

Location, location, location

Earlier this year *Optician* carried out research to try to understand what motivates optical professionals to work where they do. The objective of the Specsavers-sponsored survey was to quantify the salaries earned by opticians and to measure the importance of other working conditions such as location and career progression. The research went on to determine how far optical practitioners worked from their place of education, home town and extended family.

Methodology

Participants were drawn from a representative sample of the *Optician* email database of over 8,000 contacts who were invited to take part in the survey. The data is drawn from over 600 responses from fieldwork which took place in April and May of this year.

More than half (54 per cent) were females and the average age of respondents was 43 years, with the majority (64 per cent) coming from the 35-45 year old group. Part-time workers made up three in 10 of those responding. The ethnicity of those taking part was predominantly white British (71 per cent) followed by one in 10 being British Asian, 5 per cent Asian, 5 per cent non-UK European and 5 per cent not wishing to disclose their ethnicity.

When asked about their professional qualification, 60 per cent stated optometrist, 27 per cent dispensing optician and 7 per cent contact lens optician. Most worked in independent practice (46 per cent) followed by multiple (27 per cent), franchise (10 per cent) and hospital (4 per cent). Three per cent each stated their workplace as a manufacturer, supermarket or education.

The research showed that the mean average salary of those taking part was £37,185 (Figure 1) an increase from £35,495 earned on average in the last salary survey which took place in 2008. This was lower than the comparative figure from the 2006 survey which showed an average salary of £36,184. The majority (29 per cent) have a salary before other benefits between £40,000 and £55,000, an increase from 24 per cent in this band during the 2008 survey. The proportion of

Financially rewarding opportunities exist for optical practitioners willing to move away from where they grew up or graduated. But how many would be prepared to consider a change of location?

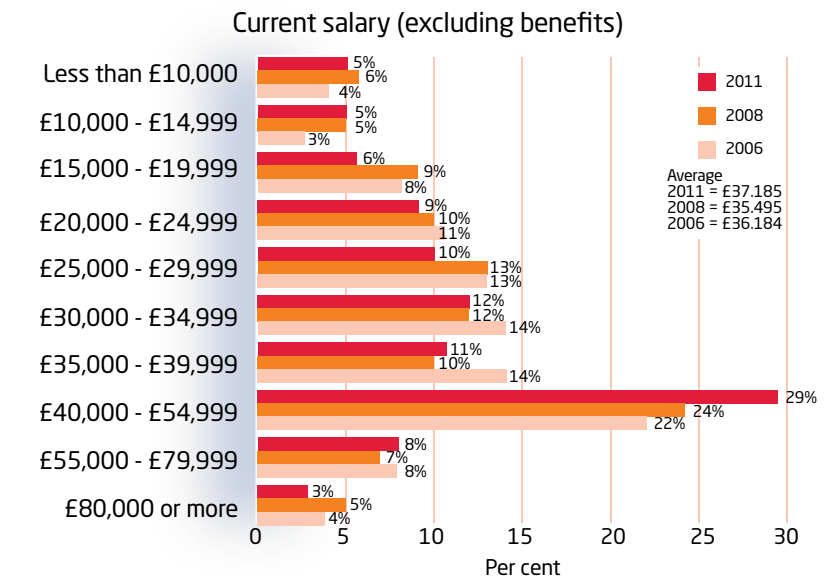


Figure 1 Current salary (excluding benefits)

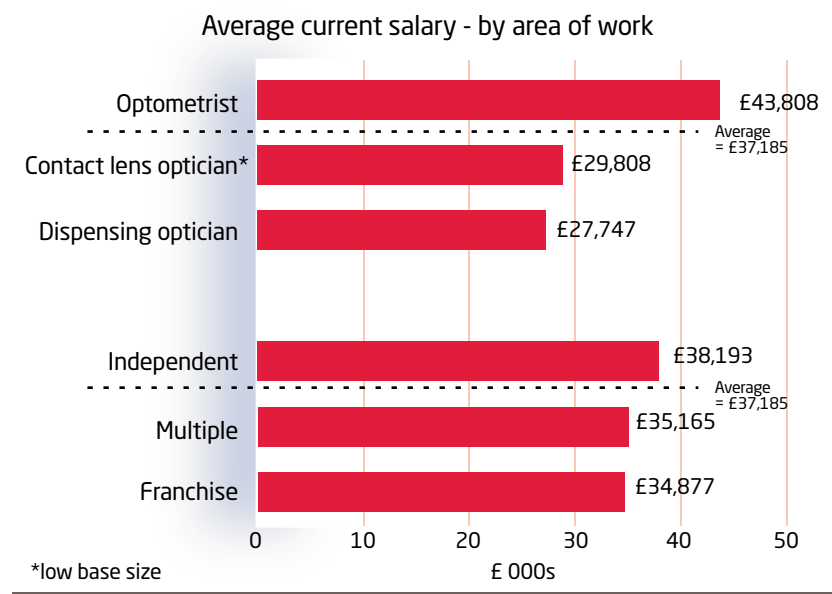


Figure 2 Average salary - by area of work

salaries in the lower and higher bands had fallen since the last survey. Just 3 per cent earned £80,000 and above compared to 5 per cent in 2008 and just 6 per cent earned between £15,000 and £20,000, compared with 9 per cent in the 2008 survey.

