

Remote control

It all began back in 2004 in one woman's garage. Now, 11 years later, occupational therapist and business owner Lisa Duclos is running her own rehabilitation service and managing a team of 21 consultants who all work remotely. She's even moved out of her garage and into a real office!

If you asked me 11 years ago whether I'd be running my own company I would have laughed. Really laughed. So inconceivable and beyond my reach did it seem that Lisa Duclos would one day be directing a company of health professionals, let alone a team of remote professionals. That's right, I run a business that is totally contractor based, all 21 of us.

It all started in a garage at home in 2004. All I had at my disposal was the internet, a fax machine (remember those), my email, a mobile phone (when they were huge), and me. I had a vision to create a rehabilitation service that was not just good but great. So as an occupational therapist with skills and a dream, I began to bring my vision to life and established Momentum Rehab.

Momentum Rehab is a rehabilitation provider to Compulsory Third Party Insurance insurers in NSW. We also offer home modifications assessment to the Aged and Disability sectors. Our core business though is to rehabilitate people who have been injured in motor vehicle accidents through no fault of their own. It is an intense industry, particularly on an emotional level when you are working with clients who are at a fragile stage of their lives. I became an occupational therapist because I wanted to connect with and help people in need. I wanted to see people who have been injured get the very best level of service they deserve.

Once I started, the referrals grew quickly and I needed help, so I took on my first contractor. I experienced all of the standard concerns of a new

employer: should I employ, what if I train them and they leave, what if they give all of my work to other providers? I had concerns but I could see the benefit of creating a business that also supported my life.

A couple of years down the track I welcomed two beautiful babies into the world and realised I needed more help, so in 2008 I employed another two contractors who are still with me seven years later. Demand for service grew and as it grew, so did the team.

My intention was to build a business through skilled and experienced contractors. Contractors are usually therapists who, due to their life situations or lifestyle decisions, have chosen not to do the "9-5 thing", but they have so much life and clinical experience to offer that they are the people my business attracts and retains ... the experts and the go-getters. Contractors are fantastic for a business as they bring new ideas and varying expertise and experience.

When I tell people about my team of 21 contractors, I am often asked, "How can this work?" Assumptions have been made that remote contracting teams struggle with disconnection, isolation or too much independence, but this hasn't been the case for my team. Health professionals are renowned for being 'people' people; it is in our DNA. We love to chat over morning tea, lunch, a ward round, or a colleague's desk. Yes, it's true, we are a chatty bunch who love social connectedness. We also love being professionally stimulated and we love autonomy, workload control, ►



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► flexibility, trust and respect.

Our love of a chat and that sense of connection can be achieved through creating opportunities for connectedness, even in a remote team.

As the team has grown, so have the joys and the challenges. I would be lying if I said it has all been easy. There have been days of disappointment, tears and angst and many sleepless nights. There have been times when I've wondered if it was all worth it. This is pretty common for business owners.

Not having a team that you can sit with and observe comes with its own challenges. These challenges can include not meeting deadlines, the quality of service provided not being to the company's standards and employees' life issues impacting on their availability to work when you need. It can be really hard for a team of contractors to adopt the same work practices and work ethic as the business owner. It can be equally difficult to obtain loyalty and commitment to your company values, ethos, culture and vision when working with a virtual team. But there are ways to encourage a motivated and content team culture in a remote business model.

With the advent of technology, this type of 'virtual' business has become possible and highly effective. Even if technology isn't your thing, you can outsource this sector of your business or learn how to manage it yourself. There is an app for everything and systems that would help streamline your business, so being open to using technology will result in better efficiency and ultimately a better bottom line.

Good systems and communication are vital. Investing in communication and providing the right levels of mentoring and support are essential for consultants who work on complex cases in isolation.

The use of technology for our case management system has not only improved information security but also accountability levels and our ability to track adherence to company policies and customer expectations. Using a case management system was a big shift for my team. Initially it took a lot of work to set up, but once established it has saved us time and money. Working alongside good technology you need willing people. It is always



important to ensure you have the right people supporting you and your systems.

How do you find the right people?

Consultants tell me they love the support and sense of a team that Momentum offers while also providing trust, respect, autonomy and flexibility — it's a win for everyone when all of these factors are in synergy. I don't treat people "just like a contractor" which is very important. These people are my business. My greatest asset and resource — my contractors — are at their best when they feel valued and that is what I set out to do in a very intentional manner. This is achieved by a weekly email I send to everyone, one-on-one Skype sessions with the team, acknowledging birthdays, gifting wine, flowers and vouchers and doing fun things together. Work has to have an element of fun, particularly in a challenging industry like ours. We enjoy being together and creating some lightness helps us deal with the stressors of the work that we do.

So if you're thinking of expanding your business but don't have the resources, capacity or desire for a team of full-time employees, I can say with confidence that this model can and does work. It's not for the faint-hearted and it won't be the right model for everyone or for every business. If you are considering this type of business model first consider:

1. Know who you're recruiting.

Networking and word of mouth has been the most effective and reliable means for me to attract, grow and retain reliable and talented people.

2. Keep the communication lines open. Encourage and facilitate regular and effective communication with consultants and customers. Ensure systems are in place for consistent information sharing, relationship building and for keeping an eye on what is happening on the frontline. This will ensure that your reputation stays intact.

3. Be involved and be part of the work process. Don't think you can run this model and work in isolation yourself — it won't work! You need to have your finger on the pulse.

4. Have great systems in place. Streamline using technology but not at the expense of the personal touch. Keep it real and user-friendly.

How do I stay sane?

I've learnt so much from being a start-up business and experiencing so much growth over the last 11 years. I'm definitely not the same person and have developed in many ways. I've learnt most of all that I need to fear less, have courage and move forward.

Have a great team around me. Being in business can be lonely and isolating but I have been blessed with the right people at the right time to support me on this ride, which has at times been a bit hairy and scary.

Be kind to myself. I have learnt to have realistic expectations of myself and to look after my physical and psychological health. This may include a coffee and/or exercise and a little bit of chocolate (they are my vices), spiritually through reading or listening to an uplifting song or message, or psychologically by reading a blog or listening to a podcast. I also like my newly adopted humour habit of trying to laugh about something every day (usually myself) to combat any inclination I may have to take myself too seriously! ☺

Lisa Duclos is the primary consultant and occupational therapist at Momentum Rehab. Momentum Rehab was established to address the need for a rehabilitation provider whose primary purpose was to provide quality, efficient and customised services to the CTP insurance industry.