

# Today's Dietitian

The Magazine For Nutrition Professionals

## How to Make More Dough in Dietetics — A Top 10 List

By Joanne Lichten, PhD, RD

*Today's Dietitian*

Vol. 8 No. 10 P. 44

*"Nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion."*

— Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, German philosopher (1770-1831)

Do you believe you're earning what you're worth? No? You're not alone. Via SurveyMonkey.com, I recently conducted a 10-question online salary satisfaction survey (June-July) of 552 RDs employed in dietetics. Not surprisingly, 52% were either "unsatisfied or very unsatisfied" with their current financial compensation and 62% said that compared with other people with similar years of experience and education, they felt "underpaid or very underpaid."

Not only are these dietitians unhappy with their present earnings, but it also appears their unhappiness has penetrated into their overall preference for their chosen profession. Sadly, 40% agreed with the statement, "I've seriously thought about switching careers so I can make the money I need." When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "If I had to do it all over again, I'd still become a dietitian," 37% disagreed.

This unhappiness likely results from the fact that, according to the 2005 American Dietetic Association (ADA) and the Commission on Dietetic Registration's (CDR) Compensation & Benefits Survey of the Dietetics Profession, dietitians (with an average of 15 years' experience) are earning an average salary of \$49,500.

Of course, one half of all dietitians are earning more than \$49,500. In fact, from this same ADA/CDR survey, I noticed that 10% of all dietitians were earning at least \$77,900. As a motivational speaker, I wanted to do something to inspire dietitians to reach for these higher salaries so we could not only be proud of what we do but also be able to pay the bills.

Therefore, from February to July, I sought out "financially successful" dietitians who fit the following criteria:

- are currently an RD;
- work in the field of dietetics; and
- earned more than \$75,000 in 2005.

In addition to background information and advice for dietitians and dietetic students who want to earn more money, the survey contained a list of 66 different things relating to their education, experiences, and traits. The instructions asked the respondents to check off whether they believe these things were "not important," "somewhat important," "important," "very important," or "not applicable" to their financial success. After rating each of these, respondents were asked to identify the top three they believe differentiate themselves from other dietitians who earn less.

From the 88 surveys completed, I examined which traits, skills, and experiences received the most top three votes.

I think you'll be surprised that the top 10 list does not include "a fundamental need to make more money," "being self-employed," or "having a narrow niche specialty." Fewer than 43% believed these traits were "important or very important." Nor does the list include some of the other things you may have heard contribute to higher incomes, such as "marketing and sales experience," a "competitive nature," or the "ability to negotiate for what you're worth and willing to walk away if necessary." These did rank high—67% to 85% believed these were "important or very important"—but not nearly as high as the following top 10 skills suggested for financial success in dietetics. Interestingly, each of these 10 were ranked as being "very important or important" by at least 90% of the respondents.

### **1. Passion**

When the respondents ranked their top three traits, passion received the most votes by far. In fact, there were nearly 50% more votes for passion than the second-ranked item. These dietitians often shared stories about how much they love what they do. Jaime Schwartz, MS, RD, who works in public relations for food and beverage clients, told me, "When you're passionate about what you do, you leave a lasting impression on everyone you come in contact with, even during times when you're not at work. People can see your passion by the way you talk about what you do."

Schwartz mentioned how meeting someone briefly at a kickboxing class at her gym soon after she completed her dietetic internship in 2002 led to two great opportunities in the years that followed. "I had been talking to a friend before the class began about something work-related and another kickboxer [Marsha] overheard me and gathered that I, like her, was a dietitian. Even though we were at the gym, she recognized the passion I had by the way I spoke about my career. I moved not long after and didn't see her again until a networking event at FNCE [Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo] 2004. We immediately realized where we had met before and kept in touch after that. When Marsha was looking for a copresenter for a session she was presenting at FNCE the following year on generational diversity in the workplace, she recommended me for the role. And when she needed a cochair for the Dietitians in Business and Communications Mentor Program, she asked me to take on the job. It was through the passion I exuded about what I do during a workout, not at work, that led me to these great opportunities."

Passion is so important that another respondent wrote, "If you don't like your job, find something else to do. With a dietetics career, you can do almost anything."

### **2. Communication/People Skills**

While many dietitians go after another degree to earn more money, the ADA compensation survey reinforces that those with a master's degree earn only \$5,000 more than those with a four-year degree. And, since it often takes a couple of years to complete a master's degree, one must calculate those two years of lost income into the overall picture. Many financially successful dietitians told me that good communication skills go much further than another degree or certification. One dietitian wrote, "An additional degree and more credentials next to your name isn't going to make you more money.... I sought out additional projects that helped me fine-tune my communication skills...." Remember that while degrees and certifications might get you in the door for the first job, you'll need great communication skills to keep your job, get promoted, and move on to the next job.

Another respondent explained how her people skills allowed her to advance at a much faster pace than others with far more work experience. "Our company was involved in a takeover by another company. My VP didn't feel my boss had the necessary people skills to be able to work with the new company, so he gave me a four-grade promotion—two grades above my boss!"

### **3. Strategic Thinker**

In my survey, I defined strategic thinker as one who begins with the "end in mind." Delia Hammock, MS, RD, nutrition director of Good Housekeeping Institute, exercised strategic thinking in the search for her perfect job. "I found the job I wanted and then applied three times [over approximately 10 years] before I got it. Each time I tried to figure out why I wasn't chosen and made it a point to get expertise in that area."

