Can Childbirth Educators Make a Living Wage Doing What They Love?

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ABSTRACT

In this column, a master certified coach offers advice and direction to childbirth educators on how to develop a business plan that may enable them to earn a living wage in their profession.

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I am often asked, “Can I make a living wage doing what I love?” Probably not, I answer. But it’s entirely possible that you *can* make a living, and a good one. It all depends on whether you envision a job or a program.

If you set your sights on making a living wage, you are almost certainly going to dream, plan, and build too small for financial stability. You are likely to live a hand-to-mouth existence and to be at the mercy of changes that affect your program rather than being proactive about them. A living wage is what you would hope to receive from an employer. As your own employer (or as the person responsible for funding your program), you’re responsible not only for your wage, but also for the infrastructure that makes it possible to pay you.

Here are some steps you can follow to determine whether you can earn a good living doing what you love:

1. Define “good living.” Write down everything that an employer might otherwise cover, such as health insurance, sick pay, vacations, retirement

funds, etc. Sometimes, envisioning three scenarios is helpful: bare-bones, middle-of-the-road, and ideal outcomes. Be sure to plan for income taxes and social security contributions, too.

2. Define what you “love doing.” If it is perinatal education, identify your goals and objectives for that profession. Develop an evaluation plan so you can measure your program’s progress. Plan to collect information that will answer the questions you will have, and gather that information from the right people (parents, providers, etc.). This process will provide constant feedback about your successes and problems, and offer a basis for later program changes or additions.
3. Decide how much time you are prepared to devote to your work, including managing administration, implementing marketing strategies, keeping up your certification, attending conferences, and delivering services. (A rule of thumb is that principals spend 40–60% of their time administering and marketing their business or program. That means 40–60% of what you earn is overhead.)

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4. What does it cost to fund a healthy program? Even if you work from home, you have telephone and supply expenses, travel expenses, training costs, and (I hope) marketing expenses. Remember to include the portion of your desired income that is overhead as well as any work that is done by employees or subcontractors. Again, it can be helpful to envision three scenarios for minimal, adequate, and ideal funding levels.
5. How much time will you have to deliver services? Take the time you are prepared to work each month, subtract 50%, and you'll have a ballpark estimate of the number of hours that you can use to actually earn income ("billable time").

6. What's the going rate in your community for the kind of work you do? Again, it can be useful to set a range from minimum to average to high-end rates.
7. If you were able to work all of your available billable hours at the average going rate, how much would you earn?
8. Compare this amount with the overhead expenses you calculated (Step 3) and the salary you are aiming for (Step 1). If your projected earnings are adequate to cover those expenditures (plus 10–20% for profit and contingencies), then you have an excellent chance of making a good income so long as you are an efficient administrator and market your services to get and keep a full calendar.

What if the numbers don't add up? You have several options. The simplest is to work for someone else, exchanging the freedom and responsibility of running your own program for the security of a paycheck. Alternatively, you might collaborate with other practitioners to cut costs, spread the

risk, and create a more professional “front end” for your programs. Some professionals find it better to work part-time at a stable job so their benefits are taken care of and they are not so reliant on income from their private practices.

Another approach is to go back to the drawing board, looking for places to cut expenses and/or increase income. One way to cut expenses in the start-up phase is to pay yourself little or nothing until you have a full calendar. If you can afford to put the money you earn into marketing, adding value to your services, and improving your skills and systems, you’ll build a strong program that may be able to pay you well for years to come. Whether you plan on taking this approach or not, it is a good idea to have a nest egg or other sources of income until your program runs sustainably. Otherwise, money worries can have a negative impact on your marketing and your focus.

Whatever approach you take, it is important to accurately assess the market for your work. Find out the number of births, income, and education levels of families, and the cultural norms and expectation around childbirth in your community. How many families are poised to value the Lamaze approach to normal childbirth? How many might be interested if they understood the benefits? What are the obstacles to reaching interested families and enrolling them? (The same questions apply if you are training childbirth educators.)

Keep in mind that marketing is a big part of the success equation. Marketing can help educate and reassure families, introducing them to benefits they may never have even considered. Marketing can make you visible, accessible, and credible to other childbirth professionals. Marketing can also engage you in ongoing dialogues with families, other providers, and opinion makers in your community. These conversations have the potential to not only bring new clients or trainees into

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If you love working to empower moms, babies, and families to experience the benefits of normal childbirth, telling a compelling story about it is part of that work. I can hardly wait to join Lamaze International for its annual conference in Austin, Texas, in September 2005 to share marketing approaches that can help you build exceptional programs that deliver quality services and reward you for your commitment and effort.

For more information on this year's Lamaze International conference and other Lamaze events, visit www.lamaze.org or call 1-800-368-4404.

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