

A photograph of a physical therapist (male, red shirt) assisting a patient (female, dark blue shirt) with a lunge exercise in a gym setting. The therapist is kneeling on a green mat, pointing towards the patient's foot. The patient is in a lunge position on a blue mat. In the background, there are shelves with kettlebells and dumbbells, and large windows. A teal and green geometric overlay is present on the right side of the image.

APTA Benchmark Report: Hiring Challenges in Outpatient Physical Therapy Practices

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A Report From the American Physical Therapy Association and APTA Private Practice

Introduction

Since being declared a public health emergency by President Donald Trump on March 13, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruption within workforces across the U.S. The physical therapy profession isn't immune.

The American Physical Therapy Association's report "Impact of COVID-19 on the Physical Therapy Profession Over One Year," published in May 2021, tracked via three surveys how the pandemic's effects reverberated throughout the profession over one year.

Two years into the pandemic, outpatient physical therapy practices reported facing continued staffing challenges.

To better understand the extent of these labor pressures, APTA and APTA Private Practice in summer 2022 collaborated with Vault Consulting to conduct a workforce pulse survey directed at outpatient settings.

The survey sought data from respondents about location and number of sites, primary practice type and longevity, percentage of cash-based payment, number of full-time equivalent positions, currently filled versus open positions, reasons for staff voluntarily leaving, and changes to staff levels.

Survey data was collected between May 25, 2022, and June 16, 2022. The survey was sent to 447 practices across the U.S. and yielded 133 usable responses (29.7% response rate), representing 2,615 clinics and 10,977 full-time equivalent employee positions, including physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and support personnel.

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Executive Summary

As the physical therapy profession adjusts to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the profession is still facing significant challenges with staffing and the workforce. In summer 2022, APTA sent out a benchmarking survey to better understand the current labor pressures facing outpatient physical therapy practices.

Survey data revealed three main hiring challenges for staffing such practices. First, outpatient physical therapy practices have significant vacancy rates. The vast majority of practices have openings of at least 5%, with a 16% total vacancy rate across all employee categories — physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and support personnel. There are more openings for PTs than for PTAs and support personnel.

Second, the pandemic has increased hiring challenges. Most practices have more staffing openings now compared with pre-pandemic levels, and many practices (40.8%) are facing higher turnover rates now than they were two years ago.

Third, relocation and pay are the primary reasons for staff voluntarily leaving positions at outpatient physical therapy practices. Over a third of employees (37.3%) left primarily due to relocation, and a quarter (25.4%) left primarily due to pay.

APTA and APTA Private Practice developed four action steps to invest in workforce management in the profession, including (1) participating in the minimum data set for national data on the physical therapy workforce, (2) ongoing collection of data on the status of the physical therapy workforce, (3) exploring comprehensive workforce models that factor in current status and the impact of the pandemic, and (4) initiating a series of benchmark reports.

In addition to informing the action steps that APTA and APTA Private Practice developed after analyzing the survey data, the information in “APTA Benchmark Report: Hiring Challenges in Outpatient Physical Therapy Practices” is intended for APTA members to use as benchmarks applied to their own staffing situations in order to gain insights into the state of the current workforce.

Summary of Survey Findings

Three major findings from the data collected from this survey indicate current hiring challenges that are creating labor pressures for outpatient physical therapy practices:

