

JOB SATISFACTION OF SELF EMPLOYED TRAINERS AND PERSONAL TRAINERS EMPLOYED AT COMMERCIAL GYMNASIUMS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Personal trainers are responsible for the effective delivery of health and fitness programmes. Their roles are of importance to the fitness industry and therefore, the degree of job satisfaction they experience is of prime importance. The purpose of this paper is to identify the various factors that play a role in determining the job satisfaction levels of personal fitness trainers employed at commercial gymnasiums and self employed trainers. A total of 353 personal trainers from South Africa formed the target population for the survey. A structured questionnaire was sent to the entire population. A response rate of 85% (n=300) was received using the mail survey method. Key results revealed that the majority of the trainers at the commercial gymnasiums expressed low levels of satisfaction with their salary, opportunities for promotion and growth, commission structure, ranking system and working conditions. More importantly, a major finding was that self employed trainers experienced greater levels of satisfaction than commercially employed trainers.

Key words: Job satisfaction; Personal trainer; Commercial; Self employed.

INTRODUCTION

Personal training is a profession that is practised worldwide (Lumpkin, 2004). It is a highly skilled profession and requires a great deal of expertise in areas such as marketing, human relations, communication, service delivery and knowledge in the field itself. Personal trainers are responsible for the effective delivery and promotion of health and fitness programmes. They play a key role in the fitness industry and therefore the degrees of job satisfaction they experience are of prime importance (Koehler, 1998). Personal trainers are different from a regular fitness trainer as they train clients on an individual basis.

After completing their studies, two employment options are available to personal trainers. They may work in a commercial gymnasium, or practice as a freelance personal trainer in a number of health clubs.

The key theories of job satisfaction, namely Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs theory, Herzberg's motivation theory (Herzberg, *et al.*, 1959), Lawler's (1973) facet model of satisfaction and Locke's (1976) value-based theory of satisfaction were used for this study. Maslow's (1954) self actualisation model is based on the work of existential philosophers who postulate that man has the innate drive to achieve his full potential, but that it is the conditions

of everyday life that place constraints on this “instinct for self actualisation” and cause him to perform sub optimally. Herzberg *et al.* (1959) found that five work related factors, namely achievement, recognition, work itself, responsibility and advancement, tended to affect job attitudes in a positive direction. The presence of these factors tended to contribute to increases in performance. On the other hand he found eleven work environment related factors such as salary, possibility of growth, interpersonal relations (sub-ordinates), interpersonal relations (superiors), interpersonal relations (peers), supervision technical, company policy, working conditions, personal life, status and job security that contribute to job satisfaction. These 11 factors of Herzberg (1959) are of prime importance as contributors to job satisfaction of personal trainers or any worker. In most of these eleven factors, if the factor was not present it led to low degrees of job satisfaction.

Lawler's (1973) facet model of satisfaction argues that job satisfaction is a function of the extent to which what one receives from a job matches what one thinks he or she should receive from the job. If personal trainers feel they are higher qualified and have more experience they would expect to receive more from the job in terms of compensation.

Locke (1976) argued that individuals place more or less value on each of all possible outcomes from their jobs. The outcomes may be salary, prestige, or working conditions. His theory is applicable to personal trainers as some may prefer working for the prestige and status associated with the job while others may place more emphasis on salary.

There are three important dimensions of job satisfaction (Lumpkin, 2004): firstly, job satisfaction is an emotional response to a job situation; secondly, job satisfaction is determined by how well outcomes meet or exceed expectations. For example, if commercial personal trainers feel that they are working much harder in the gymnasiums but are receiving fewer rewards they could have a negative attitude towards the job, the employer and co-workers. These employees would experience lower degrees of job satisfaction. On the other end of the continuum if they are treated well and are being paid equitably, they are likely to have a positive attitude towards their job (Robbins, 2003). They would be satisfied (Luthans, 2002). Thirdly, job satisfaction represents several related attitudes such as the work itself, pay, promotion opportunities, supervision and co-workers that an individual has towards the job.

Smucker & Kent (2004) analysed job satisfaction and referent comparisons of administrators in three different segments of the sport industry. The results of the study showed a relationship between promotion and job satisfaction. If employees were not promoted when they considered themselves worthy of promotion low degrees of job satisfaction arose. Respondents indicated low degrees of job satisfaction with regard to low pay, promotion and negative working conditions.

Koehler (1998) researched corporate fitness managers who directed fitness programs or facilities in Californian gymnasiums. This group of managers experienced satisfaction with their overall employment, social services, moral values, and achievement and lower satisfaction with supervision, lack of opportunities for advancement and compensation. Commercial personal trainers in South Africa experienced high and low levels of job satisfaction with similar contributors.

