

Locum tenens practice option may extend careers in medicine, help physicians avoid burn-out

By Mark S. Brouse
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Locum tenens may extend the medical careers of physicians and help them avoid burn-out, according to a survey commissioned in January 2008 by VISTA Staffing Solutions.

Physicians surveyed indicated that locum tenens would be most attractive to physicians considering semi-retirement, those making a professional transition from one position to another, and residents completing training who want to try out diverse geographic settings and practice types before settling down.

Locum tenens—Latin for “one holding a place”—is the industry term for physicians who fill temporary assignments, covering for a colleague during medical or military leave, for example, or staffing a healthcare facility while that facility recruits a permanent physician. The practice is worldwide, and a \$1.6 billion industry in the US alone, according to Staffing Industry Analysts. Interestingly, however, 69% of survey respondents said they had no personal experience working as or hiring locum tenens physicians.

The VISTA survey was conducted via Ask 100 Doctors® from Encore Research Group, an online physician consultation program that provides nearly instant consensus medical opinions.

LOCUM TENENS IMPACT ON MEDICAL CAREERS

Extend careers

The VISTA survey was designed to test the potential impact of locum tenens on physicians' careers and any resulting impact on physician supply. Almost 70% of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement, “Locum tenens can extend careers in medicine.”

HOW STRONGLY DO YOU AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT, “LOCUM TENENS CAN EXTEND CAREERS IN MEDICINE?”

1 (least agreement)	3%
2	10%
3	18%
4	40%
5 (most agreement)	29%

One physician wrote, “Great option for physicians nearing retirement and wanting to continue but can't because of overhead and business concerns. Also allows for vacations. From the locum tenens' point of view, many benefits to broaden experience and add income later in and early in career.”

A respondent's **length of time in practice** had an impact on the results for this question, with physicians in practice 11-20 years and 21-30 years expressing much stronger agreement than physicians in practice 1-10 years.

ABOUT ASK 100 DOCS

This survey was commissioned by VISTA Staffing Solutions and conducted by Ask 100 Doctors® (patent pending), an online consultation system that connects thousands of physicians. This system can provide nearly instant consensus medical opinions for a variety of case scenarios or establish that no consensus exists. Ask 100 Doctors® has sophisticated capabilities of scale and sub analysis, making the system a unique research tool for individuals and organizations seeking detailed insight into how doctors think about today's vexing medical dilemmas.

Ask 100 Doctors® was developed by the Encore Research Group. Encore is an acronym for ENCouraging COmmunity Research and Education. The mission of Encore Research is to develop products that enable physicians to help communities understand and navigate the increasingly complicated world of health care. Applications are designed to be free of commercial bias. Ask 100 Doctors® is a unique tool that allows users to understand the strength of consensus among physicians for a vast variety of medical issues. Encore Research is primarily owned and operated by a group of physicians.

Avoid burn-out

Next, the survey asked whether locum tenens could help physicians avoid burn-out by giving them a feasible way to work part-time, make a transition, or secure locum tenens coverage for their own practices. More than half, 53%, “agreed” to “strongly agreed,” with 25% in the neutral position. One physician wrote, “I worked as a locum tenens when I left a job that had completely burnt me out. I was looking at leaving medicine completely and the locum tenens gave me time to find another position that kept me practicing medicine.”

HOW STRONGLY DO YOU AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT, “LOCUM TENENS CAN HELP PHYSICIANS AVOID BURN-OUT?”

1 (least agreement)	9%
2	13%
3	25%
4	35%
5 (most agreement)	18%

Gender influenced responses to this question. Women were more likely to agree or strongly agree that locum tenens can help physicians avoid burn-out.

Better distribute physician supply

For many reasons, physicians are drawn to practice in suburban and urban areas, creating a maldistribution of physicians and acute shortages in rural areas. The survey asked whether locum tenens could help solve this problem. Overall, positive responses exceeded negative responses (43% to 31%), however, some specific comments indicated that poor compensation for primary care physicians and the shrinking supply of new physicians will continue to aggravate the problem. One respondent wrote, “I think locum tenens are popular in areas physicians would like to visit, so I don’t think it would greatly benefit the physician maldistribution problem, unless underserved areas were more highly compensated.”

Improve physician skills

Because locum tenens gives physicians the opportunity to work in a variety of practice types and geographic settings, the survey asked whether the doctors believed that locum tenens can improve physician skills through diversity of experiences. This was the most evenly split question in the survey, with about one-third disagreeing, one-third neutral, and a little more than one-third agreeing. Comments ranged from, “I personally think locum tenens would be fun. As for hiring them, I would always be somewhat wary of someone who was not either beginning or finishing their career,” to “Change of scenery and exposure to different communities should enrich a physician’s experience and professional expertise.”

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Survey results showed that locum tenens is an attractive practice option for physicians considering semi-retirement, those making a professional transition from one position to another, and residents completing training who want to try out diverse geographic settings and practice types before settling down.

Some 82% of physicians indicated that working as a locum tenens would be a good way for a physician to transition into **semi-retirement** because he or she would no longer have to carry the overhead of running a practice and paying for professional liability insurance. (Locum tenens agencies secure insurance and the doctors’ travel, housing, and local transportation expenses are paid for by the healthcare facility or practice, so the work is essentially overhead free.) One physician wrote, “I see this as one good way to go part-time towards the end of my career as I no longer wish to work 55 hours a week, which is ‘regular time.’”

