

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Dr. David Phelps

[Dentist Freedom Blueprint](#) with Dr. David Phelps

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

You are listening to The Freedom Blueprint Podcast with your host, Dr. David Phelps. You'll get straightforward advice to transform your practice into a self-sufficient cash machine, compound your net worth, and multiply your cash flow stream with hassle-free real estate. More at freedomfounders.com.

David Phelps: Good day, everyone. This is Dr. David Phelps of the Freedom Founders Mastermind community and Dentist Freedom Blueprint podcast. Today, I'm really looking forward to this interview because this is a gentleman that I have really known out in the space but we haven't met in person. In fact, we're meeting virtually for the first time today, so just letting you know where I'm coming from, but my intrigue is really in his model and practice, what he has achieved and built and we'll ask some questions about why and really also what's next. I think this is really centers on kind of my passion life, is I don't think anybody needs to be just set in a one path, one trick pony type of a career, whatever it is, profession, all the way to aged 65. Or whenever they think they're going to jump off and quote. "retire," which I hate that word anyway. So without further ado, I'm going to bring on our guest today. Dr. Paul Etchison. Paul, how are you doing sir?

Paul Etchison: Hey man, I'm doing good. Thank you so much for having me. I am a long time listener, longtime fan of your podcast and I'm just excited to finally be a guest here, so thank you for that.

David Phelps: Well, and you also have a surname that's perfect for dentistry. I mean, we've got to etch.

Paul Etchison: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

David Phelps: So if I was looking for a dentist and I knew anything about the procedures, I would go for Dr. Paul Etchison because he knows how to etch.

Paul Etchison: Yeah. I always liked to etch though, so you've got to protect that you know?

David Phelps: Got to, got. Yes, absolutely. All right. So, so a little bit of background about you so people know kind of what we're going to talk about today. So Paul, you started a startup seven years ago. Are you outside of Chicago? I know you're in Illinois. Where exactly are you looking?

Paul Etchison: Yes, so we're maybe like 30 miles from the Indiana border, about 40 miles south of Chicago. So I guess this would be called a southwest suburb of Chicago. I'm where the suburb ends. So if you go one mile South of my practice, it's just farms all through central Illinois. So I'm about as far a suburb as you can be from Chicago. So a lot of people ask me, "Do you go into the city a lot?" I don't. I'm kind of far, I'm 40 miles. They'll take me an hour and a half with traffic to get to the city.

David Phelps: Okay. I haven't asked this yet, so I'm just going to ask. Are you married, children, what's your family status?

Paul Etchison: Yeah, married my high school sweetheart, we've been together for 23 years now.

David Phelps: Wow.

Paul Etchison: So we've been dating since I was a sophomore and she was a freshman in high school. We got two daughters, Riella, who's eight and Alyssa, who's four, and I think that's going to be it for us. My wife thinks she wants one more, but I think we're out of diapers and I think I'm done.

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

David Phelps: Okay. Really, really good. You graduated from school. Did you do a residency or already you did associateship or what'd you do out of the gate?

Paul Etchison: Yeah, so I graduated in 2009. I went to an associateship, which I consider my residency. There was a large group practice, a lot of managed care, HMO, Medicaid, and I just learned a whole bunch while I was there. I really just learned from the older guys that were there and the doctors that were there a little longer than me and I just pressed myself to learn more and more procedures and always just try things and it was a great learning experience for me.

David Phelps: How long did you do that?

Paul Etchison: Did it for two and a half years. So about maybe coming up on two year anniversary is when I started looking at my startup and I think I was ... Yeah, about two and a half years into my associate was when I left completely and then went into my practice full time.

David Phelps: So what you just laid out is really the way I think young people, no matter what they think they want to go into, and in this case it was dentistry for you, but I wrote a book called The Apprentice Model. I'm not trying to sell it here on this podcast, but it's a passion of mine too because there's so many young people I think that go into whatever career, I deal mostly with dentists as you do, that's our world. But many are trying to figure out what's that pathway, coming out of school with a lot of debt today. "Do I go work for corporate or should I try to a startup because bank financings relatively easy? What should I do, what should I do?"