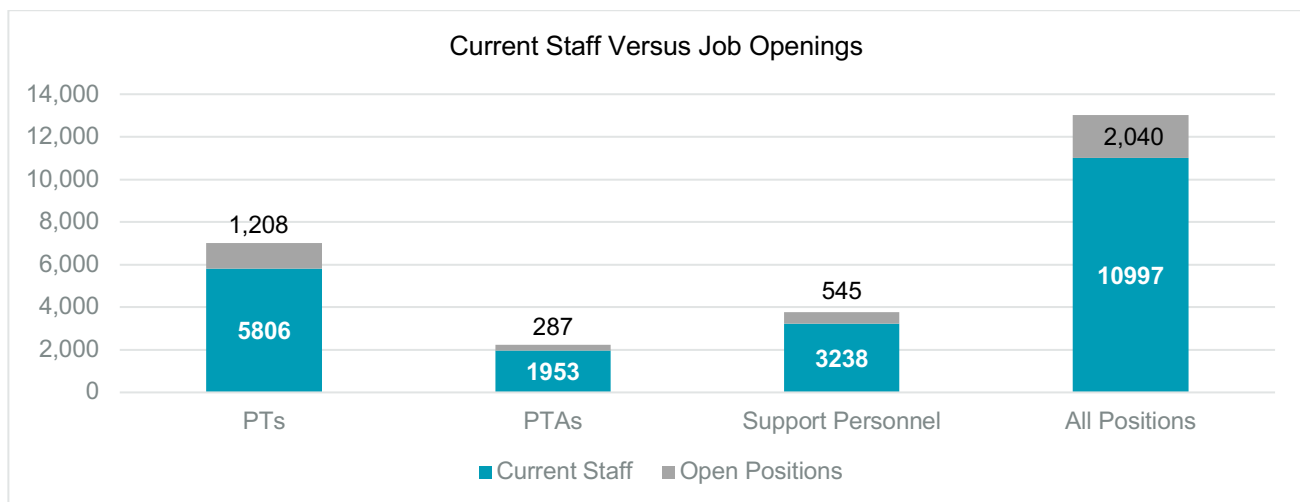
1. Vacancy rates are significant.
2. The pandemic exacerbated hiring challenges that existed pre-pandemic.
3. Relocation and pay are primary reasons for leaving.

Vacancy Rates in Outpatient Physical Therapy Practices Are Significant

Survey respondents indicated significant challenges in hiring. More than three-fourths (78.9%) of practices reported at least a 5% level of current openings for their workforce. The job opening rate was calculated by dividing full-time equivalent job openings by total FTE, defined as currently employed FTE plus the number of FTE openings.

Across all employee categories (PTs, PTAs, and support personnel), the total vacancy rate (i.e., position openings) for the survey population was 16%. Looking at each category specifically, the vacancy rates were 17% for PTs, 13% for PTAs, and 14% for support personnel.

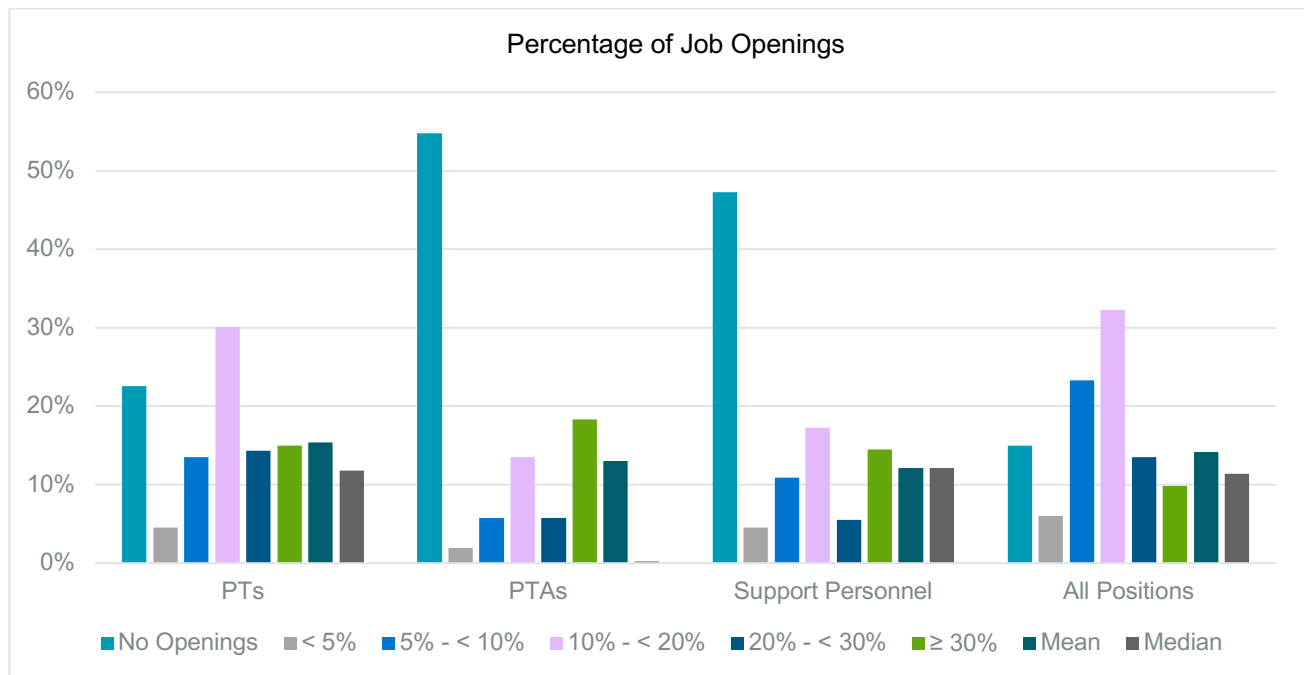
Number of Current Staff and Openings for Specific Employee Categories and All Positions Overall



For individual outpatient physical therapy practices, filling open positions of PTs was the top challenge.