#### **4. Vision**

I described vision in my survey as “thinking beyond the way we do things now.” Karen Duester, MS, RD, owner of Food Consulting Company, offered two recommendations to develop vision in your career: “Pave your own way” and “lead, don’t follow.” She elaborated, “Too often, I see dietetic professionals try to duplicate what others have [very] successfully offered to the marketplace. But in the end, no one can be a better ‘me’ than ‘me.’ I always encourage fellow RDs to find their unique ‘genius work’—a combination of skills, abilities, work style, and so many other things—then take that to the marketplace. We will all be amazed at the results.”

#### **5. Positive, Can-Do Attitude**

Over and over again, I heard from financially successful dietitians that too many dietitians whine instead of taking proactive steps about their roles, responsibilities, and salaries. One respondent bluntly said, “So many people don’t get it. Attitude will take you further than skills.” How’s your attitude?

#### **6. Willing to Work Outside Your Comfort Zone**

Amy Myrdal, MS, RD, marketing director for the California Walnut Commission/Walnut Marketing Board, said, “I believe part of my financial success is due to the fact that I’ve never shied away from challenges. When interviewing for jobs, I’ve often said, ‘Yes, I can do that!’ even if I’ve never done the task. I believe in myself and I love challenging myself.”

#### **7. Self-Confidence**

Do you believe you don’t have enough self-confidence to accept work outside your comfort zone? Then follow the advice of Caitlyn Lorenze, RD, LD, owner of Wholesomebody: “Fake it ’til you make it.”

Lorenze revealed that she still gets very nervous when someone asks her to do something outside her comfort zone. “The other day I had just finished a workout when the phone rang. It was USA Today. They told me about a study and asked me for some comments. Well, I must have said the right things because they asked if they could come by my office to film my response in an hour. Turns out they were not the newspaper but the television show, USA Today Live. So, I sprinted home, showered, and got back to the office for the interview.

“I was very nervous. But if it’s something I want, then I can ignore the nerves. My self-confident alter ego steps up at important times. And my nerves go away after about two minutes and I do great. Remember, you won’t have confidence until you challenge yourself. When someone asks you to do something you feel uncomfortable doing, just respond, “Sure, I would love to.””

#### **8. Willingness to Take Calculated Risks**

It’s obvious that some people consistently make more money by accepting positions that increasingly pay more. Julie Boettger, MS, RD, director of operations of inTEAM Associates, took an entirely different approach to becoming financially successful. In fact, she repeatedly took pay cuts in successive jobs to ultimately earn more.

But Boettger described how she accepted these pay cuts as calculated risks. “I started working in the Chicago schools where I was paid well and had the opportunity to do a lot of different projects since the district was large. The benefits were excellent and the job was very secure. A friend that I had met through the Illinois School Food Service Association was retiring and asked me if I wanted to apply for her position as a director in a suburban district. The job was a little more pay on a monthly basis, but it was only 10 months a year. On the other hand, it was five minutes from home and it was a director position. That was risk No. 1.

“By the end of the first year, I was making as much as I was when I left Chicago, gaining a lot of new skills and feeling very successful. While in this position, I purchased a software package from a company that was relatively new. I complained about the training that I received. The software company offered to hire me on a contractual basis to provide training to their customers.

“Since my salary was more than they were willing to pay, I talked my school district into letting me work with the software company to gain more experience with the software and to visit other school districts—both of which I thought would ultimately benefit my school district. The software company paid the school district for my time. A

few years later, the software company offered me a position. It was the same salary but for 12 months, so I would be taking a cut in pay. This was risk No. 2.

“Within a year, I was again matching the monthly salary from the school district plus profit-sharing benefits. The skills that I have picked up working for a software company are entirely different than what I would have gotten as a foodservice director. My salary has more than doubled the rate that my old position now pays. Recently, the software company bought a consulting firm and I transferred to the consulting company.”

### **9. Networking and Creating Strategic Alliances**

Both networking and creating strategic alliances ranked as equally important in the survey. And because of their similarity, I grouped them together as one item. One respondent, Barbara Eichorst, MS, RD, CDE, a diabetes educator with Innovex, explained that networking is a first step in building a strategic alliance and allows for the initiation of the strategic alliance—but that creating strategic alliances is much more than networking. “Ultimately, strategic alliances allow for a revenue flow to one or both professionals that would not otherwise occur.”

Eichorst described how she created strategic alliances that led to new jobs. “My first job was for a cardiologist [whom] I met at a seminar where we exchanged ideas for patient care. He was impressed with my skills and arranged for the interview with his staff. Of course, I got the job! My second job was as a diabetes program coordinator for a department of primary care. While the job was created for a nurse, I was able to demonstrate that I am cross-trained in diabetes care delivery due to my previous collaboration with nurses.”

### **10. Self-Starter/Self-Motivated**

Being a self-starter allowed Angela Sader, RD, MBA, to become the director of nutrition services at Golden Gate National Senior Care, located a far distance from her home. “Just before my family needed to move, the company let my boss go. I went in ready to leave but made the suggestion that they let me work from a home office. While they had not done this before, they thought they would give it a try for a trial period. Four years have gone by now and I have received a promotion and I am still working from home. Not only is my family situation working, but my job situation is as well.”

So, if you’re feeling disillusioned by earnings that are lower than you believe you deserve, don’t give up on dietetics. And don’t immediately think you have to give up on the industry in which you currently work. From these 88 financially successful dietitians, I’ve discovered that it is possible to make good money in every industry, including nonsupervisory clinical hospital positions and long-term care. Follow the example of these 88 dietitians and develop the top 10 skills that will contribute to financial success.

*Joanne Lichten, PhD, RD, has appeared on more than 300 television and radio shows and has spoken to more than 1,000 companies and convention audiences about stress management, life balance, eating healthy in restaurants, and other topics. She is the author of Dining Lean: How to Eat Healthy in Your Favorite Restaurants and How to Stay Healthy & Fit on the Road.*

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