
WORKFORCE STATUS OF THE MASSAGE THERAPY PROFESSION

WRITTEN BY:

**Robin B. Anderson, M.Ed.
(Pending), BA, LMT, BCTMB,
CEAS**

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018), the massage therapy occupation is projected to grow by 26% by 2026, which is significantly faster than the average growth rate of about 7% for other occupations. In contrast, enrollment in massage therapy education programs of various types nationwide is down significantly and has been for several years (American Massage Therapy Association, 2018). Moreover, places who employ massage therapists, which are a wide variety of practice settings, are experiencing workforce shortages due to increased demand for services (American Massage Therapy Association, 2018) and high turnover rates that can only be correlated to potential work-related injury (Blau, Monos, Boyer, Davis, Flanagan, Lopez, and Tatum, 2013). But are these the only reasons? Further investigation into this imbalance in the massage therapy workforce is warranted to determine other potential factors and solutions.



CURRENT IMPACTS TO THE WORKFORCE

There are two factors that have impacted the growth of the massage therapy industry in recent years: the establishment and explosion of the franchise massage clinic business model and the production of significant research indicating of the efficacy of massage therapy as a non-pharmacological treatment method for pain management in medical settings accredited by the Joint Commission (2017). The demand for massage therapy services in a variety of practice settings is very high (Dishman, 2017; American Massage Therapy Association, 2018), yet businesses and health care facilities are having a difficult time finding qualified applicants for the volume of positions available to meet their service needs. While there does not seem to be a barrier to entry for the massage therapy profession, speculation suggests that there is a lack of qualified candidates versus shortages of positions to be filled (Dishman, 2017).

Corporate franchises such Elements Massage are struggling to keep up with service demand yet are projecting being able to hire approximately 2,500 new massage therapists within the coming year (Massage Magazine, 2018). Massage Envy, the largest nationwide franchise and employer of massage therapists, is experiencing similar employment shortages, citing the immediate need for approximately 100 therapists to meet the consumer demand in one metropolitan area in California (Robertson, 2015). Both corporations state that their biggest challenge is finding qualified candidates to fill the positions they have, and they do not just want warm bodies; they want outstanding service providers. Massage Envy says that the difficulty is that people do not necessarily see massage therapy as a viable career option, especially with a median income of about \$35,000 annually (Robertson, 2015; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).

Elements is taking matters into its own hands by partnering with Cortiva Institute, the largest corporate massage therapy education group in the country, by directing their graduates to Elements locations nationwide for guaranteed jobs (Massage Magazine, 2018). This would seem to be a proactive measure that would help the workforce challenge; however, it is not a universal solution. The training programs offered at Cortiva are geared towards a spa or wellness training focus only, do not have the same quality curriculum or earned accreditation standards across the board in all locations, and cannot provide training in medical facilities effectively (Cortiva Institute, 2018). Due to these inconsistencies in state regulations and

educational standards of the massage therapy profession, partnerships such as the Elements – Cortiva connection are not the sole answer to the workforce shortage of massage therapists and current low enrollment factors in massage therapy schools. Further validation comes from data collected by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and current workforce survey research. In the state of Maryland, the most current workforce state profile indicates that there are 1,858 working massage therapists in the state with an estimated 32 practitioners for every 100,000 people who are of legal working age (HRSA - Maryland Report, 2014). Related professions such as occupational therapists and physical therapy assistants report similar workforce ratios and shortages of services (HRSA, 2014). In a recent study that surveyed practicing massage therapists nationwide, they indicated that physical and work-related exhaustion were the main reasons for injury-related workforce reduction along with financial impact from maintaining the ability to practice (Blau, et al., 2013). These are all contributing factors that demonstrate that while there is occupational growth, there are still challenges that are impacting the realization of the occupational expansion estimates.

ANALYSIS OF WORKFORCE DATA INDICATORS AND EDUCATION QUALITY

A disconnect seems to exist between workforce growth projections, the pace of supply of trained massage therapists, the ability to keep up with service demands, and educational models in massage therapy. The franchise corporations seem to be on to something with their speculation of the massage therapy profession as not being a viable career choice (Robertson, 2015) but also with their attempts at creating partnerships with training programs and schools (Massage Magazine, 2018). Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) supports the viable career theory based on annual wage estimates indicating that the median annual wage is just \$39,990. While this figure may seem adequate for a professional career with an associate degree or non-credit certificate level of training, as demonstrated in Blau, et al., (2013), factoring in the potential for physical and work-related exhaustion and financial burden of maintaining a massage therapy license, this may be impacting the decision for potential candidates not to choose massage therapy as a sustaining and legitimate professional career and

may be selecting other allied health professions such as physical therapy or nursing, or related industries such as personal training or yoga instruction instead.

