

Unique Careers for Dietetics Professionals

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With genetically modified food, trendy diets, and cutting-edge food science making headlines, it is a ripe, exciting time to make a living as a dietetics professional. Advances in computer technology alone have created career opportunities that simply didn't exist a decade ago.

However, many of these dynamic careers are in less obvious places, such as non-food business corporations, on the Internet, and even within the legal system. "To take advantage, we need to think out of the box. We're always talking clinical or foodservice work, but we need to think of ways to sell ourselves in a way that is more creative and more well-rounded," says Linda McDonald, MS, RD, publisher of the information service *Supermarket Savvy*. "Sometimes we have to go into areas and can't sell ourselves only as [dietetics professionals], but as food experts."

Dietetics professionals following their own path say that open-mindedness is necessary not only to see these hidden positions, but to actually show these nontraditional businesses how dietetics can be of value to them. "If you want to work with big corporations, you have to understand how they work so you can market yourself to these companies from a business angle. Help them see that workplace wellness is not a business expense, but a return on the bottom line," says Jean Caton, MS, RD, owner of McKinley Coaching and Consulting. "Many of these major corporations are starting to recognize this, and they pay much better than most of the food industry can pay."

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Four dietetics professionals have found their own niche within some rather unique environments. They saw opportunities, took several risks, and, in the end, say they are happier than they would have been within a traditional professional career track.

ORDERING THE COURT

Nancy Collins, PhD, RD, has always known that her main mission as a dietetics professional was to improve nursing home health care. However, a decade ago she discovered that some of her biggest influence would be not only within the homes themselves, but the legal system. Aside from running her own Florida consulting firm since 1990, Collins has served as an expert witness in several nursing home court cases.

"It started out about 10 years ago when I was asked to do two cases. The next year it was six, then 15. Right now I'm involved in two dozen cases," says Collins, who is also chair of the Nutrition Entrepreneur dietetic practice group.

She specializes in long-term care and geriatrics, specifically wound healing and involuntary weight loss. "Many are in nursing homes, have a wound that didn't heal and lose weight and eventually die," she says. Collins has done both defense (for the nursing home company) and plaintiff (for the loved one's family) work, which helps her see both sides of long-term care issues.

Court cases can be time-consuming, but Collins, who has her PhD in dietetics, also has a busy consulting practice, primarily working with pharmaceutical companies on marketing materials, white papers, and monographs, among other projects. She's paid for her legal services and it only makes up 25% of her annual work—people who become full-time expert witness are generally considered opportunistic, she says. Furthermore, you should participate because you have an expertise and a desire to

help in a specific area, especially since you'll be sitting on the stand . . . a lot.

"You need thorough knowledge of the law. I've seen a lot of dietetics professionals try to rush and get a proper understanding of the nursing system before a trial, but the lawyer's job is to break down your credibility. 'What makes you an expert?' 'Why do you know this?'" Collins says. "You have to anticipate what they are going to ask and what you are going to be questioned about. A 10,000-page history of a patient is not uncommon, so you need to read it . . . and be able to converse about it without getting flustered."

This confrontation is exactly why Collins loves being a witness. "I like detail-oriented work. To me, it's like a mental chess game."

HELPING PEOPLE FIND THEIR WAY

Jean Caton, MS, RD, has a simple mission statement: "Inspiring and empowering the women of the world, one woman at a time." It is a lofty goal, one that she found she could achieve better leaving the corporate world after 25 years and starting her own company, McKinley Coaching and Consulting, 2 years ago.

She found her calling as a life coach, something she might not have discovered without being in a traditional business environment. "I worked in the field of marketing and, in a way, was always coaching [other professionals]. It was just who I was," says Caton, who also works on marketing and public relations for the Nutrition Entrepreneur dietetic practice group. "When I stepped out on my own, I already had people calling me 'Coach.'"

Caton began studying at Coach U (www.coachu.com), a well-regarded online program that gives certifications in coaching, and found that she could do well in both professional and personal coaching. "I work as both a life coach and a coach for business people. Your life and your work, well, it's all your life. You don't shut your

life off when you go to work in the morning.”