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

To me, you took the path that if I was starting over, I would take it in a heartbeat, no matter what I was going to do and that is you found a group, an environment where you could go and learn. And learn not only business, but clinical speed, efficiency, diagnosis. You've got your feet on the ground and there's no faster track than doing that with people who have already blazed that path but you got to put yourself in that environment. You've got to find that right environment, right?

Paul Etchison: Yeah and you're totally right and I think a lot of dentists now, the culture is to like, "I'm all in, I want to be all in. I want to be an owner. I want to graduate." And they're looking at practices while they're still in school. I think you just got to get your feet wet. I mean, I can tell you I was busting files in molars that first year out and to the point where I said, "You know what, I'm just done doing molar root canal." Then I had my mentor, Dr. Rene Tanquilut and he said, "You know what dude? We're going to stick with this." He's like, "Watch me do one. Let's get an attracted tooth. I'm going to help you out, we're going to figure it out how you get your glide path so you don't bust files."

And I did. Now all I do pretty much in my practice, I have some associate dentists, but I do molar root canals and I do orthodontics on kids. I mean, that's pretty much my bread and butter of most of my procedures except for some larger cases, crown and bridge. Yeah, I wouldn't be at that level if I didn't stick with it. I think I wouldn't be at that level if I didn't have him to push me and kind of mentor me and help me say like, "Hey, this is how it is. You're going to get better." So it was a great experience for me to be in that learning environment and I don't think

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

I could have went into my practice more prepared if I just went out of school and just opened up.

David Phelps: A lot of it's mindset, isn't it? It's how we think, because I think in school and all through school, but particularly in dental school, the fear of failure ... because if you fail something in school, even even on a typodont, I mean you got failure on that particular prep or whatever you're doing. I mean it was looked at as like you're an idiot, you're stupid. So we were so careful and I think that carries on into practice and like you said, you're go into practice and maybe the first few procedures you do on any kind, whether it's surgery or endo, crown prep, I don't care what it is and it doesn't go exactly like you wanted it to, let's put it that way, wanted it to, we never hit perfection. So I think people get scared and they go, "Oh, you know, I can't do that and I killed a lot of time."

But you took the other approach and of course you had a mentor that created an environment for you to learn in, "Hey, it's okay. It's okay Paul, let's figure this thing out." So now you've got some of the best guidance you could and that's a forte in your practice. We'll talk about your practice model, but now you're doing something that you're really good at and it becomes easy at that point. Not hard, not difficult, not something you stress out over day because, "Oh, that patient's coming with that procedure." I'm sure you don't look at your schedule like that, really much that way at all, right?

Paul Etchison: No, no. I've been doing it 10 years now, so everything is on autopilot for the most part. Occasionally I get some challenging cases that are really interesting to me. But yeah, I mean like you said, I mean, you can't do a hundred procedures if you don't start with the first one. I

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

mean, you got to give yourself some leeway but I think dental school really creates that environment where it's almost like emotionally abusive. I can tell you, when I drive by UIC in Chicago, my heart beats fast and I feel like I'm going to throw up. So it's a traumatic period.

David Phelps: Listen, that is so universal. Early on in life, I thought it was just me. I mean, I thought it was just me and then the school will start asking for donations, alumni donations, and I kind of checked with some of my peer group, "Are you guys sending money in?" And they're going, "Heck no."

Paul Etchison: "No, no, no, I hated that place."

David Phelps: So I don't feel so bad but same thing, and I've been out of school for decades now, but I still ... like you said, my heart goes to my throat and I start breaking out sweat.

Paul Etchison: Yeah, yeah, it's true.

David Phelps: I think I got a restraining order, I don't go close anymore so it's better for my health.

Paul Etchison: Terrifying place.

David Phelps: So true. So true. So talk to me about why dentistry, how dentistry, how did that become your pathway? When did that start? What got you interested in being a dentist?

Paul Etchison: Yeah. So when I was in college, I didn't know what I want to do. I wanted to do advertising originally, so I actually graduated with an advertising major. It was tough to get into that program at U of I. When I say U of I, I mean university of Illinois, I know Is mean different things depending where you're from. When I got in there I had an externship or a summer internship with Leo Burnett,

[Dentist Freedom Blueprint](#) with Dr. David Phelps

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

the big advertising agency in Chicago, and the person that he knew my stepdad, he ended up ... the guy that was getting it for me ended up having a stroke and going on disability, I didn't get the internship. He didn't pull the string for me because obviously health issues and that kind of just took the wind out of my sail and it led me to thinking do I even like this?

