

BUSINESS IN PRACTICE

Mobile physio keeps patients moving



BUSINESS MODELS Fiona White, director and principal physiotherapist of Own Body mobile physiotherapy and rehabilitation, discusses what it takes to go from solo mobile practitioner to running a team of 40 across three states. Melissa Mitchell reports.

Traversing Melbourne each day between her home and her work, Fiona White, APAM, struck upon an idea to begin seeing clients privately on her way home as a way to earn a bit of extra money. Fiona, who was then working full time in rehabilitation, had no plans to hire anyone else or to create what she considered to be a 'real business'. If anything, Fiona was content in working with her predominantly older patients, but she had begun to see a real need to reach clients who couldn't drive or leave their home for physiotherapy.

As her private client base began to grow organically, Fiona, by now working 12 hour days, hired her first team member while still holding down her full-time job. When her request to renegotiate her employment arrangements to enable part-time work was rejected, Fiona took a leap of faith and poured everything into getting her mobile physiotherapy business, Own Body, off the ground.

'I started just by flying by the seat of my pants. The business began as me simply treating people after work, and as a sole practitioner it was quite straightforward,' Fiona says. 'But I still had to learn about ABNs, business structures and what my legal obligations were, especially around Medicare. Eventually I had to consider what to name my company, design a logo, build a website, create a brand, develop policies ... the list goes on; there was a lot of learning, and still is. A vital part of our progress early on was having great mentors around me who had done it before and could facilitate those first few steps.'

Timing also played an important role in the acceleration of Own Body as a truly mobile business. By 2009, as Fiona was starting out, technological advances had afforded business owners the freedom to be able to do much of their work from virtually anywhere in the world, as long as they had internet access. With a laptop,

a mobile phone, transport and administration support, Fiona was able to build the business without the need for a bricks and mortar office.

This business model, backed by an administrative team which diverts much of the bureaucracy and appointment management away from the growing team of physiotherapists, enabled team members to spend more time on the road—and more time with their clients. Longer appointments, factored into the roster along with travel times, are just one of the many benefits of Own Body's approach to mobile physiotherapy. Another is using the clients' own home environment as part of their treatment.

'One thing that is unique about our service is that we don't do any hands-on treatment. All of our clients are aware of that from their first phone call, they're aware that we are a rehab service,' Fiona says. 'We don't actually take much equipment out, we use a lot of what the clients have in their homes. It's a real skill set to be able to arrive at a client's home, assess their environment and come up with a practical exercise plan or rehab plan that suits them. Being invited into their home is a privilege, and I have to say an advantage as well. Our clients are comfortable, we can assess them holistically, and design a program that makes sense to them, and is actually adhered to.'

Reflecting on starting up the business, Fiona says drawing on resources such as HR in Practice through the APA, and engaging different consultants at different stages of development were fundamental to its early success. So have there been pitfalls along the way? 'Of course! But speaking as someone who didn't have any management or business experience whatsoever, all these negative experiences created golden nuggets of wisdom, teaching me how to be better next time,' Fiona says.



In the almost 10 years since Own Body began, Fiona has seen an exponential growth in the business. She now manages a team of more than 40 clinicians across Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane, with plans to expand further in the coming months. Fiona's business acumen is something that has grown along with the business, aided largely by extensive research, a supportive base of family and entrepreneurial friends, but also formal business development programs and networks. But above all, Fiona credits Own Body's success to a simple conviction which underpins the business: 'If you hire great people, pay them well and treat them well, the rest is easy'. (Continued on next page.)

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Establishing core values to underpin the business as it developed was one of Fiona's early steps, as was continual nurturing of key relationships with her client base and referrers. Ensuring new team members represent Own Body's core values and putting them through a systemised and well-supported orientation and supervision process has enabled Fiona to hire well, thereby boosting team retention rates. Online chat tools such as WhatsApp and Slack help foster connectivity between team members, allowing for a shared pool of knowledge each can draw on in an instant. Last year, Fiona employed a team supervisor as her role continues to evolve towards business development, primarily operating from her home office.

'One thing that has been a key to my success, or that has been important about the way that I have set up my business, is that I don't prioritise profit. Obviously I need to earn an income but money has never been a driver for me. It's more about creating a great work-life balance and creating a position that makes me and my team happy. I know I'm providing a great service and connecting amazing physios with clients in the community. And I'm very proud to have created a work space for remarkable physios to do what they love—and maintain a great work-life balance.'



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