A study conducted by Howell and Higgins (2005) of the job satisfaction of sport administrators employed in American and Canadian recreation programs found that males reported higher degrees of job satisfaction than females. They also concluded that respondents showed low levels of job satisfaction with salary and promotional opportunities which contributed to their feeling dissatisfied about their jobs. Personal trainers also reported that salary and lack of promotional opportunities led them to experience low levels of satisfaction about their jobs.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The liquidation of the Health and Racquet Club in 2000 and the subsequent take over by Virgin Active had a profound effect on the personal training profession (Salgado, 2001). Trainers were unsure regarding several issues such as the renewal of contracts, uncertainty regarding retrenchments, rental increases, budget constraints and uniform issues. Changes of this nature have had an effect on the attitude, morale and performance of personal trainers which caused them to express low degrees of satisfaction with their jobs (Khan, 2001). This created a high degree of uncertainty and anxiety that prevailed in the personal training profession and this has had an influence on their level of job satisfaction.

Changes in employment conditions coupled with massive rent increases led to a high turnover of personal trainers, as many of them could not afford the new rentals (Salgado, 2001). Former personal trainers of company employed gymnasiums became private trainers. The private practicing fitness trainers' levels of job satisfaction therefore need investigation and a comparison would be made with trainers who are currently employed at commercial gymnasiums. An important reason for investigating job satisfaction is the belief that increased job satisfaction will result in increased productivity and hence profitability of health clubs. It will assist personal trainers to work in a more stable environment, and provide greater efficiency in service delivery to their clients.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to investigate the job satisfaction of self employed trainers and personal trainers employed in commercial gymnasiums. It attempted to identify the problems experienced by personal trainers, the solutions they proposed and to make future personal trainers aware of the levels of satisfaction involved in personal training in general. This paper attempts to seek answers to the following critical questions:

- 1) What are the levels of job satisfaction experienced by commercial trainers and self employed trainers?
- 2) Is it fair to constantly fluctuate commission structures of commercial trainers?
- 3) Should a personal trainer who has a higher qualification and longer years of service be given the same ranking as a newly qualified personal trainer?

METHODOLOGY

The target population for the investigations comprised 353 personal trainers who belonged to the former South African Registered Personal Trainer Association and represented all the provinces in South Africa. A structured questionnaire was sent to the entire target population

using a mail survey. A return rate of 85% was received. Of these 53% (n=160) were employed at health clubs and 47% (n=140) were self employed.

The secondary sources that were used for a review of literature were textbooks, journals, Internet sources, media articles and other dissertations.

A pilot study was conducted in KwaZulu-Natal with a total of 50 personal trainers to reflect the homogeneity of the target population. These 50 personal trainers were also used in the final sample. The pilot study enabled the researcher to pre-test and validate research instruments and research procedures prior to the initiation of the empirical investigation. The pilot study revealed that two questions appeared to be ambiguous. This was subsequently remedied to fine tune the final questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire was established by the test retest responses. In addition, a preliminary analysis revealed the same consistent responses justifying the reliability of the instrument.

The questionnaire consisted of a number of close-ended questions, using the yes/no and the Likert scale. The Likert scale consisted of a rating scale of 1 -4 where respondents were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction towards their job. The rating for the likert scale was 4 - very satisfied, 3 - moderately satisfied, 2 - moderately dissatisfied, 1 - very dissatisfied. Provision was also made for open ended questions. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: Section One: Biographical data, Section Two: Occupational choice and motivation, Section Three: Job satisfaction and Section Four: Job security.

Once the questionnaires were received they were coded, and captured on the computer. The Statistical Programme for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 11 for Windows was used to conduct the statistical tests. Means, frequencies and test of significance were also applied on the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the job satisfaction of self employed trainers and personal trainers employed in commercial gymnasiums. As a relatively recent phenomenon, the position of personal trainers and individuals filling those positions represent an area fraught with issues and questions for educators, researchers and fitness professionals alike. Not the least among these are the feelings and perceptions that personal trainers hold about their own job situation.

The respondents were all South African. A total of 60% of the respondents had between 10-15 years of experience in personal training, while 32% of the respondents had between 5-10 years of experience in personal training. Only 8% had relatively little experience of less than four years. Such high levels of experience in the personal training profession could be indicative of a high standard and quality of personal training in South Africa. With regard to job satisfaction of personal trainers it would appear that, overall, self-employed trainers experienced greater levels of job satisfaction than commercial trainers. That is, their overall job satisfaction was reported to be an average of 78.67%. The possible reasons for this include greater autonomy and compensation. Commercial trainers had an overall job satisfaction of 55.5%. However, certain aspects of the job seemed more pronounced than others such as salary, promotion and supervision. Specifically, the factors shown to be more satisfying than

all other factors were social service, or the chance to do some things for other people, and moral values, or not going against one's conscience.

Conversely, those factors that were less satisfying for commercial trainers were lack of advancement, opportunities for promotion and growth, commission structures constantly changing and compensation. A South African study conducted by Surujlal (2004) on the human resource management of professional sport coaches in South Africa yielded similar results in terms of coaches' job satisfaction. These findings are consistent with the findings of Herrera and Lim (2003) who conducted a study on job satisfaction among Athletic trainers in National College Athletic Association Division One institutions and concluded that athletic trainers experienced lower levels of job satisfaction with issues such as lack of opportunities for promotion and growth, salary and lack of skills development workshops. Howell and Higgins (2005) also concluded that compensation and lack of opportunity for upward mobility was the key determinant of job satisfaction in his study of job satisfaction of sport administrators employed in American and Canadian university recreation programmes. These studies evaluated similar elements as the present study in terms of job satisfaction.