In addition, 58% of the physicians said locum tenens would be a good option for physicians seeking to make a **professional transition**, for example, while they find a new permanent position or while they wait for a license to be granted in a new state. Comments provided at the end of the survey support this, for example, one physician wrote, “I have considered

VISTA STAFFING SOLUTIONS

VISTA Staffing Solutions is the physician staffing division of On Assignment, Inc. Founded in 1990, VISTA is the only physician staffing agency that provides the full range of work options for physicians and coverage options for healthcare facilities and practices. These options include locum tenens across the US; long-term placements in the US, New Zealand, and Australia; and clinical, clinical academic, and clinical executive physician search and consulting. For more information visit www.vistastaff.com.

[locum tenens work], especially when I was changing locations. A new Medicare number takes a long time to get and shortfalls of income nearly always happen. This is an ideal time to do locums. I should have done that several years ago because I had to take out deferred investments to cover expenses and got penalized.”

Working as a locum tenens right after **completing residency training** was cited as an attractive option by 47% of the physicians surveyed. One wrote, “I credit [locum tenens] with allowing a smoother transition from inpatient doc (during residency) to outpatient doc (real life practice).”

In addition, 28% of the physicians said locum tenens was an attractive option to supplement income while building a practice and 19% said it was an attractive option during vacations or when one is not scheduled to work in his or her full-time job.

AT WHAT POINT(S) IN A PHYSICIAN'S CAREER DO YOU THINK LOCUM TENENS IS AN ATTRACTIVE OPTION?

(Multiple answers were allowed.)

- Toward the end of your career as a semi-retirement option:82%
- During a mid-career transition or practice change:58%
- Immediately after residency47%
- While building a practice to augment income:28%
- While currently working, e.g., during vacations or when not scheduled:19%

TYPE OF PRACTICE PREFERENCES

Half of the physicians surveyed indicated that they would prefer recurring assignments or “return engagements” or a schedule of rotations to specific practices. Almost as many (45%) said they

would prefer any opportunity within driving distance of home. The concept of working a high-intensity, short-term assignment to maximize earning potential (regardless of location) was of interest to 39% of respondents. An additional 30% expressed interest in an out-of-state rural practice and 13% in an out-of-state urban practice.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF SHORT-TERM OR TEMPORARY POSITIONS WOULD BE INTERESTING TO YOU?

(Multiple answers were allowed.)

- Return engagements50%
- Opportunities within driving distance45%
- High-intensity, high earning potential assignments39%
- Out-of-state rural practice.30%
- Out-of-state urban practice13%

LENGTH OF ASSIGNMENT PREFERENCES

Locum tenens assignments vary in length from weekend call coverage to seasonal stints (i.e., tourist season) to international placements of a year or longer, with every option in between. Survey respondents indicated they would prefer assignments of one to four weeks (36%), or one to three months (29%). Another 30% thought they would prefer partial days or single days on a regular schedule, i.e., Wednesday afternoons or Saturdays.

This is one area within the survey where **age of the respondents** had an impact on results. Physicians 30 to 39 indicated a strong preference for partial or single days on a regular schedule. Physicians 40-49 preferred one-to-four week assignments and physicians 50-59 preferred one-to-four week with an increasing interest in one-to-three month assignments.

ABOUT ON ASSIGNMENT, INC.

On Assignment, Inc. (NASDAQ: ASGN), is a diversified professional staffing firm providing flexible and permanent staffing solutions in specialty skills including Laboratory/Scientific, Healthcare/Nursing/ Physicians, Medical Financial, Information Technology and Engineering. The corporate headquarters is located in Calabasas, California. On Assignment, Inc. was founded in 1985 as Lab Support and went public in 1992. The company's branch network encompasses over 80 branch offices across the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Ireland, Belgium, and also provides physicians in Australia and New Zealand.

IN SUMMARY

The locum tenens practice alternative is perceived as a way to extend physicians' careers in medicine and help them avoid burn-out, according to survey respondents. Physicians believe it is most attractive to physicians looking for a feasible way to semi-retire, those in transition from one position to another, and residents who want to test out different parts of the country (or world) and various practice settings before making a permanent commitment to a full-time practice.

Is locum tenens the right option for you?

Contact a VISTA recruiter today to discuss your plans and priorities and we will help you find out: **800-366-1884**, email at facts@vistastaff.com, online at www.vistastaff.com. You can read stories of physicians who have used locum tenens at different times in their careers at our blog, www.vistastaff.com/physicians/blog.

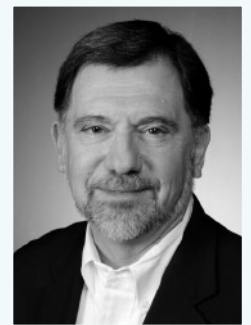


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark S. Brouse, President

Mark S. Brouse is president of VISTA Staffing Solutions, one of the largest physician staffing companies in the nation. VISTA provides temporary physician staffing—or locum tenens—jobs to physicians from just about every medical specialty and is the only locum tenens company that provides both domestic and international opportunities. The company also provides Physician Search and Consulting and Extended Locum Tenens Staffing. VISTA Staffing Solutions is a founding member of the National Organization of Locum Tenens Organizations (NALTO), an organization that develops and enforces standards for credentialing, ethics, and business practices within the locum tenens industry.

Mark focuses on developing innovative partnerships with the hospitals, health systems, and community-based practices that VISTA serves to help them make physician staffing a strategic advantage. He played a lead role in the development of effective professional liability insurance programs for this unique industry. As a founder of VISTA, he is committed to creating a culture that puts people first and gives them the incentive to think and act like company owners. Mark is a member of the boards of directors of the YMCA of Greater Salt Lake, the Utah Healthcare Institute, and PEHR Technologies.



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