

Practice Re-entry Study for the Physical Therapy Profession: Report Memo 2022

Final Report

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Introduction and Background

This memo summarizes the methodology and results of the practice re-entry study conducted by the Federation State Boards of Physical Therapy/Healthcare Regulatory Research Institute (FSBPT/HRRI) in partnership with the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) between March and December 2022. The study was supported by a six-person task force assembled by FSBPT/HRRI. The task force was charged with (a) providing guidance and feedback on the study design and implementation and (b) reviewing and interpreting the results.

The purpose of the study was to examine the psychological and behavioral mechanisms underlying physical therapists' (PT) and physical therapist assistants' (PTA) decisions to take extended leaves of absence from practice and, subsequently, return to practice. The study was designed to explore four principal components thought to contribute to a practitioner's decision-making and overall experience of leaving and returning to practice.

1. Factors that influenced the decision to leave practice
2. Challenges experienced when attempting to return to practice
3. Tools and resources used to navigate the return to practice
4. Tools and resources that would have been useful for navigating the return to practice

This work order (WO7) is a follow-on to several notable research efforts supported by FSBPT/HRRI. First, in 2021, FSBPT added a question to its annual practice analysis surveys (Harris, Rogers, & Caramagno, 2021) that asked respondents to report the duration of any extended leaves of absence they might have taken. The results revealed that a small to moderate proportion (17 to 28%) of PTs and PTAs have taken extended leaves of absence and, of these, most respondents (51 to 73%) reported their absences lasted three to six months.

Second, FSBPT/HRRI partnered with HumRRO to explore potential patterns or relationships in the practice analysis survey data as part of a separate work order (WO6). HumRRO conducted descriptive and group differences analyses and found that the tendency to take leaves of absence varied by different group characteristics (e.g., gender, primary clinical work setting), though none of the results were conclusive due to small sample sizes.¹ Nevertheless, the analysis results pointed toward possible areas of further research.

HumRRO presented the results of the WO6 analyses to the task force in March 2022 and the task force provided recommendations for topics to explore during this practice re-entry study. We present a summary of the study methodology and results below.

¹ It is worth noting that the practice analysis survey data were not collected within a research framework designed to explore the phenomenon of interest. Accordingly, the analyses conducted in conjunction with WO6 were purely exploratory.

Methodology

The study involved a series of one-on-one structured interviews with practitioners who experienced a leave of absence at some point in their careers. FSBPT/HRRI identified study participants by parsing examination data in its licensure database. If a licensure candidate had two or more examination administration records (i.e., exam attempts) within a period greater than two years, the candidate qualified for inclusion in the study.²

FSBPT/HRRI provided HumRRO with a list of 20 physical therapy professionals (14 PTs and six PTAs) to participate in the interviews. HumRRO sent a recruitment email in November 2022 that provided an introduction to the purpose of the study and HumRRO's role, and asked recipients to confirm their interest in participating. Seven PTs/PTAs signed up for an interview after the initial recruitment effort. Given the small response rate, FSBPT/HRRI and HumRRO made additional attempts to contact the remaining 13 individuals in the initial sample and FSBPT/HRRI sent a recruitment letter to a second sample of PTs and PTAs. Three additional individuals opted to participate in the study. However, four individuals dropped out of the study prior to being interviewed. The final sample included six participants (three PTs and three PTAs).

The structured interview protocol included four sections of questions. The first section included questions about participants' backgrounds such as the year they received their first license and whether they were currently practicing at the time of the interview. The other three sections focused on precipitating factors, professional impact, and the participants' experiences returning to practice, respectively. The complete interview protocol is presented in Appendix A.

It is worth noting that, although the interview protocol included a set of standardized questions, interviewees were given the option to engage in a free-flowing storytelling format. This option was included at the task force's request to allow participants a more natural format for recalling their experiences from memory. Interview facilitators used the protocol to guide their notetaking and ask follow-on questions if the participants did not address one or more of the questions. Each interview lasted approximately 50 to 55 minutes.

