

Success in chiropractic practice: a practitioner-based content analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Although there has been much recent emphasis regarding the ability of recent chiropractic college graduates to survive and succeed in practice, there has been little scholarly analysis of the components of success in practice. This study is a content analysis of what alumni of one chiropractic college consider to be important components of chiropractic practice success and the competencies necessary to contribute to achievement of these components.

METHODS

600 randomly selected graduates were asked to identify six characteristics of successful chiropractic practice and to provide two competencies for each. Preliminary findings of success competencies suggest that the following are essential: interpersonal skills, understanding and commitment to chiropractic philosophy, interpersonal skills, business acumen and a service ethic.

When the surveys were returned, research assistants typed responses into a spreadsheet. Three researchers working concurrently with discussion and full consensus, categorized each response. Categories emerged and sub-categories developed where appropriate, to enhance understanding of the essential nature of the characteristics of the indicator or competency.

RESULTS

We received a total of 114 usable surveys, for a response rate of 17%. The result was 942 “lines” of data to analyze, each line consisting of a practice characteristic and accompanying competency. The content analysis produced twelve primary categories of characteristics/competencies. Sub-categories of the three most frequently cited categories were made.

Most respondents focused their attention on the personal characteristics of the chiropractor. Much as the entrepreneurial literature (e.g. Amit 1994) has emphasized how important an organization’s founder is to a fledgling company, this research supports the notion that in professional practice, at least in chiropractic practices, the chiropractor’s skills, talents and abilities are a major factor in success. Within this category, by far the highest factors mentioned were traits associated with the personality of the doctor – his/her charisma, personal health, positive attitude, enthusiasm, honesty, etc. This suggests that for professional practice, the fate of the practice is tightly tied to the abilities of the individual practitioner. In other words, in chiropractic practice, chiropractors are not simply interchangeable parts; rather they are inseparable from the practice itself.

In particular, respondents noted that interpersonal skills play a major role in determining practice success. These skills include the ability to create rapport, communication skills, listening skills, and “people skills”. Clearly, the one-on-one service aspect of chiropractic practice makes these skills paramount in building successful practices.

For a surprisingly large number of respondents, confidence/faith in chiropractic is an important component in practice success. This includes the notion of practitioner commitment to chiropractic philosophy, understanding the importance of providing chiropractic care, “staying on purpose”, and being “principled”.

Notions of knowledge and a service ethic came lower down in the list. Perhaps surprisingly the happiness of the chiropractor was not frequently mentioned as a prime characteristic of a successful practice.

Table 1

| Elements of Practice Success /Required Competencies | | |
|--|---|-------|
| Rank | Category | Count |
| 1 | Chiropractor's characteristics/attributes | 244 |
| 2 | Business Acumen | 226 |
| 3 | Clinical Skill | 128 |
| 4 | Patient Education | 76 |
| 5 | Practice Volume | 64 |
| 6 | Patient Satisfaction | 58 |
| 7 | Income | 52 |
| 8 | Retention | 37 |
| 9 | Fun in practice/Families | 24 |
| 10 | Focus on providing care to families | 17 |
| 11 | Community Service | 12 |
| 12 | Service to the Profession | 4 |
| | Total | 942 |

Table 2

| Chiropractor Characteristics, Sub-categorized | | | |
|--|------|-----------------------------------|-------|
| # | Code | Label | Count |
| C1 | CH | Personal Characteristics (Traits) | 70 |
| C2 | IP | Interpersonal Skills | 61 |
| C3 | PR | Confidence/Belief in Chiropractic | 57 |
| C4 | KN | Knowledge | 25 |
| C5 | SE | Attitude of Service | 21 |
| C6 | EN | Enjoyment/Happiness | 16 |
| C7 | 12 | Organizational Skills | 12 |
| C8 | PH | Personal Health | 8 |
| | | Total | 270 |

Not surprisingly, respondents also reported that various aspects of business skills and knowledge are important to practice success. Marketing acumen was the single most cited essential attribute. This included the ability to evaluate practice location, advertising and skills in networking to mine potential referral sources. Next in frequency mentioned were skills in managing office staff, including recruiting, training, and motivating staff. Also reported were skills in actually running the office (smooth office procedures and paperwork to promote efficiency).

Table 3

| Business Acumen, Sub-categorized | | | |
|----------------------------------|------|-------------------|-------|
| # | Code | Label | Count |
| B1 | HR | Human Resource | 51 |
| B2 | MK | Marketing | 48 |
| B3 | OP | Office Procedures | 42 |
| B4 | FE | Fees | 20 |
| B5 | FI | Finance | 18 |
| | | Total | 179 |

The third major category of skill reported by respondents was the clinical skills area. We discovered that these skills broke down into three sub-categories (Table 4). Some respondents mentioned specifically the ability to correct subluxations and some emphasized the analytical side of the clinical experience (i.e. locating and analyzing the vertebral subluxation); many respondents felt that the ability to create results (presumably symptomatic results) was paramount in creating a successful practice.

Table 4

| Clinical Skills, Sub-categorized | | | |
|----------------------------------|------|----------------------|-------|
| # | Code | Label | Count |
| CL1 | AD | Adjustment/Technique | 73 |
| CL2 | AN | Results | 36 |
| CL3 | RE | Analysis | 26 |
| | | Total | 136 |

DISCUSSION

This study takes a first cut at determining what the essential competencies are in creating a successful practice. The source of this data is from practicing chiropractors, in practice from one to 25 years. Several interesting and useful findings resulted. First, the success of a practice is tied directly to the skill, talents, capabilities and behaviors of the individual practitioner. These results have implications for the sale of chiropractic practices. The importance of personal characteristics on the success of the practice suggest that the sales prices of chiropractic practices apportioned to goodwill should not be particularly high. If the incoming chiropractor cannot duplicate the selling chiropractor's individual characteristics, the likelihood is that the success of the practice after the sale is consummated is unlikely.

These results also point out how important it is for chiropractors to develop interpersonal skills in order to succeed in practice. We infer that colleges and management consultant services should provide training in skills such as active listening, communication, leadership, etc. These skills, normally taught in the business school milieu, should be added to chiropractic college curricula.

This is supported by the emphasis on business skills in the data. Clearly, it is not enough to be clinically sound to create practice success. Business skills are felt to be very important in developing a viable practice.

It was interesting that the data did not support the notion that income level is a definitive determinant of practice success. Certainly practice volume was felt by more to be significant. This suggests that there is a strong service component implicit in chiropractic practice. It is much more often felt that taking care of more people is a strong indicator of success than income generated by the practice.

Also worthy of note is that the practice is a local phenomenon. In other words, the emphasis is clearly on the patients who come to the practice. Commitment to the larger community was not frequently stated as an indicator or determinant of success, nor was service to the profession.

Finally, the fact that practitioners see faith and confidence in chiropractic as a key component of success suggests that development of this confidence should be an important part of the education of chiropractors. This supports the efforts of some colleges and practice managers in the past to focus attention on providing confidence-building presentations for their students. Some of these lectures take the form of “miracle stories” of practice, and may serve to provide confidence to the audience members.

In addition to these three main categories, respondents reported, in smaller numbers, having a high practice volume, having high levels of patient satisfaction, and income as determinants of practice success. They reported patient education as an important causative activity in creating a successful practice.