

A Manager's Perspective

Back to 1995 - Now What?

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Since the passage of the Balanced Budget Act (BBA) of 1997, the employment situation for Physical Therapists and Physical Therapist Assistants has changed dramatically. What used to be a wide open job market turned, at least for a brief time, into a very tight job market where therapists and assistants had significant trouble finding employment. Layoffs and reorganizations left some therapists and assistants without jobs and with a great sense of urgency to find one – quickly.

The good news is that the tight job market is over in many parts of the country. Recent employment data shows that for Physical Therapists, at least, the current job market is similar to that prior to BBA. This is a rather dramatic change for many of us. I no longer get calls from therapists during dinner asking if I know of any jobs in my area. Once again those calls are from employers or recruiters. Temporary staffing agencies and traveling therapist companies, so heavily impacted over the past several years, are now springing back to life. Their phones are ringing again as they rise from the ashes of BBA.

During the “dark years” immediately following BBA, we learned a lot about ourselves as individuals and as a profession. We discovered that in some cases, it was supply and demand issues that elevated our worth or value in society rather than our direct contributions to society as care givers. We began to understand the economics of health care. We began to carefully search our souls to determine what we really needed professionally compared to what we had always been used to getting. We became a bit more humble, seriously more realistic and significantly more open-minded. We began to learn to judge our contributions – not just our titles.

Although painful, many of these changes can ultimately be good for us in the long run. We've become more flexible, better listeners and often, better at self-assessment and job search skills. As we've questioned our future and pondered our present, we become more sensitive to our environment and the colleagues we work with in other disciplines and professions. We've gained a bit of respect for those who have not always had it so good. We've also made some tough choices.

Some of our peers decided that the going was too tough and they left the field – totally, partially or emotionally. Others addressed these challenges head on and strengthened their resolve and commitment. All of us questioned why (and even whether) we wanted to continue to be PTs and PTAs.

As we emerge from the post BBA devastation, we have some serious soul searching to do. Are we going to fall back into the complacency and arrogance of our pre-BBA past? Are we going to, once again, let our personal marketing, self-assessment and job search skills lapse as we feel less pressure from lay-offs and reorganizations? Are we going to once again allow others who strive to be like us (but who are not qualified to be us), capture significant components of our practice while we are comfortable in those practice areas we prefer, simply because they are available and willing – even if marginally qualified?

As we feel the renewed crunch to recruit and retain staff to meet the needs of the expanding baby boomer population as they head toward Medicare, will we once again be willing to

delegate skilled care to unqualified extenders just because we can – even if we know we should not?

It seems to me we are at a cross roads as a profession. The crisis we face today as we recover from the BBA may be a bigger crisis than the BBA itself. This crisis is an internal crisis, a potentially self-inflicted wound. If we make the wrong choices, we will have no one to blame except ourselves for the future that we will build for our profession and for our patients.

Over the course of the past several years, I have seen therapists and assistants in some very difficult times. Mostly, I have been very proud of the courage and professionalism that we have exhibited. As we battened down the hatches, cinched up our belts and prepared to weather the storm, we've grown stronger and more cohesive. We have clearly seen the value of professional organizations such as APTA and AOTA. Without their intervention on our behalf, the impacts of BBA would have been much worse and more prolonged. Together, we really did make a difference.

Now, as we return to an employment market similar to what we have always been used to, I hope that we will continue to make the best choices and continue to work together as a more cohesive profession working toward a common goal. My fear is that we will backslide into our old complacent and apathetic behaviors because the times are good again, because there is no immediate threat to our livelihood or because it will simply be easier to do that.

I hope that does not happen. I fear that it will.

Here is my question to you: How do we, as a profession and as individuals, build on the new skills and attitudes that we developed in response to BBA so that we are stronger, more powerful, more knowledgeable, better coordinated and better?

I'd love to hear about your thoughts and experiences on this issue.

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Originally published 5/2001