Among the 133 respondents representing 2,615 clinics, there were 1,208 open PT positions, 287 PTA positions, and 545 support personnel positions. Over the entire sample, one of almost every two clinics had an opening for a PT, compared with one of every nine for a PTA and almost one in every five for support personnel.

Percentage of Job Openings Per Position and Overall



The discrepancy between the mean and median percentages indicate that a few large practices artificially raised the average. Most respondents (62%) were practices with either just one or with two to four sites, but a few (4.7%) had more than 50 sites.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Increased Hiring Challenges in Physical Therapy

More than half of practices (56.9%) responded that they currently had more job openings than they did in December 2019. Only 6.2% of respondents had fewer current openings than they did in December 2019. Furthermore, for almost 40% of respondents, the total number of current job openings increased by more than 50% compared with pre-pandemic levels; 36.5% of respondents had an increase of 25%-50% compared with pre-pandemic levels.

As for staff turnover, 40.8% of business owners reported more turnover in the first half of 2022 (Jan. 1-May 15) than during the same time span in 2019. Of the respondents, 18.5% reported less turnover in the first half of 2022 than in the same time span in 2019.

Relocation and Pay Are Primary Reasons for Leaving

Business owners were asked to rank the top three reasons why they believed staff voluntarily left their organization since Jan. 1, 2022. Respondents indicated that relocation and pay were cited as the top two reasons that PTs and PTAs voluntarily left employment with their outpatient physical therapy practices:

- Relocation, because of either the employee or a significant other, was the primary reason for leaving employment, chosen by 37.3% of respondents. What's more, 67.8% of respondents placed it within the top three reasons.
- Pay was the primary reason for leaving for 25.4% of respondents; however, 63.5% of respondents placed it within the top three reasons, bringing it close to relocation as a significant reason for leaving.

- Concerns about work-life balance were the primary reason for leaving for 22.9% of respondents, but, notably, 77.1% of respondents placed it within the top three reasons, exceeding both relocation and pay when primary, second-ranked, and third-ranked reasons were combined.
- Despite the ongoing public health emergency, concern over COVID-19 was ranked as the primary reason for leaving by only 1.7% of respondents, and only 11.9% of respondents placed it within the top three.
- One in 40 respondents (2.5%) indicated that the primary reason for turnover was employees leaving the profession entirely; that number rose to 27.1% when the top three reasons were combined.

Reason for Leaving	Primary	Second-Ranked	Third-Ranked	Top Three Combined
Relocation (Employee or Significant Other)	37.3%	16.9%	13.6%	67.8%
Pay	25.4%	22.0%	16.1%	63.5%
Work-life Balance (Reduction of Hours/Stress)	22.9%	30.5%	23.7%	77.1%
Other	8.5%	11.9%	19.5%	39.9%
Left the Profession	2.5%	11.0%	13.6%	27.1%
COVID-19 Concerns	1.7%	3.4%	6.8%	11.9%
Early Retirement	1.7%	4.2%	6.8%	12.7%

It's unclear based on this survey where employees were relocating from or to; however, practices operating in the West were most likely to experience job opening rates of 20% or more (36.3%) overall, while practices operating in the Northeast were least likely to experience the same (11.8%). One half of respondents with operations in multiple regions indicated that PT and PTA openings were different across the regions in which they had sites.

While practice owners may have little control over employees who choose to relocate, pay and work-life balance may be modifiable risk factors that can be addressed by employers moving forward. Similarly, any lingering concerns about COVID-19 may abate once the public health emergency is lifted.

Conclusion and Action Steps

Two years since the COVID-19 pandemic began, outpatient physical therapy practices continue to face significant staffing challenges — more than they were before the pandemic.