Results Summary

The experiences described by the six participants included in the study may not generalize to the total population of PTs and PTAs and caution is advised in drawing conclusions. Nonetheless, the data gleaned from these interviews provide a glimpse into the experiences that PTs/PTAs might encounter while attempting to re-enter physical therapy profession after an extended leave of absence. Additionally, because there is virtually no research on this phenomenon to date, the results presented herein represent an important first step toward understanding the scope and impact on individuals and the profession overall. The remainder of this section provides a snapshot of the interview results. Appendix B provides a summary of the results in a table format.

² Many state boards require practitioners to renew their licenses every two years. The sampling approach for this study assumed that individuals who attempted the exam more than once in a span of time longer than two years had allowed their licenses to expire and that decision coincided with a leave of absence from practice.

Sample Demographics

- All participants were based in the United States.
- Four participants had taken one extended leave of absence.
- Two participants had taken two separate leaves of absence.
- Five participants were female, one participant was male.

Precipitating Factors

- Three participants planned to take their leave of absence, one participant's leave was not officially planned, but it was expected. Two participants' leaves were unplanned, either due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic or due to layoffs.
- Five participants left practice due to family matters or childcare.
- One participant experienced job stress and burnout.
- One participant wanted more time to manage a personal business.

Returning to Practice

- Five participants cited additional income as a factor motivating their return to practice.
- Four respondents noted that their enjoyment of the work influenced their decision to return.
- Two participants returned after their children matured and they had the time to return to work.
- One participant had not yet returned to practice.

Useful Tools for Returning to Practice

- All participants' licenses lapsed and were required to retake the NPTE licensure exam.
- All participants used a variety of study tools (e.g., books, flashcards, practice tests, training videos) to prepare for the exam.
- Two participants used the National Physical Therapy Application.
- Three participants took formal review courses in addition to their associated study materials.
- One participant met with a former colleague and a graduate school professor to discuss the steps to return to practice.

Challenges Encountered

- All participants experienced obstacles when returning to work.
- All participants cited their principal obstacle as the process of determining the steps required of them to return to practice.
- Three participants mentioned having difficulty passing the exam.
- Two participants discussed difficulties getting interviews for jobs and/or securing job offers. They hypothesized that the gap in employment history could have played a role.

Desired Tools and Support

- Many participants discussed wanting detailed and clear instructions and resources about the requirements to return to practice. Several participants discussed wanting a designated website for those returning to practice that might include:
 - Links to clear and useful resources
 - Checklists to guide their return to practice
 - Anecdotal stories with advice
 - Lists of participating organizations for clinical hours to renew license
 - Contact information of those who are willing to help others return to practice
 - Contact information for designated individuals who can answer questions
- Several participants mentioned that a mentorship program would have been helpful for:
 - Discussing the return-to-work process with someone who had recently returned to PT/PTA practice themselves
 - Discussing the current state of PT/PTA practice and any changes that have been made during their leave.
- Several participants discussed the need for an approved list of study materials that could be used to prepare for the NPTE exam.

Recommendations

Recommendations for future research are presented below.

- Conduct additional interviews to gather additional information and identify common themes among participants' experiences. This will help strengthen conclusions about the phenomenon that generalize to the broader PT/PTA population.
- Incorporate an incentivization program to improve response rates for the study. The incentive itself could take a variety of forms, including but not limited to entrance into a drawing for a prize, a public recognition of participation, or a monetary reward.

- Expand the sampling approach to include a larger, more diverse sample of participants. This will help generate a richer palette of information from which to understand practitioner's experiences and needs. Additional activities might include implementing a marketing/communication campaign to generate awareness and interest, contacting local interest groups or membership associations to identify interested parties, and snowball sampling.
- Utilize the annual NPTE practice analysis surveys to identify additional individuals who are willing to participate in this ongoing research stream. Questions could be added to the survey to collect additional information about the phenomenon. However, caution should be exercised to avoid encumbering the surveys' principal objectives.

