Second Gigs

Psychology, with a bit of side work

In his Twitter bio, Bedford Palmer II, PhD, describes himself as a licensed psychologist, assistant professor, multicultural consultant, writer, and legislative advocate. That he has so many roles isn’t unusual. Like many of his colleagues, Palmer supplements his primary job with part-time work. What is striking about Palmer is the ethos guiding all his professional endeavors, even the ones he isn’t necessarily compensated for. “Even if we’re for-profit as psychologists, we need to adopt a non-profit mindset and be mission-driven,” he says. “When I do anything professionally, I think about my mission: to further social justice.”

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Palmer, who is based in Oakland, earns most of his income as an assistant professor in the counseling department at Saint Mary’s College in Moraga, Calif. He also has a private practice, where he offers psychotherapy, consultations, and training services, with a focus on multicultural issues and advocacy. In addition to this work, Palmer is highly active on social media, and recently launched “Naming It,” a weekly podcast on pop culture, current events, Blackness and psychology with his colleague, LaMisha Hill, PhD.

For Palmer, the decision to diversify his professional roles has more to do with community reach than income. Other psychologists may choose to take on additional work for different and complex reasons. Regardless of their motivations, it seems that many psychologists are opting to take on more than one job.

“I think it certainly is a growing trend,” says Lindsey Buckman, PsyD, a clinical psychologist in Phoenix who has a private practice and a consulting business. Psychologists may diversify their roles for intellectual reasons, or to reduce isolation and create opportunities for collaboration, she says. “A third reason would be to supplement their income—this might be related to the decrease in tenured faculty positions or difficulty surviving in the current health care reimbursement climate.”

For Buckman, expanding her professional scope has both financial and intellectual benefits. Her clinical specialties include chronic illness, LGBTQ concerns, and peak performance, and her consulting services include marketing strategies for independent practitioners, policy development and advocacy for LGBTQ people, and professional presentations. “Developing a consulting element to my practice allows me to think strategically, develop policies, and be a member of a team,” she says. The financial flexibility is also a perk: “It’s nice to have a financial stream that is not based on an hourly rate or face-to-face contact,” she says.

Finding a new identity and paying off debt

Building a coherent, integrated professional identity out of these multiple roles is the key for psychologists like Buckman and Palmer. “A few of my clinical specialties overlap with my consultation services, and they certainly
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all influence one another,” says Buckman. “I use all my skills and knowledge to inform my business.”

For Palmer, podcast production and online engagement add about five hours to his 60-hour workweek. But because his digital media presence is a vital part of his professional identity and his mission, he can easily justify those unbillable hours blogging, Tweeting, and producing his podcast. Palmer integrates his work as a professor, clinician, and online as much as possible. “Even on practice days, I’m working on my research and teaching, I’m building and identifying my brand, and I’m integrating that brand into my work,” he says. “It’s important to go toward a specific focus.”

Kate Richmond, PhD, has also found that her primary and secondary roles influence one another in important ways. Like Palmer, she earns most of her income as a professor and supplements it with a private practice one day a week. She started the practice ten years ago to pay off her student loans, but now it’s a crucial part of her professional identity, and she plans to continue it once her loans are paid off.

“I’ve always been drawn to the idea of being a researcher-teacher-clinician,” says Richmond, who is an associate professor of psychology at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa. “The roles really complement and inform one other. It keeps me energized, it keeps me from burning out, and my days are exciting because of the diversity of what I do.” Richmond says that many of her research questions come from her clients and students, and her research boosts her identity as a teacher and a clinician.

Richmond and Palmer both credit their respective employers for recognizing the value in their private work and its relevance to what they do on-campus. Without that kind of institutional support, they both say that private work would be difficult or impossible. For Richmond, it goes both ways. “Financially, I couldn’t have stayed at Muhlenberg without my practice,” she says. “The student loans have to get paid off, and this is my way to do it.”

Beyond financial benefits

For other practitioners with second jobs, that kind of financial necessity plays a bigger part in their decision to continue in their secondary roles. Gage Stermensky II, PsyD, is the director of behavioral health at the Community Action Partnership of Western Nebraska (CAPWN) in Gering, Ne. Additionally, he has a private practice, and an adjunct faculty position at Bellevue University near Omaha. He took the CAPWN position and went into part-time private practice because he saw needs for both roles in his rural community. But his decision to start the private practice was largely influenced by his own financial need: he has student loans, high insurance costs, and two young children.

“The private practice is a new part of my professional identity, and isn’t as visible as my work at CAPWN or my teaching position. Once I’m out of debt, I’m not sure what will happen to the practice,” Stermensky says. Still, he is grateful that the practice gives him the opportunity to do psychological evaluations, which he enjoys. The opportunity to be versatile and less isolated is a major advantage of having have more than one job, he says, in addition to the networking and financial benefits.

Of course, time management and work-life balance can be difficult. “I think the largest challenge is trying to figure out when to prioritize what,” Palmer says. Stermensky also emphasizes that rural psychologists face particular challenges. “Many of us have to supplement our private practice roles because there aren’t enough clients in the area,” he says, noting that he sometimes has to travel up to three hours away to meet clients.

Richmond shared similar sentiments about the difficulty of achieving a healthy work-life balance while juggling multiple roles. But, she says, “to be totally honest, the rewards and benefits have far outweighed the costs.”

Whatever their reasons for taking on secondary work—to ease the burden of debt, to supplement income, to reach and uplift their communities, to deepen their intellectual pursuits, or some combination of these—it’s clear that psychologists’ training allows them to apply their experience and skill in creative and enriching ways.

“I would love to see more psychologists in positions that really highlight the diversity of knowledge and skills we possess,” says Buckman.

For many psychologists, the best way to demonstrate this diversity is by channeling their work into multiple, but integrated, pursuits—from private practices to podcasts.

Written by Hannah Calkins