Analysing salary by region revealed some big differences against the

national average of £37,185. The north and east of England produced some of the highest salaries, with the North East region having an average figure of £39,130 and nearby Yorkshire and Humberside a figure of £40,058. East Anglia had the highest figure of £40,714, reflecting the difficulty of recruitment in that area. Surprisingly

the South West, another tricky area for recruitment, showed an average of £35,563. The South East had an average of £39,592 with greater London, the Midlands, the North West and Scotland all between £35,069 and £35,863.

Optometrists on top

Broken down by job function (Figure 2), optometrists came out top with an average of £43,808, CLOs next at £29,808 and dispensing opticians £27,747. By practice type, independents provided the highest average at £38,193, multiples at £35,165 and franchises at £34,877.

When analysed demographically, men are shown to earn more than women, with a salary of £41,446 against £33,351. While this figure is not normalised for hours worked, the trend is repeated for part-time workers. The figures for part-time working calculated on a pro rata basis for the number of days worked reveal that men working part-time earn £42,093 and women £35,236, indicating that a gender gap may still exist.

As might be expected, those in the older age groups earn more, but between the 35-44 age group (£38,587) and the 45 plus (£38,787) the difference is not that marked. Those in the 18-34 group earn on average £33,030. When split by ethnicity, British Asians earn an average of £40,000 and white British £37,707. However, salary isn't necessarily the main driver for the profession.

Salary figured quite low down on the list of why respondents had joined their current employer, with just 8 per cent saying that had been the reason for taking up their current job. Most said the challenge presented by their new job (17 per cent) or the fact the job was local to where they live (15 per cent) were the reasons for joining their employer. The reputation of the company and the flexibility of the hours was stated by 9 per cent for each, while just 4 per cent had moved for a more senior position.

When asked about the timing of any intention to move job, nearly four in 10 (39 per cent) said they didn't know. Those currently looking for a new job made up just 17 per cent of those responding, although 28 per cent of the British Asian category said they were currently looking for a new role. A small percentage said they would be looking in six months (3 per cent), or six to 12 months (4 per cent), one to two years (6 per cent) or over three years (7 per cent). A sizeable, and somewhat surprising, 16 per cent

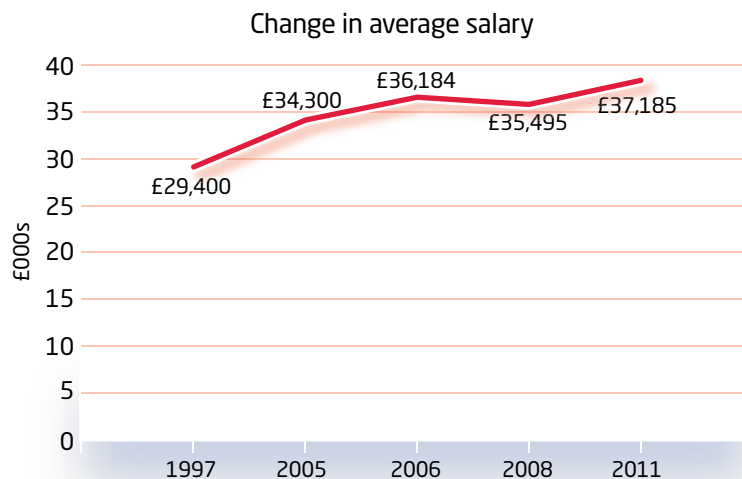


Figure 2 Change in average salary

stated that they never intended looking for a new job ever again.

When asked about the important factors in choosing a new job, it was location, location, location. A massive 97 per cent said location was very (62 per cent) or fairly (35 per cent) important in their choice. This beat salary, type of practice, job description, identity of the employer career prospects, working hours and experience.

Salary was suggested by 52 per cent as very and 45 per cent as fairly important, while the type of practice scored 44 per cent and 39 per cent respectively on those two measures.

When *Optician* delved further into location as a factor in optical employment it found that the average distance travelled to work was 15.6 miles. Seven per cent live less than a mile from work, 26 per cent between one and five miles and 23 per cent between six and 10 miles. About a fifth each travel between 11 and 20 and 20 to 50 miles to work, but just 5 per cent are prepared to work more than 51 miles from home.

Family ties

The survey also looked at location during education and found that a quarter of optometrists lived at home while studying, while three-quarters of other respondents lived at home while qualifying, with just a quarter travelling to study.

The reasons why people work in their current location were also explored and found that family ties were the main drivers. Reasons such as this is where I wanted to live and got a job close by (21 per cent), close to my family (20 per cent), I wanted to work in this area (19 per cent), I grew

up here (18 per cent) and my partner works here (12 per cent) dominated. On the more mobile side, 17 per cent said they had moved to work in their current job and 14 per cent said they had better opportunities in their current location.

When asked about where they decided to live, three-quarters said their choice of work was determined by where they live. Deeper research revealed that respondents live on average 52.2 miles from where they grew up. Ten per cent live within a mile, 22 per cent between one and 10 miles and 19 per cent between 11 and 49 miles. Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) have moved more than 100 miles and 13 per cent grew up in a different country.

The average distance worked from extended family is similar at 57 miles but 26 per cent live within 10 miles of their extended family and 21 per cent no more than 50 miles away. A quarter are more than 100 miles away and 14 per cent live in a different country to their extended family.

When asked about what might entice them to move, more money (32 per cent) did factor, along with better career prospects (29 per cent) and a relocation package (27 per cent). A fifth said they would move if their wider family moved or their household's principal earner moved, but one in four (23 per cent) said they would not move under any circumstances.

Clearly those working in optics have solid ideas about where they want to work and that is close to home. Our survey highlights the opportunities that exist in some regions of the UK and they are available for optometrists and dispensing opticians who are willing to move. ●