And I realized I didn't, but I had the good grades. I didn't want to be a medical doctor, so dentistry just ... I landed in it and I think I'm very passionate about it. No one in my family has done it but I think what I liked about it is that I spent so much time, this was something that there was no ceiling to. I could never reach a point where I said I can get any better and that was what I really loved about it and I was just so focused on communication skills, business skills, but also the clinical skills, especially graduating and I just loved it. It just lit a fire in me where I just wanted to keep learning more, getting better, getting better. I go to these seminars and I see people do these crazy procedures and I say, "You know what? I don't know how to do that, but I can figure that out. I can learn how to do that. I want to train to learn how to do that."

That's just been my experience with dentistry and I think that's one of the things as you can't ... Some people say, "I wish I had the passion you had," but I don't think I came in with that passion. I think you have to put in the time to master something and then the passion comes later and then it just kind of rolls, it gets momentum.

David Phelps: So Paul, what you did, and after you did your ... I'll call it an internship, but you're with the multi-practice multi-doctor group that you spent two and half years really doing that apprentice model, if you will. Then you decided

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

it's time to go out and spread your wings. So how did you determine that you want to do a startup versus an acquisition? How'd you make that decision?

Paul Etchison: Yeah, so it was always on my radar and your first thing, you reach out to brokers and then they start sending you things and you start reading through the emails and saying, "Okay, maybe this, maybe this, Oh, this one's kind of close to me. Maybe this is the area I want to be." And I went and took Scott Luna's course, Breakaway Practice and I just saw the success stories. I said, "You know what? I can do that." I didn't even think about doing a startup.

Then I came back from San Antonio that following weekend, when I went to a one year old birthday party that following weekend, drove by a strip mall, fairly empty, but the only strip mall on a road in an area, but it's fairly busy road, fairly undeveloped. Then I looked it out on Google Maps and I said, "Man, in this town, all the dentists are over up here and this thing's down here, this little strip mall, it's got this little hub of neighborhoods. Yeah, I bet this is really demographically great." It just happened to be, so it was just all serendipitous. It just happened and I just took that location and it's been great for us.

David Phelps: So you started with five ops?

Paul Etchison: Yeah. So we started with five ops. I mean we started with just two ops, just two ops. Well we had five, five op office. Did that for six years, maybe six and a half years, until we just recently expanded a year ago from five ops to 11 ops. That was kind of a decision I decided to do when the opportunity presented itself in our strip mall, when the person next to us went out of business. It was something I

[Dentist Freedom Blueprint](#) with Dr. David Phelps

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

didn't want to do. I didn't want to have that big office but at this point I decided I wanted to have more time and I wanted to back off of the procedures I really didn't enjoy doing and just step away from clinical and just explore some other avenues, some other projects and stuff like that.

So my decision to go from five to 11 was not a financial decision, more as it was a time decision. It's been great and it's been fun. It's fun to grow things and I was at the point in my five op where we were collecting 3.4 million out of five operatories and I didn't see any more growth. I know we could have done it if we added weekend hours, but it wasn't as exciting. You plateau and it's grown and your to capacity and then now what? So this has been my fun new project of growing, trying to get 11 operatories to capacity. So I've been enjoying it.

David Phelps: So you said something I think is really key and a lot of people miss this so I'm just going to bring it back in. You said you expanded not for financial means, not because you wanted more money, more top line revenue, which hopefully would convert into profits, that wasn't your desire. You want time. Well, you just mentioned you've got two daughters, eight and four. Hello, that might be a good thing to do rather than just build more, build more just because you can, or you think you should because you've been quote, "successful" at this point.

So you made a decision to buy back your time and to do that, in this case you saw the opportunity to expand. Now do you own a strip mall?

Paul Etchison: No.

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

David Phelps: Or do you lease? Okay, so you lease, so the opportunities was there, you could expand out. So take us quickly through the startup from the two ops then to the five ops. So I'm assuming it was just you at the beginning. You didn't go in with somebody else and to to this day, do you own 100% of the practice?