Menard (2014) analyzed the quality of massage therapy education by surveying educators, practitioners, and complimentary and integrative health care providers. Her results of the surveyed group indicated the following key points:

- Massage therapy education is inconsistent, should be more competency-based with greater emphasis on critical thinking and reasoning, and needs more uniformity between state requirements for licensure.
- There are many massage therapy educational facilities, but most experiences have been considered sub-par and nonspecific.
- If massage therapists want to be considered comparable to allied health care professionals such as physical therapy assistants, the quality of education must improve and consideration for an Associate Degree level as a minimum professional standard. To work in medical facilities and hospitals, candidates need adequate training to be confident to work effectively and safely with patients who are ill and their family caregivers; educational standards need to change to reflect these skillset needs.
- Educators need more training in teaching competencies to be better instructors and improve educational quality.
- Training programs should be more like those in Canada, requiring more pathology, rehab skills, and professional communication.
- One solution would be to create articulation agreements from proprietary schools to community colleges and universities so that those who are pursuing work in a health care setting would have the training needed. (Menard, 2014)

These factors seem to indicate that even current massage therapy educators, practitioners, and other allied health professionals see the need for educational change to have a greater, more positive impact on the workforce dilemma.

Industry data also suggests that while income levels are higher for massage therapists in medical settings (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), due to the wide spectrum of entry-level massage therapy education models which does not necessarily include training in these workplace settings, these positions are few, and individually vetted for evidence of skill set abilities of working in health care teams, with required onboarding just as other allied health professionals are similarly hired. Moreover, the

needs of employers in other settings to have more qualified candidates who can work in their facilities while trying to keep turnover rates low and meeting service demands, are also being affected by educational quality and consistency of standards (Menard, 2014). To find a workforce education model that meets these requirements to create more stability in the massage therapy industry in America, Menard’s (2014) suggested discovery of looking northward to Canada to find a more transparent process is worth consideration.



Source: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/massage-therapists.htm#tab-1>

COMPARISON TO THE CANADIAN WORKFORCE EDUCATION MODEL

Shroff and Sahota (2013) determined that Canadian massage therapists at large had a few future aspirations for the growth of their profession: recognition by the medical community as part of it just as chiropractic and physical therapy professionals; incorporation of services to be covered by insurance plans; availability of more research supporting massage therapy treatment efficacies; obtaining a degree level of education for massage therapy training; and the desire to work as part of interdisciplinary health care teams for the overall increased quality in patient care. This study further outlined the steps necessary to reaching these goals; recent information indicates they are reaching them. According to the Canadian Massage Therapy Schools information website (2018), a modified two-tiered system exists where candidates who attend one of the approved colleges earn a degree and complete more than 3,000 hours of training, equivalent to that of other similar allied health professionals, and are generally employed in medical facilities with good income prospects. Furthermore, the job

outlook is positive and there seems to be a steady flow of candidates into training programs to meet these workforce demands (Government of Canada, 2018).

In stark contrast here in the United States, individual states regulate massage therapy training and practice, like the Canadian provinces, but the educational requirements are significantly lower in levels of training at 500 hours or more (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018), and are starkly inconsistent in academic rigor. To create a notable impact on the American massage therapy workforce, increases in overall required training hours and standardization that demonstrates that those with more education and training such as an earned degree of an associate level or higher, equates to an allied health professional status and therefore dictates a higher income level, which then creates a ripple effect in stabilizing workforce demands (Menard, 2014). Higher educational standards would also elevate the quality of candidate completing their training programs, which is the desire and need of corporate employers.

SUMMARY

The current state of the massage therapy workforce is disheartening and could potentially devalue the profession without timely and proper corrections in workforce educational models, clear definitions of skill sets and scopes of practice, development of community partnerships with employers in need, and income earnings that distinguish that of a professional career. Using Canada as an example while considering the current demand for services in all practice settings, if workforce education and training models evolved to higher competency standards and instructional quality with different levels of requirements designated by practice setting needs, this could lead to a better balance in the massage therapy workforce. Acceptance that the profession has evolved to another dimension is needed to create a more viable workforce so that all vested stakeholders can be successful. For current employers including franchises and medical facilities, raising the educational standards and determining which training facilities are producing better qualified massage therapists protects their clients, patients, and businesses. For therapists, it provides more job opportunities and better professional wages that would create more desire and drive to pursue a massage therapy career. The key is taking the data indicators from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) and acknowledging that to meet this projected industry growth, we must also evolve to a workforce model that is modernized and progressive just as the massage therapy profession has due to support of quality research on its efficacy and benefit to the public.



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