

# Characteristics Employers Seek when Hiring New Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy Graduates: A Survey

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## Introduction

- There has been an overall growth in job outlook for physical therapists to 36%<sup>1</sup> and occupational therapists 29%<sup>2</sup>.
- For Physical Therapy, there are 233 accredited doctorate programs.<sup>3</sup> For Occupational Therapy, there are 76 accredited doctorate programs, 163 accredited master's level programs as well as 20 developing doctorate and 18 developing masters level programs.<sup>4</sup> The resultant increase in graduating students creates a need for graduates to establish ways of "standing out" when applying for entry-level positions.
- A MedLine and PubMed search yielded minimal research regarding the effects of modifiable factors such as professional membership, additional certifications, published research, etc. on potential attainment of an entry-level position for recent graduates.

## Objectives

- Collect data regarding characteristics employers seek when hiring new physical and occupational therapy graduates as well as the demographics of the hiring officials completing the survey.
- Present the data trends to assist future students in improving their marketability.
- Make the data accessible to university programs to ensure their curricula incorporates components or that students are given opportunities for what employers for physical and occupational therapists maybe looking for.

## Methods

- Non-experimental qualitative survey study that utilized convenience sampling.
- An introduction to the researchers, concise synopsis of the study, and a request for hiring officials contact information was emailed to the physical and occupational therapy programs' clinical affiliations.
- An email was then sent to the hiring official with a PDF attachment of the informed consent form and a link to complete the survey.
- Data were submitted to and stored in Checkbox, a survey program made available to students through FGCU.
- Participants included 24 individuals responsible for hiring physical and/or occupational therapists
- The survey was designed to evaluate which characteristics employers value as well as the demographic data for hiring officials in each field.

## Results

### Characteristics of Respondents

- Of the total number of completed responses (N=24), 67% (n=16) were female and 33% were male. The most common age range for participants was 41 to 50 (n=11), with 29% being 50 or older and 25% reporting ages 31 to 40. 79% (n=19) of participants reported that they are responsible for hiring both physical and occupational therapy positions.
- 87% reported their ethnicity as White/Caucasian.
- 33% of participants reported "other" as their clinical setting, 25% reported therapist-owned outpatient, and both skilled nursing and acute care represented 12.5% of the participant responses.
- Geriatrics and pediatrics accounted for 33% of patient populations, with sports being the third most reported population.

### Preferred Characteristics of Employers

Please evaluate the following statements based on their importance.  
23 Responses

	1	2	3	4	5	N/A	Average Rating
An applicant's GPA	9 (39.13%)	4 (17.39%)	7 (30.43%)	1 (4.35%)	1 (4.35%)	1 (4.35%)	2.1
Clinical affiliation experience in this specific setting	1 (4.35%)	1 (4.35%)	1 (4.35%)	8 (34.78%)	12 (52.17%)	0 (0.00%)	4.3
A master's degree in PT/OT	4 (17.39%)	2 (8.70%)	3 (13.04%)	8 (34.78%)	6 (26.09%)	0 (0.00%)	3.4
A DPT/OTD	8 (36.36%)	5 (22.73%)	3 (13.64%)	5 (22.73%)	1 (4.55%)	0 (0.00%)	2.4
Certification in a specialty area (e.g. massage, C.S.C.S., etc.)	5 (21.74%)	2 (8.70%)	9 (39.13%)	4 (17.39%)	3 (13.04%)	0 (0.00%)	2.9
Membership in APTA/AOTA	5 (21.74%)	7 (30.43%)	5 (21.74%)	3 (13.04%)	3 (13.04%)	0 (0.00%)	2.7
Strong professional skills	1 (4.35%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	3 (13.04%)	19 (82.61%)	0 (0.00%)	4.7
Time management skills	1 (4.35%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	3 (13.04%)	19 (82.61%)	0 (0.00%)	4.7
Reputation of the applicant's PT/OT education program	1 (4.35%)	4 (17.39%)	8 (34.78%)	7 (30.43%)	3 (13.04%)	0 (0.00%)	3.3
Letters of Recommendation	2 (8.70%)	4 (17.39%)	8 (34.78%)	4 (17.39%)	5 (21.74%)	0 (0.00%)	3.3
Completion of relevant continuing education courses	1 (4.35%)	1 (4.35%)	6 (26.09%)	9 (39.13%)	6 (26.09%)	0 (0.00%)	3.8
Peer-reviewed research publications	7 (30.43%)	5 (21.74%)	9 (39.13%)	1 (4.35%)	1 (4.35%)	0 (0.00%)	2.3

Answer	Total Score	Overall Rank
clinical affiliation experience in this specific setting	73	1
strong professional and time management skills	73	2
certification in a specialty area (e.g. - massage, C.S.C.S., etc.)	28	3
letters of recommendation	18	4
a master's degree in PT/ OT	14	5
reputation of the applicant's PT/ OT education program	8	6
an applicant's GPA	7	7
a DPT/ OTD	5	8
membership in APTA/ AOTA	4	9

Note: Total Score is a sum of the ranked item options. Top positioned options have higher rank.

## Data Analysis

- Due to the limited sample size, data analysis consisted of frequency counts and descriptive statistics to interpret data.

## Discussion

- Among the top preferred characteristics reported was time management; this is likely due to the high value of productivity within the physical and occupational therapy fields. A therapist with good time management is likely more efficient in the workplace.
- Another preference reflected in the survey was strong professional skills which we believe makes a positive experience for patients and falls in line with the professions' ideals for ethical and competent care.
- The final factor that was ranked as important was graduates who have similar clinical experiences as the job they are applying for. Due to the high variation of techniques and needs throughout different settings, it is more likely that a candidate with similar clinical exposure will be able to successfully assimilate more quickly.
- Limitations include the small convenience sample, low response rate, majority of respondents being located in Southwest Florida, and disseminating the survey via electronic communication.
- Future research should focus on increasing the reach of the survey across the nation as well as the general size of the sample population. It should also consider separating the surveys for physical therapists and occupational therapists. The survey instrument could also be improved for efficiency and more valuable data collection.

## Conclusions

- There were several characteristics that were valued higher than others such as time management, professional skills, and clinical experience in a similar setting.
- The findings in this survey should not be universally applied due to limited responses and small/isolated sample size.
- The data obtained can be used by future students to shape the course of their graduate degree program.