Paul Etchison: Yes, I still do own 100%. Selling equity portions for me right now is on my radar, but it's not something I've done yet. So when we opened up, we had two operatories, it was me and two other girls and we grew, we grew. I got a hygienist in there fairly soon. I think that's a mistake that a lot of dentists make at the startup point is they wait too long to get the hygienist. I think it's very easy to do same-day dentistry if you have the new patient pay for that hygienist very, very quickly, and it's just you have to set that infrastructure. If you want to grow, you have to be comfortable having a hygienist being not 100% busy. I think a lot of people are scared to do that but we did that. I think we've got our third op within a year.

We ended up getting the fourth and fifth op probably within two or three years. Then I want to say it was maybe four years into that practice where I cut myself back down to three days and I brought on an associate for three days. I did that for a year. Then she added those other two days. She was five days and I was three days and then we just added more associates when we expanded to 11 ops because we had the capacity but that's been the trajectory.

I mean we've grown very fast. Since we've opened, we've been seeing anywhere from 80 to 120 new patients a month, not doing a lot of marketing. That's all mostly word of mouth and some systems that we set in place so that

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

we make sure that every time we get a new patient in, we make sure that we get the rest of the family in but it's been organic growth.

We just take really great care of people and we're very, very intentional on our patient experience and I think that makes a difference. Something else, and I tell people this, I don't mean to say it braggingly but seven and a half years now, and I still have the same staff, never lost a single staff member in seven years.

David Phelps: I saw that. I saw that in your bio. Not one person.

Paul Etchison: Yeah, we lost one girl because she went to nursing school and she eventually graduated, but we never lost anyone because they were upset and they found a better opportunity. I have three girls on my team that drive over an hour to get there. I don't have really the other ... I'm the closest person in my practice, believe it or not. We have people working for me from all over? But we have a great environment, great culture and I think the great systems that we put together, just being a long-term team together. I mean, you can't put a value on that. It's amazing.

David Phelps: We probably ought to do a podcast with your team, I think. No seriously because it's one thing to talk about it and people throw around the word culture and system and team and ... but I certainly know, you've embellished it, that's the key. You want to grow anything and have sustainability. If you want to have more time back, you want to leverage who you are in whatever capacity, you've got to have the right people around you and if you've got constant turnover, you don't have the right people in the right seats it's a constant battle. That's where people get burned out-

[Dentist Freedom Blueprint](#) with Dr. David Phelps

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

Paul Etchison: Yeah, no I can see that.

David Phelps: And it's like, "I'm done, I'm cooked." And they just kind of hanging on through the rest of their life and that's a sad way to go. So obviously you haven't done that. How many associates today do you have?

Paul Etchison: So I have two full time associates. They're both five days a week. I have a periodontist, that's every other Friday and I'm working on getting an endodontist in there. But yeah, that's what we have. I think at the maximum capacity, it would be myself continuing, I do two days a week, and I only do a three weeks a month, so six clinical days. I think maybe adding one more full time provider would put us at a capacity point that I would be comfortable with that wouldn't be too crowded. But we're not there yet. We're not ready to expand quite yet to that.

David Phelps: One full time GP provider?

Paul Etchison: Yeah, yeah.

David Phelps: So tell me about the hours. How do you use your hours to be consumer-oriented?

Paul Etchison: Right. So Monday through Thursday we're 7:00 AM to 8:00 PM so we're pretty much all day long. There's about two hour gap in the middle where we're overlapping with the night shift and the morning shift and Fridays we go from 8:00 to 3:00. We're not going to do ... and don't want to say we'll never do weekends, but we never have and we never had to. So I don't want to work on the weekends. I don't feel really right making my staff do it. So I think we're going to stay Monday through Friday and we're just split-shifted. We actually go till 9:00 PM on Monday night but that's about to change in two weeks, go

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

back down to 8:00 PM and I'm pretty excited about that because that's my shift, that's my night.

David Phelps: That's your shift. How many hygienists now?

Paul Etchison: Man, seven, eight maybe. You know what? We're up to 26 people. So it gets hard to can remember who's who? But yeah, we ... think seven.

