Everything in life is a balancing act, including deciding what kind of practice setting will make for a satisfying dental career. For some, the choice of solo practice offers advantages over a group or academic setting.

The advantages

Being one’s own boss is usually thought of as the biggest advantage to solo practice. The flexibility to set working time to fit one’s own schedule, especially the ability to shift hours around as children grow, make it possible to attend plenty of school concerts, netball games, and soccer matches. Patient scheduling is completely within your own control, and staffing is entirely at your discretion.

Anyone who has employed and worked with associates will know their ability to throw hissy fits. Rather than face the prospect of hiring another, you may choose to work alone, supported by your nurse and front-desk staff, and feel comfortable as your practice hums along.

There is no board of directors to convince; no manager to persuade; no partners to get to buy into a new paradigm. You choose which insurance plans you want to participate with and which ones seemed to be more trouble than they’re worth. You get to design a filing system that works for you, choose the software, and even shop for the computer hardware yourself. There is a sense of ownership that would take years to develop—if ever did—had you gone into a group practice instead.

Best of all, of course, is the intensity of the one-on-one patient relationships you enjoy. They come to see you, and you are the dentist they get. Over the years, your patients become your friends, deepening the joy of caring for them.

The case against

The flip side of constant availability is the illusion of indispensability. Each weekend out of town becomes a hassle; every vacation requires a negotiation. And none of those days off come with pay. The opportunity cost of time away from the surgery is significant for everyone who is self-employed, as is the overall financial risk of the business endeavor.

But the issue that probably keeps more dentists away from solo practice than any other is the perceived professional isolation. Think about it: throughout dental school and your early jobs when you yourself were an associate in someone else’s practice, you were always surrounded by colleagues. Study groups, teaching conferences, patient rounds in the hospital— you never had to think twice about bouncing random questions off your peers. ‘What’s the dose of amoxicillin?’ ‘Should I refer this patient?’ ‘What do you think about this OPG?’

The further along you get in your training, the less you tend to ask questions, but even as an attending you are still surrounded by colleagues. You are never completely alone— until you choose to be by going into practice by yourself. After all those years working as part of a team, how do you keep from getting lonely without any other colleagues around?

Are you for or against solo practice? Email editor@smile-on.com and let us have your views.

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