References

Harris, J. L., Rogers, A. R., & Caramagno, J. P. (2021). *Analysis of Practice for the Physical Therapy Profession: Report Memo 2021* (No. 100). Alexandria, VA: Human Resources Research Organization.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

WELCOME REMARKS AND ORIENTATION

Welcome and thank you for making time to speak with me (us) today. I (We) know your time is precious and you could be tackling other priorities, so I (we) just want to convey my (our) gratitude for this opportunity to talk to you.

The focus of this call is on your experiences taking time away from physical therapy practice and, subsequently, your return to practice. As you might already be aware, the paths people follow when they take leaves of absence from physical therapy are not well-documented, so there is little information about the experiences they have or the support they might need as they attempt to return to practice.

Our talk today is part of a research effort being led by the Healthcare Regulatory Research Institute at the Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy. The ultimate goal of this research is to enable HRRRI to provide tools and information to support practitioners who take leaves of absence. So, this call represents the first step toward understanding what the experience is like.

Before we begin the discussion, please let me (us) introduce myself (ourselves). My name is _____ and I'm a behavioral science researcher with the Human Resources Research Organization based out of Alexandria, VA. We're a small, non-profit organization that provides consulting services in applied social and behavioral science. We've partnered with HRRRI to carry out this research initiative and provide consultation on designing the overall plan of research.

I (we) have a few questions to start us off that will help me (us) learn about your professional background, but after that, most of the discussion will be informal. I (We) simply want to give you an opportunity to share your thoughts about your experience. In other words, tell your story. I'll (We'll) be taking notes as we go.

Given the subject matter, I (we) understand that the conversation might touch on sensitive topics, or you might not wish to share every detail about your experience. If you do not feel comfortable answering any of the questions, or if there are topics you do not wish to discuss, you are not required to do so. Just let me (us) know and we can move the discussion in a different direction.

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me (us)?

QUESTIONNAIRE

Basic Information

1. When did you first become licensed as a physical therapist (physical therapist assistant)?
2. Are you currently practicing in physical therapy, and if so, what is your current job title or role?
3. Since you first became licensed, how many total times have you taken an extended leave of absence from physical therapy? Please note, for the purpose of this interview, we're considering a period of 3 or more months to be an extended leave of absence.
 - a. How long did your leave of absence(s) last?

Storytelling Option

Thank you for answering these questions. Now, I'd (We'd) like you to simply tell the story of your experience taking your leave of absence from practice. Take us through your journey starting from before you took your leave, all the way through your return to practice.

QUESTION PROMPTS FOR INTERVIEWERS

Precipitating Conditions/Factors

1. How long had you been in the physical therapy profession before you took your first extended leave of absence?
2. What was your job title or role at the time you took your leave of absence?
 - a. What were your principal areas of responsibility (e.g., patient care, admin/management, clinical education, supervision)?
3. What was your principal work setting at the time you took your leave of absence?
 - a. What was your principal patient population?
4. Was your leave of absence a planned decision or did it happen unexpectedly?
 - a. What factors influenced the onset and duration of your leave of absence?
5. Were there any notable things happening in your immediate personal or professional environment at the time you decided to take leave? This could be things starting a second job or stresses at work or changes in your living situation (e.g., moving, gaining a roommate or family member).
6. To what extent did the stresses and strains of your job influence your decision to take a leave of absence?

Professional Impact

1. What impact did your leave have on your professional life?
 - a. Did your professional license lapse?
2. Can you share some of the pros and cons that your leave of absence had on you professionally, or personally?
3. Did taking leave change your perspectives or outlook on physical therapy (e.g., rekindled your interest, changed how you approach patient care, helped you identify your professional values or aspirations)?
4. Did you experience a loss of knowledge or skills while you were on leave? If so, in which areas did you notice the loss?
 - a. Based on your experiences, which professional competencies do you think are MOST and LEAST prone to loss when someone takes an extended leave of absence?
 - b. Again, based on your experiences, which professional competencies do you think are MOST and LEAST difficult to regain after taking a leave of absence?
5. What, if anything, did you do to maintain your knowledge and skills while you took time away (e.g., continuing education courses, self-directed reading, online coursework)?

Return to Practice

1. Did you return to practice, or attempt to return to practice?

If “yes” to question 1.

