

A RESEARCH ON NEEDS, QUALIFICATIONS AND PROSPECTS OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF FITNESS STAFF - THE CASE OF PRIVATE FITNESS CENTRES IN GREECE

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INTRODUCTION

The health and fitness industry has come a long way all around the world, with on going advances in a quest for longevity of the healthy lifestyles in a triangle of “mind-spirit-body” (Golding et al., 1989).

The fitness craze of the last decades resulted in the abundance of private fitness facilities in Athens, which emerged to answer the increasing demand for exercise programs. Yet the success of the fitness centres was inevitably threatened by the owners and the fitness leaders of the fitness centres, who often lacked the education, training, and qualifications that they needed to possess for the survival, development, and the long-lived success of an organization (Deane, 2000). The benefits of being a fitness instructor charmed many people with the ease of working hours, free memberships, lack of academic degree, and certification prerequisites. Despite the fact that the pay may be low within the sport industry, “Many have remarked, ‘I get paid for doing what is essentially my hobby!’” (Stedman, 2001).

In contrast to terrific equipment, the intangible things such as talented, well-trained, enthusiastic and empathetic personal trainers doing what a client needs in a particular situation may better keep members coming back, and bring new members in (Deluca, 2000; O’Brien, & Sattler, 1999).

The primary purpose of this project was: (a) to determine the extent to which fitness professionals are certified, (b) to identify the current situation of qualifications and skills of fitness professionals, and (c) to identify the existence of additional services provided by fitness professionals at their fitness centres.

METHODS

Both secondary and primary data were used in this study. Secondary source materials included journals articles and publications concerning big private fitness centres in Athens. Primary data were collected by using semi structured interviews, and purposive sampling was used to select twenty five big private fitness centres in Athens. The semi structured interview method was used in this case to explore the views of fitness instructors working at fitness centers regarding: (a) the level of education and type of professional certifications that fitness professionals hold, (b) the qualifications and skills they have regarding to practical and management concerns, (c) the type of services they frequently provide as part of their job position, and (d) the professional experience and accreditation as criteria for recruitment and career development in fitness.

The focus of this research project included twenty five big fitness centres in Athens, the capital city of Greece, which plays a vital role in the overall growth of fitness industry. Fifty interviewees were drawn from these fitness centres, in order to analyze the perspectives and insights of fitness professionals at the level of instructors.

RESULTS

Data of the interviewees’ responses were analyzed to gather information specific to the professionals who work in the fitness industry and segmented into the following fragments:

Qualifications of Fitness Professionals

Despite the fact that practical skills, knowledge, interpersonal skills, and management skills are identified as qualifications necessary to perform the role of fitness leader (Betul, 2005), the results of the research

demonstrated the qualifications and skills of fitness professionals queried, corresponding mostly to their knowledge in the fitness field.

Certification of the Fitness Professionals

Referring to the level of education, 50 % of the interviewees identified themselves to be graduates of a physical education and sports science department of a university, the other 50 % identified themselves as “gym experts” due to the fact that they all had training preparation for their position in fitness but no academic degree.

Additional Certifications held by Fitness Professionals

According to the responses to the question concerning additional certifications, none of the surveyed objects could identify itself as certified in CPR / first aid provision; however in specific services provided in fitness centres almost all of the instructors hold a relevant certification (e.g. aerobic instructor, pilates / yoga / fitness personal trainer).

Attitudes about Certification

Despite positive attitudes towards the importance of the certification of the fitness staff in every field that they work, all of the interviewees consider that they are not required to pursue further certifications as long as the fitness staff holds one certification, since they are not compensated for further professional qualifications.

Services provided

Fitness instructors were asked to identify services provided at their fitness centres as part of their job position and the analysis of their response shows that they provide a variety of services, such as: exercise programming, motivation, weight control advice, nutritional advice, group exercise classes, personal training, advice for rehabilitation of injuries, stress management advice, pre and post natal advice and recommendation of supplements.

Career Development

All of the fitness instructors indicated clearly that they participate in additional training to better themselves as fitness professionals. However, while certificates comprise a condition for selection during recruitment phase, participation in seminars and training sessions, as part of career development, seems not to be boosted enough by employers, as it was expected. The causations of this trend are traced in: a) the nature of employment relationship of fitness/ health instructors, as they usually employed as part-timers, b) the temporary occupation in fitness centers, and c) financial issues, in terms of neither seminars' fees are covered by employers, nor additional knowledge and gained expertise is rewarded accordingly.

DISCUSSION

With regard to the Presidential Decree (No 219) defining the operation of private fitness centres, the trainers and instructors must hold a university degree in physical education or they must possess licentiate issued by governmental body. Despite that this PD supports the graduates of physical education and sports science departments of universities in the sport industry by means of coaching certificates, this study revealed that the fitness professionals working in fitness centres lack in their majority relevant diplomas. The current situation in Greece indicates a number of educational organisations that provide certifications in specific fitness specialities without state recognition.

In order to set standards and protect the fitness industry from abuse, the universities should reinforce the physical education and sports science departments to open diversity of courses under the branch of fitness management that will prepare the students for the career opportunities in the fitness industry. Educational programs emphasizing interpersonal and management skills, can greatly assist fitness professionals in coping with their job challenges.

According to Parks, certification established by the fitness industry could protect prospective students preparing for careers in fitness from competition with unqualified people (1990). The researchers further claim that “if stringent certification standards become accepted nationwide, the industry will become more professionalized and the more highly qualified candidates should get the jobs” (1990).

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