More than three-fourths of respondents report a vacancy rate of at least 5%. Among the employee categories (PTs, PTAs, and support personnel), there are higher percentages of openings for PTs than for other categories. Practices also are facing higher levels of turnover compared with pre-pandemic staffing levels. Among employees who leave practices voluntarily, the top three reasons are for relocation (either the employee or a significant other), pay, and work-life balance.

“APTA Benchmark Report: Hiring Challenges in Outpatient Physical Therapy Practices” is meant to provide APTA members with key workforce benchmarks that will allow them to gain insights into the state of the current workforce. Practice owners can directly compare their own staffing levels and workforce challenges against other practices of similar sizes and geographic locations.

APTA and APTA Private Practice developed four action steps that will lead to investment in workforce management in the profession:

1. Commitment to a national initiative to participate in the minimum data set for national data on the physical therapy workforce.
2. Ongoing collection of data on the status of the physical therapy workforce in varied settings, with reporting at regular timed intervals.
3. Exploration of comprehensive workforce models that factor in current status and the ongoing impact of the pandemic on the physical therapy workforce.
4. Initiating a series of benchmark reports for the profession on workforce data and trends to inform and advance physical therapist practice.

About This Report

The information collected in the survey and reported in the aggregate is for informational purposes only.

Objective: The purpose of the survey is to provide APTA's members with key workforce benchmarks that will allow them to gain insights into the current state of the workforce. Participants can directly compare their own staffing levels and workforce challenges against other practices of similar sizes and geographic locations.

Methodology: Survey data was collected between May 25, 2022, and June 16, 2022. The survey was sent to 447 practices across the U.S. and yielded 133 usable responses (29.7% response rate), representing 2,615 clinics and 10,977 full-time equivalent employee positions.

Analysis of each question was performed only for respondents who answered that question. Non-responses were excluded from the analysis.

Among respondents, the most represented geographic region was the South, with 1,192 clinics or other sites of service. Most practices had between one and four sites of service (62.0%) and operated in one region (89%). Ortho/sports practices represented the majority of respondents (83.2%). Nearly one-half (46.4%) of respondents have been in private practice for more than 20 years, and a third (33%) had been in private practice for 10 to 20 years. For 88.8% of respondents, practices had under 50% cash-based services.

Practice respondents represented 10,977.3 full-time equivalent employees, including physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and support personnel. Practices could determine what they considered full-time hours, although one PT or PTA was considered one FTE regardless of many hours they worked per week; however, if they began working for a practice midway through the year, they were considered 0.5 FTE.

- Total 5,806.16 FTE PTs with a median of seven PTs per practice.
- Total 1,953.07 FTE PTAs with a median of two PTAs per practice.
- Total 238.09 FTE support personnel with a median of four support personnel per practice.

Definitions:

- **Full-time equivalent (FTE):** An employee that works whatever number of hours the practice considers to be a full-time employee (35, 40, 45, 50, etc.). A therapist was not counted as more than 1.0 FTE, regardless of the number of hours worked. Only time that a therapist worked in the position (i.e., If a therapist began working half-way through the year, they were recorded as 0.5 FTE) was included. Any non-exempt staff were recorded as a decimal based on their hours worked (i.e., a non-exempt staff member who works 20 hours of a 40-hour workweek was recorded as 0.5 FTE).
- **Clinic/site of service:** A freestanding clinic or other location in which practices contract to provide services (i.e., Management Service Agreements, Employee Lease Agreements, Partnerships, etc.).
- **Total FTE:** Currently employed FTE plus the number of FTE openings.
- **Job Openings Rate:** FTE job openings divided by Total FTE.

Regions:

- Northeast: Connecticut, Del., Mass., Maine, N.H., N.J., N.Y., Pa., R.I., and Vt.
- South: Ala., Ark., District of Columbia, Fla., Ga., Ky., La., Md., Miss., N.C., Okla., S.C., Tenn., Texas, Va., and W.Va.
- Midwest: Iowa, Ill., Ind., Kan., Mich., Minn., Mo., N.D., Neb., Ohio, S.D., and Wis.
- West: Alaska, Ariz., Calif., Colo., Hawaii, Idaho, Mont., N.M., Nev., Ore., Utah, Wash., and Wyo.

Disclaimer: APTA and APTA Private Practice recognize the significant limitations of this report. Although respondents represented practices with a total of 10,977 FTEs, the difference in the mean and the median indicate a higher portion of small practices as part of the survey sample. Even with these limitations, we believe this survey on the current state is informative to the current labor challenges facing outpatient physical therapy practice.