

Independent Practice Provides ODs with Autonomy and Flexibility

A network of colleagues and structural support can remove some of the barriers

Early in optometry school, **Audrey Raley, OD**, set her eyes on opening her own independent optometry practice—and less than two years after graduation from University of Houston College of Optometry, she did just that in New Braunfels, Texas. “I’ve always wanted to be the master of my own destiny and be able to care for my patients in the way I wanted to,” she says. “I felt like I would be limited in either scope or decisions if I worked for someone else.”

During the two years that it took her to “get my plans together,” she worked at short-term or longer-term stints in about 20 practices, filling in for private practice ODs and corporate ODs, ranging from high-tech practices with multiple doctors to smaller locations where she worked alone. Each experience provided her with some sense of what she wanted or didn’t want in her future practice.

Dr. Raley certainly was not alone in her desire to go into private practice after graduation, says **Kristin O’Brien, OD**, who helps manage the Vision Source® NextSM program. “For me, independent practice is the ultimate way to

practice optometry. But there’s a place for every type of OD within private practice, too,” she says, noting that not all private practitioners are as focused on being the owner from the start. “There are the super-entrepreneurial doctors who want to own a practice, and there are also those who want to work in a practice that provides full-scope optometry or offers the chance to specialize in something specific.”

The perceived barriers to independent practice

The barriers to entering private practice may be based more on perceptions than reality, says Dr. O’Brien, who opened a private practice in Denver, Colorado, supported by two other Vision Source doctors in different states. She recently sold that practice and



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moved across the country to Charlotte, North Carolina, to work for Vision Source Chief Medical Officer **Amir Khoshnevis, OD**, whom she has always considered a mentor. Her story is illustrative of the flexibility that owning a practice can have.

While she admits it was difficult to sell a practice that she nurtured from its infancy, she decided the move was perfect for her professionally and personally, as her husband had better

job opportunities after the move.

Just like Dr. Raley, Dr. O’Brien knew while she was still in optometry school, serving as the president of the Private Practice Club, that she wanted to be an owner. But she has heard from many students and young ODs that the option wouldn’t work for them.

She unpacks the arguments. “The first objection I hear is that you cannot make as good a wage as a new graduate associate doctor compared to what corporate is paying. I advise new graduates to look in-depth at what a

contract is worth and not just get lured by the bottom-line number,” she says.

Look at hours, for example. Many corporate locations require evening and weekend coverage. “While some private practice ODs may have to piece together some part-time jobs that could become full time, many offices stay with a more traditional 9-5 type of schedule,” she says.

What is covered in the contract is also important. “Compare all the elements of a contract: continuing education benefits, health insurance, disability coverage, state dues for professional organizations and/or a bonus structure. All of those factors can add up to

tens of thousands of dollars, and the bonus structure can be very lucrative,” she says. While the independent OD looking to hire an associate may not offer as high of a base salary, Dr. O’Brien notes that “small business owners can be strategic in what they offer that provides a new OD

with a great package that is more customized for the new OD and his or her future.”

Making the switch

Optometrists with several years of experience under their belts in corporate modalities are also sometimes worried about the switch to private practice, Dr. O’Brien says. “The fear of the unknowns—like managing staff, overhead costs and managing an optical—can keep them where they’re comfortable.” But part of the challenge of life is to be ready for opportunities, especially when practitioners are surrounded by a network of caring colleagues who support the doctor starting out.

“Vision Source is a nationwide network of colleagues who have your back. From local doctor administrators to support from the Member Support Center, there are people who are there to make sure you’re successful,” she says. The result is a growing network of independent ODs, practicing to their fullest potential and moving the profession forward. ●



Dr. O'Brien



Dr. Khoshnevis