- a. Why did you decide to return to practice?
- b. What steps did you take to prepare for your return to practice?
 - i. Did you begin these activities prior to your return or after you re-entered the workforce?
- c. What obstacles did you encounter (e.g., regaining skills, finding information about licensing, understanding the requirements for re-entry to practice, finding and being competitive for employment)?
- d. What tools or supports, if any, did you use to help your return (or attempt to return) to practice?
 - i. Which of these tools was MOST helpful to you?
 - ii. Were these tools or supports provided proactively by your employer or did you seek them out?

- e. What tools or supports, if any, would have been helpful to you as you returned (or attempted to return) to practice? If “no” to question 1.
2. What factors influenced your decision NOT to return to physical therapy practice?

Thank you again for taking time out of your day to help us learn about your experiences. We cannot express how grateful we are for your candor and thoughtfulness throughout the call. Do you have any final questions or thoughts that you'd like to pose to us before we end the call?

Appendix B: Results Summary

Interview Sections/Topics	n
Basic Information	
1. First became a licensed therapist	
Between 1990-1999	5
Between 2000-2009	1
2. Current job title/role	
Physical Therapist	2
Physical Therapy Assistant	3
Not currently practicing	1
3. Number of leaves of absence	
One	4
Two	2
Precipitating Conditions	
1. How long in the profession before leave of absence	
0-4 years	2
5-10 years	3
11+ years	1
2. Job title at time of leave	
Physical Therapist	3
Physical Therapy Assistant	3
3. Principal work setting at the time of leave	
Rehabilitation facility	1
Outpatient clinic	4
Hospital	1
4. Planned leave or unexpected	
Planned	3
Unplanned	2
Not planned, but expected	1
5. Notable things in professional/personal life	
Children/Family	5
Burnout	1
6. Did the strain of your job influence the decision to take a leave	
Yes	1
No	5

Interview Sections/Topics	n
Professional Impact	
1. Impact on professional life	
Little or no impact	2
License Lapsed	6
Re-learning	4
2a. Cons of leave	
Retake exam	2
Less confident in skills	2
Behind colleagues in knowledge/skills	2
2b. Pros of leave	
Additional family/children time	4
More confident in skills	2
More opportunities to learn	3
3. Change in perspective because of the leave	
Little to no change	2
More mature upon return due to experiences during leave	2
Increased empathy/realism/professionalism	2
4. Experience loss of knowledge/skill	
Knowledge regarding other specialties	3
Emerging treatments/tech/trends	2
Loss of confidence	1
4a. Most prone to loss	
Medications	3
Patient care techniques	4
Information unrelated to specialty	2
4a. Least prone to loss	
Human anatomy/physiology	3
Physical therapy practices	4
4b. Most difficult to regain	
Technology	1
Changing regulations/laws	1
4b. Least difficult to regain	
Anatomy/Physiology	2
5. Steps to maintain knowledge	
Nothing (or almost nothing)	4
Personal reading/research/discussions with former colleagues	3
CEU's/PT courses	1

Interview Sections/Topics	n
Return to Practice	
1. Returned to practice	
Yes	5
No	1
2. Reason for return	
Additional Income	5
Had more free time and chose to return to work	2
Enjoyed the work itself	4
3. Steps taken to return	
National PT App	2
Study materials (books, flashcards, internet, videos, etc.)	6
Review courses (online or in-person)	3
PT final exam course	1
Meeting w/ former colleagues or graduate school professors.	1
Practice exams	5
4. Obstacles encountered	
Getting interview/job	2
Lack of resources to return to work	3
Passing exams	3
5. Tools/support used to return to practice	
Internet	2
Coworkers/colleagues/network	4
Continuing education units	2
Review courses	2
Textbooks and other study materials	1
6. Tools/support that would have been helpful	
Mentorship programs	4
Clinical opportunities to renew license (instead of exam)	2
Clear resources (online, call center, etc.)	5
Currently practicing PTs/PTAs who can help discuss changes to the field	2
A checklist or person outlining everything needed to return to work - including specific state requirements	3
More information about the exam including an approved list of study materials	1