David Phelps: You know this, you talk to enough dentists, so one of the big conundrums today is that the economy for whatever it is, has been strong the last six years and unemployment is way down. In fact, there's always talk about ... I don't want to brand or classify anybody, but let's just say kind of the mentality out there in the space is younger people, because there's so much work available, it's hard to find those really want to come in and be a part of a team and a culture. They want to come get a paycheck and they're always demanding raises because they could just kind of extort and tell the owner of the business, doctor, whatever, "I could get more money over here." Then it's hard for a lot of doctors today to even find anybody to fill the bill, whatever they're looking for. Hygienists, assistants, anybody at the front desk and you're not right there in the middle of the city, you've got some staff, you said driving an hour to get to you.

All right, what is the secret sauce here? Are you just paying a lot more? Is it that plus culture? Is it that plus flexibility? What are the keys to having that team that stuck with you for seven years?

Paul Etchison: Yeah. I'm going to say it's culture. I have been very lucky with the people that have hired. I'm not going to say that I could take anybody and turn them into an all star. I do think that a lot more dentists have a lot more all stars on

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

their team that they would give credit for it if they would put the time and the training into them but I think there's a lot of training involved and our culture is just very ... we're very improvement focused and everyone's on fire. I think a lot of the girls take ownership. I think the secret sauce for that is just one, of stepping back and stop being the answer person. Give them leadership responsibilities and stop directing. There's a difference between delegation and directing and I want to delegate to them. I want to give them responsibilities and even if I don't agree with them, I want to let things play out and I want to trust them.

The other big thing too is that when things go wrong, because they will, things are going to happen and we're going to have to criticize each other. We're going to have to coach each other but I always want to maintain that my practice is safe. You can feel safe here. You can admit that you've screwed something up. If we've had something that screwed up, I don't care who did it. I don't want to point fingers and blame. I will say, "Hey, we're a team. How can we come up with better solutions so this doesn't happen again?" I think that breeds a culture of just honesty and I've earned their respect, they respect me, I respect them. I'm constantly checking in with them, asking them what can we do better? What's going on? Are you happy here? Are you still enjoying your job? Is there anything about your job that you dislike?

There's been times with certain employees that I've had them say there's something that they don't like another job. I've had one employee say, "I don't think I'm going to work here very much longer. I'm just kind of burnt out on it." But that was four years ago and she's still there. So we address these things. So I think if you have an open line of communication with your team and you're asking,

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

you're soliciting that feedback, how could anyone leave your office? Because you're going to know what they're upset about and as long as you take it to heart what they're telling you and you address it, why would they leave?

I think what you said David, about the raise thing, I can tell you in my seven half years of practice, I've had two people ask me for a raise and I pay them well, but it's nothing like where it's just astronomically out of the norm. I pay around the higher end of the averages but I think they just feel very valued and appreciated by me and I do appreciate them and I let them know constantly. So it's a lot of things that go into that culture, but it's just appreciating and valuing your team essentially.

David Phelps: Are there profit share incentives, 401k, health benefits, or what?

Paul Etchison: So we do do a 401k for the full time people or whoever does 1,000 a year and we do do a profit share. We were doing one through our 401k, but now what we do is we have the number that is four times our payroll. So whatever production number it would take to keep our payroll at 25% and then any overage of that, we have a bonus system where they can get anywhere from 15% to 25% of that per pay period. So we share that way but that keeps my payroll in line. It also rewards them and shares in the profits because I like that way of paying people better than just continuing to raise their hourly because I want to be a team thing. I want it to be we're all together. I don't like these separate hygiene bonuses. I just feel like, if you're going to bonus a hygienist, if it's the front end scheduling the patients, it's the patient experience when they're coming back, it's ... everybody's a team. So I like

Ep #245: Paul Etchison - The 3-Day Dentist Part 1

this big team bonus and I'd like that kind of profit share essentially.

David Phelps: Yeah, I agree, trying to have ... Individual bonuses gets messy.

Paul Etchison: Yeah, it's like playing favorites and they're like, Well, why did they get such a better bonus than I get? I mean, and I helped them. Yeah the hygienist did all this production, but I helped retract when they did the sealants. Why don't I get some of that?" It's not a good team mentality and I think it sets you up for bad culture.

Take the next step at freedomfounders.com. You've been listening to another episode of the Freedom Blueprint Podcast with Dr. David Phelps. The place to be to create your freedom lifestyle with more time off, security, and peace of mind. More at [Freedomfounders.com](https://freedomfounders.com).