

Employment Options: Practitioners Find Balance, Opportunities in Part-Time Jobs

by Communications Staff

November 17, 2005 -- Working in one or more part-time jobs is an employment option for practicing psychologists of all ages and in all stages of their careers. Some practitioners work on a part-time basis (less than 35 hours per week), while others work in a combination of part-time positions for a total of full-time hours (35 hours per week or more).

In this article, three practitioners discuss the rewards and challenges of holding one or more part-time positions. The article concludes with tips for handling part-time employment.

Combining professional interests

Sharon Bober, PhD, works about 30 hours per week in two part-time positions. She works primarily in a half-time research position at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute as principal investigator, researching how women who are at high risk for cancer make complicated treatment decisions. She also has a general private practice where she sees five to ten clients per week.

"The reason I do what I do primarily is that it is a way to combine clinical work with hospital-based research work," says Bober. "I have been pursuing both tracks [research and clinical work], and I have not wanted to give up one or the other."

In her practice, Bober sees a number of clients who are cancer patients or who have issues related to her research. "I can see patients in an interesting and diverse practice setting, and I can take the work I think about theoretically and help people puzzle through real-life dilemmas," says Bober. "Both [the research and the clinical work] complement each other and are intellectually stimulating and satisfying."

Tapping into diverse business opportunities

Neera Puri, PhD, combines three different part-time jobs to equal full-time hours. She is the owner of a coaching business and a therapy practice and also teaches coaching to other therapists.

Puri says that pursuing diverse practice activities presents her with a wider range of clients and business opportunities than she would otherwise be exposed to. "I find the variety of work I do to be quite important," says Puri. "The different positions allow me to explore different passions. For instance, teaching [other practitioners] about using positive psychology and strength-based interventions [in coaching] is very different from doing clinical work in my trauma niche."

Puri, who formerly worked full-time at the University of California-Davis Counseling Center, adds that her various part-time positions give her considerable flexibility. "I love the creative freedom I have in the jobs I currently hold," says Puri. "I set my own hours, and can take on long-term clients without any managed-care restrictions. I also choose the clients I want to work with."

Caring for family

Jennifer R. Burgess, PsyD, left her full-time position as clinical director for an adolescent residential treatment facility last year when she had her first child. She now holds two

part-time jobs. She works about 10 hours per week in her own private practice, where she sees four to six clients per week, and she holds an adjunct teaching position at Texas Wesleyan University.

"Where I was working before was very high stress," says Burgess. "I loved what I was doing but it didn't fit with having a family. My current job is less stressful, with more flexible hours."

Burgess and her husband share responsibility for caring for their daughter. Burgess schedules her therapy appointments for the evenings after her husband gets home from work. The classes she teaches are scheduled during evenings and afternoons, when her husband is home. "This gives him valued time with our daughter," explains Burgess.

Burgess has found that working part-time fits her current lifestyle. "It's a good balance for me," says Burgess. "I get to put on the professional hat and feel like I'm really contributing in the field, but I also have this other [family] piece. Some feel they have to choose one or the other [work or family] and can't balance the roles. I feel pretty privileged that I have a job where I can balance both."

Research indicates that caring for family is a significant factor in psychologists' decision to work part-time, especially for female psychologists. According to the 2001 APA Doctorate Employment Survey of individuals awarded doctorates during the previous year, 44 percent of women and 15 percent of men who worked part-time cited family responsibilities as their reason for working reduced hours.

Maintaining identity as a psychologist

Psychologists at or near retirement age are also choosing to work part-time in a variety of capacities, including consulting, teaching, mentoring, volunteering and writing books, in order to stay connected to the profession. According to a survey conducted by the APA Task Force on Retiring Psychologists, 64 percent of psychologists at or near retirement age plan to continue working as psychologists on a part-time basis.

Ongoing Professional Development

In addition, some early career and other psychologists use part-time work to develop skills in a particular area, enhance their professional experiences, transition into full-time work, or develop new business ventures. Some practitioners are choosing to work in more than one part-time position to build their referral base, gain administrative experience and diversify their skill sets.

TIPS FOR HANDLING PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT

Practitioners offer the following pointers for taking on one or more part-time jobs:

Prepare for the financial implications. Holding two or more part-time positions can be financially rewarding, but for some practitioners, like Burgess, working part-time may bring reduced compensation and benefits. "The biggest adjustment [to working part-time] was losing my income," says Burgess. "When I left [full-time] work it cut our household income in half."

Practitioners advise those who transition from full-time to part-time employment to prepare for the financial impact by taking such steps as working with an accountant or financial advisor to organize your finances, and making sure you and your family will have adequate health and other insurance coverage, which you may no longer receive through an employer.

Learn the business of practice. Practitioners emphasize that it is important for those who are launching an independent practice to become familiar with the business aspects of running a practice. Consult APApractice.org's Managing a Practice section for information on the business issues related to providing psychological services, and the Marketing and Building a Practice section to learn effective strategies for reaching potential clients and referral sources and developing a practice.

Stay connected. Practitioners also stress the importance of maintaining connections with other professionals. "Getting used to working more independently was a big adjustment," says Burgess. "I've always worked in clinic settings where I was part of a team. If I got stuck on a case, there was someone I could bounce things off of. Now, I'm working alone."

Her solution? She has developed an informal network of colleagues with whom she consults regularly. She notes that this requires more effort than talking to a colleague who works in the same building. "You need to plan some time when you're both available," notes Burgess. "We try to meet once a month for dinner."

In order to interact with other psychologists in her geographic area, Burgess attends discussion groups and free continuing education workshops at her local psychological association chapter and a monthly breakfast for professionals at a local county chamber of commerce. "When you're part-time and not seeing a lot of professional people, you have to look for opportunities to network," says Burgess.

Bober agrees. As a part-time practitioner, she says, "You have to keep networking and keep your contacts fresh." She meets regularly with colleagues, has a peer supervision group, and gives talks in her community.

Control your schedule. Practitioners say time management skills can be critically important for handling part-time employment.

Bober, who has two young children, cautions that managing two part-time positions isn't for everyone. "Juggling part-time positions probably works better for certain people's personalities," she says. "It helps to know yourself and your strengths and weaknesses. If you're someone who doesn't want to do one thing all the time, it could be really great. But if you're not that organized and you need big chunks of time to get things done and can't quickly shift gears, it could be a set up for disaster."

Puri agrees that it is important to maintain control of one's schedule. "I found it is essential when you run your own business to determine exactly the amount of hours you would ideally want to schedule into your work," she says. "I've seen it is very easy for independent business owners to get flooded with work, and lead unbalanced lives."

Puri has found that her part-time positions allow her more time for her husband and children, and says she considers it vital to protect her family time. "There are times I just do not schedule work."

Practitioners agree that while working in one or more part-time positions holds certain challenges, it can also facilitate balance and opportunity in their personal and professional lives.