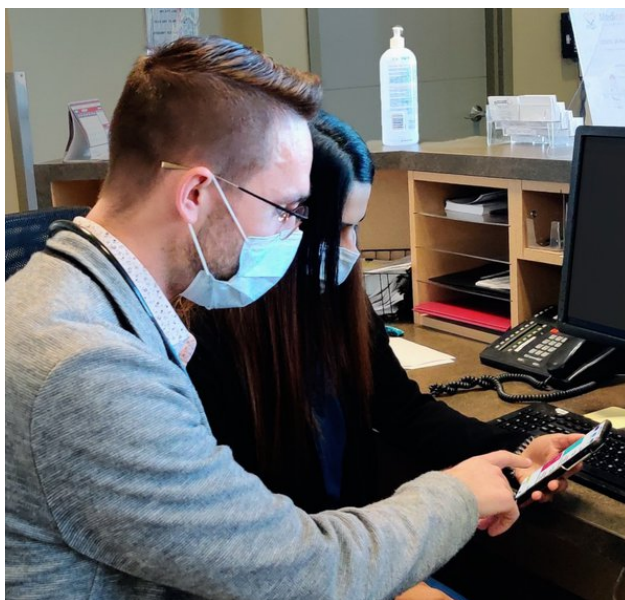


Alberta Doctors' Digest

Connecting physicians with clinics that need them

I often struggle with the interplay between technology and business. It's impossible to mention anything about technology without discussing the economic pressures that drive innovation. And unsurprisingly, when a new technological advancement is introduced, the economic pressures shift, creating new opportunities for some while unfortunately leaving others behind.

My home PCN at Central West Calgary recently held a COVID-19 mental health webinar where some of my colleagues bravely shared the negative impacts of COVID-19, superimposed on a changing and uncertain political and economic environment. Some of these feelings ultimately stem from the fear of losing our autonomy, a central tenet of our work as physicians. The importance of autonomy in our profession cannot be overstated. In a 2018 article in the [Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine](#), the authors found lower rates of burnout amongst practitioners who operated in practices where they had more independence and autonomy.



(L) Dr. Jordan Vollrath

Dr. Jordan Vollrath (L) unleashed his pent-up computer geekiness to develop a simple, straightforward app to help him and his colleagues find work on their own terms.

This is mirrored in our patients as well, where many are anxious about losing their autonomy due to unhappy workplace arrangements. In the face of these challenges, some Canadians have turned toward the gig economy where they participate in non-standard employment situations consisting of short term but highly independent work. Examples of gig economy workers are everywhere, such as with Uber or [Fiverr](#), where workers have more flexibility in their work. An article by [Jeon et al. \(2019\)](#) provided by Statistics Canada highlights sharp increases in workers participating in the gig economy since the 2008-09 recession. While there are some confounding factors, the authors

speculate that the driving force is the lack of standard work arrangements coupled with the growth of online platforms.

The gig economy is not for everyone, and ideally, it should be driven by workers exercising their independence in selecting the work they want to participate in rather than a job they are forced into. Fortunately for physicians, this type of short-term independent work may be a way to preserve autonomy in challenging times. A report by consulting firm [McKinsey & Company](#) suggested that due to the nature of their work, physicians are much more suited to working in a gig economy when compared to other vocations. This is because their skillsets are unique and in high demand, allowing physicians to define work on their own terms.

For Dr. Jordan Vollrath, being a relatively new family physician in the middle of a pandemic created challenges in finding employment. As a self-described computer nerd, much of his time with tech and gadgets was spent recreationally rather than in any formal training program. Facing the dual challenges as a new graduate and working exclusively as a locum physician, most of his work was still secured through word of mouth, which he found quite surprising in 2020.

Overburdened with free time during the COVID-19 shut down, Dr. Vollrath unleashed his pent-up computer geekiness to develop a simple, straightforward app to help him and his colleagues find work on their own terms. Named [Cherry Health](#), it works like a modern-day bulletin board, connecting jobs with those who desire them. Physician-owned and operated, his solution was built exclusively in Alberta.

"There is no shortage of locum work or locums to do it," says Dr. Vollrath. "A lot of my experience with locuming comes either from word of mouth, social media or other friends."

For Dr. Vollrath, the main differences between Cherry Health and traditional locum sites are accountability and speed. "Sometimes you just want to take a mental health day, but it's hard to find coverage for patients on short notice, which adds to the stress," says Dr. Vollrath. By having an easy-to-access database of available locums, the hope is that finding short-term coverage would be much more straightforward. An in-app feedback system also allows physicians and clinics an opportunity to provide feedback on the experience, so both parties can work as partners-in-learning to overcome barriers to accessing work. There are some indirect benefits as well. Having physicians work across different workplaces exposes them to different workflows and novelties while bringing the diversity of perspectives often lacking in a single workplace setting.

Currently, Cherry Health is only available as a smartphone app – which has made sense so far as a quick means to connect quick work conveniently. For the future, they plan to have a web portal to make desktop access a lot easier.

In my opinion, every physician should have a side gig and technology is the bridge to it. By reducing reliance on a single source of income, physicians can regain the sense of autonomy and independence that forms the core of the profession. For inspiration, I recommend the book *100 Side Hustles: Unexpected Ideas for Making Extra Money Without Quitting Your Day Job* by Chris Guillebeau.

If you have an innovative or technological solution you want to explore, the CMA operates an [innovation grant program](#) where you can access funding and advice to help you along. On the other hand, if you are not ready to start and find the current climate overwhelming and unmanageable, know that you are not alone. As part of your AMA

membership, you have access to the [Physician and Family Support Program](#)), which offers confidential support to members and their immediate family.

Editor's note: The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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