

How to start your own Occupational Health Practice

Working in occupational medicine can be an interesting journey, perhaps unlike any other in medicine. The role is an advisory one supporting various organisations with work related and general health issues in their workforce. There is a dual interest in medicine and the organisation's business practices and exposures. It is probably natural to also have an interest in occupational medicine as a business in itself and consider setting up your own practice.

Many specialists in occupational medicine work for large organisations as employees, some will then become self-employed and potentially go on to set up their own private practice.

I am an occupational physician also currently working independently and I was happy to volunteer to write this article and speak to colleagues who have also chosen this path.

This week I have been lucky enough to interview two well-known and experienced occupational health physicians Dr Lucy Wright (former CMO of Optima Health and Consultant in Occupational Medicine) and Dr Lanre Ogunyemi (Medical Director & Consultant in Occupational Medicine, Trinity Occupational & Public Health Solutions) who have both made the leap from large organisation (Optima/NHS) to setting up their own occupational health practice.

I have distilled the gems of advice and information which this has afforded me into a 10-point guide on how to set up your practice:

Step 1. Decide from the outset whether you want to work on your own either as a limited company or as a self-employed (sole trader) or if you want to build a larger practice. If the latter is the case you may want to consider a business partner – someone who understands how to write a business plan and how to write a tender and also consider working closely with another occupational physician perhaps as a partner (so that you can have holidays without letting your clients down!).

Step 2. Consider how you will gain some clients – both Lanre and Lucy do not advertise but both described building a good reputation within the occupational medicine “fraternity” as the most effective way to gain clients. Both considered networking via the Society of Occupational Medicine and being an active participant in the Faculty of Occupational Medicine as the most effective way of developing your profile and gaining clients. They also advised posting regularly on LinkedIn about the topics which most interest you to raise your profile.

Step 3. You need give your business a name, develop a website, get a business bank account and a reputable accountant – preferably one who understands your business or one in a large practice with partners with a broad understanding of tax issues as specifically pertaining to occupational medicine. Dr Lucy Wright discussed IR35, which you should understand if you are working as a subcontractor and Dr Lanre Ogunyemi discussed VAT, which may apply to some but not necessarily to all areas of your work.

Step 4. Be aware of pitfalls such as client expectations which do not match your own. Many clients do not have a clear understanding of the role of occupational health and having a clear written contract will be helpful in making clear what you are and what you are not able to offer. Have specific KPIs (key performance indicators) which cover time from referral to appointment, time from appointment to receipt of management report, feedback on health surveillance. You may wish to include an ethics clause or at least to discuss the ethical issues around occupational medicine with your client before you start to work for them.

Step 5. Have a diverse portfolio. Particularly in these difficult times (due to COVID-19) the value of not having all your eggs in one basket cannot be over-estimated. Even if you specialise in one area, try as much as possible to diversify so that if there are difficulties in one area (such as banking or aviation) your business will survive. Having some public clients such as local NHS hospitals or local government will be helpful.

Step 6. Consider finding a mentor – this could be your appraiser or another senior person in the business who can guide you.

Step 7. Consider issues such as GDPR – should you be registered with the information commissioner’s office? Should you be using your own secure online OH system?

Step 8. SEQOHS/industry kit marks such as ISO. Tend to be expensive but many large tenders will stipulate that these are required. If you have a business manager this may be a major part of their work.

Step 9. Are you going to have premises or will you engage a virtual office to field calls? If you are having an office, at this time a COVID-19 risk assessment will be crucial and if you intend to undertake face to face assessments appropriate PPE will be required.

Step 10. Last but not least, as we are all gradually getting older consider your pension – if you have a limited company and earn over the threshold you and everyone you employ will need a company pension.

I hope this has been a worthwhile introduction to starting your own business in occupational health medicine. These are certainly some of the fundamentals in getting your business up and running.

In these challenging times we may come to find that occupational health is needed more than ever as we support employees back into work.

I wish you well in starting your own practice.

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