However, Caton's view wasn't always so broad. "When I first embarked on coaching, I called it 'My Food Coach'. But then I started getting clients interested in [healthful] living, so I broadened it to 'Healthy Living Coach,' encompassing health, nutrition, and so forth. And then I realized that I was attracting people who didn't want coaching, but diets—and I didn't want to get involved with diets. I realized that the problem was my marketing. So I changed my marketing strategy and now I coach people on issues with personal identity, self-esteem, and negative self-talk, since you really have to clean up the inside in order to live a [more healthful] lifestyle.”

Her own challenge in finding a niche gives her the perspective to help other ambitious dietetics professionals as a consultant. "I also coach [dietetics professionals] on business skills. Many are great [dietetics professionals] and have opened their own practice, but they don't have the business skills in their tool bag," she says. "That's how we are going to move forward. Whether we are entrepreneurial [dietetics professionals] or working within a hospital, we're still business people. You need business skills and strong self-assurance, even if you're trying to get a promotion or asking for a raise.”

WATCHING OUT FOR SHOPPERS

For Linda McDonald, MS, RD, publisher of *Supermarket Savvy*, her business that would eventually span the past 2 decades of her life came through one of her clients. Luckily, she was paying attention.

McDonald says she was doing food industry consulting and public relations, regularly contacting then-*Supermarket Savvy* publisher Leni Reed, MPH, RD, about reviewing company products in her newsletter. Reed was one of the first dietetics professionals to do supermarket tours and, with *Supermarket Savvy*, she gave the pros and cons of new major products on the shelf.

"So one time Leni mentioned that she was looking for someone to buy the company so she could move on to other endeavors, and at that point I was interested in having my own

business," McDonald says. She made Reed an offer, realizing that she was fulfilling a special niche that she had always been interested in. "There weren't a whole lot of materials for [dietetics professionals] to use to educate consumers about shopping and [the newsletter is] a great format to get the info out to consumers about their buying decisions.”

The monthly print newsletter is now available online every other month, and McDonald hopes to go fully electronic soon. Her company also provides tip sheets, PowerPoint presentations, and other tools to help dietetics professionals educate their clientele.

However, she wants to reach more consumers directly as well, and hopes that going completely electronic—a cheaper route than print—will bring *Supermarket Savvy* to a price point welcome to the health-conscious layperson.

"What has intrigued me is taking the science info we are inundated with and putting it into terms, representations, and visuals in ways that consumers will understand," she says. "The bigger challenge to me is to take one of these concepts, like n-3 fatty acids or whole grains, and to put it into a form that will really make the consumer want to choose a particular product.”

LONG-DISTANCE DIETETICS

It took Renata Shiloah, MS, RD, only a year of working in a hospital environment to realize that wasn't where she wanted to be. "It was the same thing every day, but here it's different every day." When Shiloah says "here," she means her house.

For the past 2 years, Shiloah has run a virtual dietetics business, Nutritionist 4 U Counseling, from her home office. Using the Internet, she guides and counsels clients on losing weight and having healthful diets. "I have a Yahoo! support group online called 'Lose Weight Feel Great', which consists of patients from my part-time work at a doctor's office and my own clients," she says. Shiloah also provides a monthly newsletter with recipes and other dietary tools.

She began virtual dietetics counseling on America Online in 1997, around the time the Internet was gaining popularity. It was a chat-

room setup and, in those couple of years working with America Online, she realized the positives of being a virtual dietetics professional for her clients. "People can ask questions and find goal buddies. It works because it's a way to keep them motivated and to meet other people, but they don't feel the pressure online. No one really sees you," Shiloah says.

At the same time, virtual counseling has allowed her to spend time with her five children while working from home. It's all based on e-mail and Web updates, so punching a clock isn't a problem. "I could do work at three in the morning if I liked," she says. This also means that patients can contact her, via e-mail, any time they are in need. Some patients even include her on an instant messenger service, such as AOL Instant Messenger, that allows them to talk with her immediately in a chat room if she's on the computer when they are.

Shiloah warns that, like most entrepreneur ventures, shifts in clients can mean money could be great one week and nonexistent the next. She recommends versatility. Like Caton and Collins, she has other work that keeps her financially secure, including dietetics work at a gym and a local doctor's office. "You have to do different things to get ahead," Shiloah says.

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