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Opportunities Exist For Fitness Professionals in the Corporate/Professional Fitness Setting.

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Corporate fitness is a well-established niche with promising growth potential for fitness professionals who enjoy working with diverse adult populations in a structured setting. While corporate and commercial fitness professionals have similar overall goals, they can have dramatically different approaches in setting targets for numbers and profits, defining program objectives and creating a fitness center culture.

A fitness professional is a professional in the field of fitness and exercise, most often instruction (fitness instructor), including aerobics and yoga instructors and authors of fitness instruction books or manuals. Fitness topics may also include nutrition, weight-loss, and self-help. Fitness careers are distinguished from exercise science careers such as athletic training, however the various types of fitness certifications have more and more in common: the, "distinctions...have become blurred, with more similarities than differences given the common background that all fitness professionals must possess."

The Setting—Cultural and Organizational Differences

Experienced corporate wellness professionals emphasize that the biggest challenge is adapting to the corporate environment. Corporations tend to be more conservative than other fitness settings and they have different reporting and organizational structures.

"When you work in commercial fitness, the person you report to has fitness experience. You speak the same language," says Grace DeSimone, national director of group fitness for Plus One. "In a corporate environment, you may be reporting to someone who has experience in business, but may not understand fitness." Experts agree that corporate environments require much more focus on identifiable program objectives, metrics that measure success in meeting objectives and determining the return on their investments. A fitness professional may have to work with individuals in human resources, benefits, health and safety, or even directors of employee amenities.

The Setting—Clientele Differences

The types of people you work with in a corporate fitness setting differ from a retail club atmosphere both in terms of demographics and in terms of the nature of the relationships among "members." Your clients are unlikely to include kids, teens, older retired adults or stay-at-home moms. Rather, they are the people you see in most workplaces, between the ages of 25 and 55 and working at a desk, or in manufacturing companies, in fire departments or hospitals, or in small mom-and-pop shops. Their fitness levels vary greatly, as do their interest in or motivation to exercise.

"Many people who participate in our [corporate] fitness centers were never members of any fitness facility," Motta says. Corporate fitness facilities serve employees with much broader variance in fitness level than the typical club. Many employees will also have little interest in or motivation to exercise. "You have to create a facility that is open and welcome to the typical non-member. The equipment, people, programs, your whole customer service policy needs to fit a different client." The exercise-floor dynamics of a workplace can be very different when supervisors and employees train together. People may be more reserved, and trainers need to be sensitive to these conditions.

"Corporate fitness is about motivating workforces," says Trina E. Gray, creator of Corporate Fit Challenge™ in Alpena, Michigan. "It's about creating accountability amongst people who spend most of their waking hours together. It's about getting people at work to talk healthier, act healthier and ultimately, live healthier."

The Right Stuff for Corporate Fitness: Education, Skills, Personality

Most full-time corporate fitness jobs require prospective candidates to have a degree in a health and fitness-related field or the equivalent of a degree from education and experience, and certification by a nationally recognized certifying organization. Experts also recommend that job seekers be able to teach group exercise classes and provide personal training or be able to supervise a fitness floor. Depending on the facility's size, an employee may be required to provide a number of different services; the most versatile people have the better chances of being hired.

"Another important skill area is good business acumen—the ability to understand basic marketing techniques, budgeting and financials, public speaking, customer service and intermediate to advanced computer skills," says Melissa Towey, national recruiter and national group exercise coordinator for MediFit, based in northern New Jersey. Many recruiters for corporate fitness agree that understanding business skills is essential for building a successful corporate career.

Understanding customer care and being committed to delivering the best customer service is critical. Demonstrating that you can adapt to corporate culture is equally essential.

Personality ranks equal in importance to all other skills and education combined. The successful fitness professional in a corporate environment must have a passion for the work and be a good listener and communicator.

Every expert agreed that learning how to network and build relationships is particularly important because complex corporate cultures require dealing regularly with a wide variety of people. A staffer at a corporate fitness center may be an employee of a subcontractor that provides the wellness programming, but who also works at the corporation and must blend seamlessly into its culture.

"Working in the corporate field is like being a dual citizen," Motta says. "You could be working at a major company, but you also work for the contractor.

The two organizations can be very different, so it can be a little schizophrenic."

Corporate Fitness Careers

While some companies manage their own in-house corporate fitness programs, the trend is for companies to outsource their corporate wellness and fitness programs to vendors that have the required expertise. "If a company's major line of business is banking or pharmaceuticals, they want to concentrate

on that and hire experts who provide fitness, wellness or nutritional services," says Laura Giordano, former vice president of corporate fitness at Merrill Lynch, based in New York.

While many firms such as Plus One or Corporate Fitness Works have nationwide reach, each area of the country has its own style of program delivery—some companies provide programs at no cost to employees, others require employees to contribute; some companies see facilities and programs primarily as a recruiting and retention tool, others see it as a real way to manage healthcare costs.

Opportunities within these corporate fitness companies include both entry-level positions and higher-level executive positions. For example, an individual can begin as a local group exercise instructor, personal trainer, fitness floor supervisor or health and fitness test administrator. Other positions include group fitness director, general manager or wellness services manager. Regional and national positions may include group fitness, wellness services or recruitment.

Financial and Other Rewards

Established corporate fitness companies often offer broad benefits packages in addition to full-time employment. "You generally receive a stable paycheck, based on a base salary," Towey explains. "In many instances, you can earn above that base salary through personal training or teaching group exercise classes outside of your regular working hours. Additionally, most full-time corporate fitness employers offer a comprehensive benefits package, including medical, dental, vision, life-insurance, 401(k) plans, paid time off for vacation, sick, personal and holidays, and career enrichment money to help offset the cost of obtaining and maintaining certifications. It's important to evaluate the full compensation plan to make a true comparison of the financial benefits between corporate or commercial fitness."

Conclusion

Corporate fitness provides opportunities for fitness professionals to make a difference in individual lives, and to improve the health of corporations, the local economy and the community. For those who enjoy working with the type of clientele who may not join a fitness club, it's an opportunity to take fitness to people, rather than waiting for them to come to you.

Key words- Corporate fitness, fitness professionals

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