safety, development, regulatory, marketing, sales)
- Medical Devices (safety, development, regulatory, marketing, sales)
- Insurance (health, disability, life)
- Medical Administration
- Government (Federal, State, Local)
- Occupational Health
- Education
- Communications
- Marketing
- Informatics (IT)
- Consulting
- Entrepreneur
- Media
- Writing

In addition, just because you are a physician does not mean you are limited to the above traditional fields. Examples of physicians we have worked with who are successfully into non-traditional careers:

- An occupational medicine physician who started his own successful gourmet food company
- A pediatrician who became a very successful financial advisor, and
- A physician who invented medical devices

Physicians who are intelligent, hardworking, diligent, have integrity and credibility, and can be an asset in almost any kind of business or industry.

### **Thinking they are too old For a New Career**

At our 2008 Non-Clinical careers conference 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 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.”

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

The sad fact is that private practice experience and board certification are generally not overly helpful in the long run for non-clinical careers. We have seen numerous examples of highly successful physicians who found out early on that a clinical career in medicine was probably not for them. Physicians who have left clinical medicine during their

internships and residencies have gone on to hugely successful careers. On the flip side, a story we hear over and over again is the physician who wanted to leave during their training, but because they didn't want to disappoint their parents or spouse, stuck it out through training and through many years of unhappiness practicing clinical medicine. Post transition, when we ask such physicians if they have any regrets, their most common answer is, "Yes, I should have left clinical medicine much, much sooner."

### **Not Recognizing their transferable and valuable skills**

As a physician you have numerous transferable and valuable skills. You must recognize these skills and be prepared to articulate them when selling yourself at a job interview. Physicians should make a detailed list of their core competencies and skills to use during their career transition and job interviews.

### **Unrealistic short-term expectations and not thinking long term**

Depending on your situation (specialty, stage of career, geographic location, non-clinical career selected) you may have to take an initial pay cut associated with your first non-clinical position. A good number of physicians we have worked with have experienced this. You should think long term, however. Many, if not most, such physicians meet or exceed their clinical earnings within two to three years and end up earning far more than they ever could have earned had they stayed in clinical. For many physicians, it took many years of education, training, and experience to reach their current income level. It may not be realistic to expect to start your non-clinical position at the same income level.

### **Not Positioning themselves financially for a career change**

Careful prior financial planning can greatly empower a physician's ability to make a successful career change. Physicians are well advised to live well within their means and save as large of a cushion as possible to protect them from any initial drop in income. Physicians need to accurately assess their financial situation and their financial needs to determine how long a career transition they can sustain without undue hardship for themselves and their family.

### **Being unduly concerned with what your parents will think if you are "no longer a doctor."**

If you are staying in clinical medicine to not disappoint your parents, you are making a common mistake. From the doctors we work with we have found that the parent's initial shock of their star child no longer "being a doctor" is almost always transformed into pride in their child's new career and success and the immense satisfaction of seeing their child happy.

### **Not taking every opportunity to gain non-clinical experience while still practicing clinical medicine**

It is a mistake not to seize opportunities while practicing medicine to position yourself for a non-clinical career. For example, one of the physicians we have worked with positioned himself for a highly successful career in disability consulting by taking the opportunity to perform independent medical evaluations for insurers while he was a practicing neurologist. Another physician we have worked with positioned herself for a career in administration by publishing, speaking and generally establishing her reputation in a particular topic she was very interested in. Another example of this is a physician who agreed to intern at a TV station and positioned herself to become a medical affairs TV reporter.

### **Leaping into a new career that you might like less than your current clinical position.**

It is 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 actually like even less than your current clinical position. It took many years of hard work to become a physician. Physicians making a successful career transition realize that, done correctly, the transition to a non-clinical career may take 6 months to several years.

### **Not Getting the Buy-In of Your Spouse or Significant Other**

Physicians who obtain the full support of their spouse or significant other are much more likely to make a successful transition to a non-clinical career.

### **Conclusion**

The transition to a non-clinical career for a physician is not simple and easy. However, recognizing and avoiding the common mistakes made by other physicians can facilitate their painless and successful career transition.

### **About the Authors**

Steven Babitsky Esq. and James J. Mangraviti Jr., Esq. are principals in SEAK, Inc., known for their excellence in education since 1980 ([www.SEAK.com](http://www.SEAK.com)). The authors created and teach at the Annual SEAK Non-Clinical Careers for Physicians Conference. The 2010 conference will be held in Chicago on September 25-26, 2010.