Results of the present study showed that male personal trainers had a mean of 2.79, while female personal trainers had a mean of 2.27 in terms of their levels of satisfaction. Therefore, the research revealed that female personal trainers showed lower levels of job satisfaction than their male counterparts. The possible reasons for female trainers reporting lower degrees of job satisfaction were discrimination at work and lack of upward mobility. These findings are consistent with the findings of Koehler's (1998) study on the job satisfaction of corporate fitness managers in America which revealed that female fitness managers reported lower degrees of job satisfaction than their male counterparts with regard to upward mobility.

Commercial personal trainers 48% were within the age groups 18-25 years, and 57% of self-employed trainers were within the age group 25-35 years. The main reason cited for this is that most self-employed trainers start off their careers as commercial trainers when they are younger and then decide to pursue their own business venture, as they gain more knowledge and experience. When one starts off a career greater degrees of job satisfaction are experienced initially. Luthans (2002) states that during the early years of one's career an urgent need is felt for the reviewing of career plans to enhance job satisfaction. If a job an individual is involved in fails to provide challenges it may force the individual to start looking for alternative employment which might lead to greater job satisfaction.

Commercial personal trainers with one to five years of experience in the field had a mean rating of 2.95, and subjects of five years and more had a mean rating of 2.00 indicating that the longer the company employed personal trainer was in the profession the lower the levels of job satisfaction. A major cause of the low levels of job satisfaction was the constant changing of commission structures, and the absence of a ranking system. All commercial personal trainers, irrespective of their years of service and qualifications, were graded and ranked in the same manner, which impacts negatively on job satisfaction.

All of the respondents (100%) indicated that they did not belong to any professional fitness association and trade union. This was due to the absence of such an organisation in the country at the time. The absence of such an association could negatively affect the development of personal trainers aspiring to higher levels as they have no one to represent

them. The reason as to why there was no such body was due to the South African Registered Personal Trainer Association being disbanded. All the respondents (100%) were in favour of the establishment of a National Personal Trainer or Sport Science Association to enhance job satisfaction. It would also suggest that for the advancement of a professional personal training body in South Africa, there is a need for personal trainers to take the initiative and to facilitate the formation of such a body.

TABLE 1. SKILL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS

Skills development workshops presented	Company employed n=160	Self employed n=140
Yes	39%	0%
No	61%	100%

A concerning factor, as indicated in Table 1 was that 61% of commercial personal trainers indicated that skills development workshops were not presented to them by their employers, which contributed to a lack of job satisfaction as they did not have the opportunity to enhance existing skills. Skills development workshops are related to job satisfaction in terms of upward mobility (promotion opportunities).

Courses attended by personal trainers averaged from two to three courses during a three to five year period. An average of two to three courses for a three to five year period is too few for continuing education in the field of personal training. The industry average for health and fitness professionals is four refresher courses a year (Herrera & Lim, 2003). Providing valuable skills and improving their ability provide workers with a sense of self pride, a sense of competence, and a sense of self confidence (Gerber *et al.*, 2002). The skilled worker will feel more confident in carrying out his or her tasks. This ultimately contributes positively to job satisfaction.

Most commercial personal trainers 67% were dissatisfied with the salary and compensation they received, which contributed to low levels of job satisfaction. It appears that a perceived low salary, which leads to job dissatisfaction, is a main contributor to employee turnover (Parkhouse, 2001). Salary is a key determinant of satisfaction because it serves as a symbol of achievement and a source of recognition (Merriman, 2004). These results are consistent with the findings of Surujlal (2004) that suggest job satisfaction and job retention is largely dependent on compensation. Chelladurai (1999) also agreed with these findings and maintains that salary is a key determinant of job satisfaction. Self-employed trainers were satisfied with the pay they received as they decide how much they get as a salary. A study conducted by Smucker (2003) on job satisfaction of female sport journalists concluded that the female sport journalist expressed low degrees of job satisfaction with regard to salary which is also prevalent in the present study.

Career paths in terms of upward mobility (promotion) opportunities seem to have a varying effect on job satisfaction as they take on different forms. A lack of promotion opportunity leads to negative feelings of satisfaction as frustrated ambition can give rise to particularly intense feelings of low job satisfaction (George & Jones, 2000). The majority of the

respondents from the commercial gymnasiums 67% experienced low levels of job satisfaction with their opportunities for promotion and growth. In the commercial gymnasium environment personal training is not a career that lends itself to promotion and growth as different levels of managers exist with various portfolios. Smucker (2003) concluded in his study of job satisfaction of female sport journalists that 50% of the survey respondents listed lack of career advancement as a very important factor in their decision to leave.

Self-employed trainers were moderately satisfied with their opportunities for promotion and growth. A positive work environment and opportunities to grow intellectually for many has become more important than promotional opportunities (Luthans, 2002).

Commercial and self-employed trainers reported that they experienced high degrees of stress, which led to low levels of job satisfaction. Although self employed trainers experienced greater degrees of job satisfaction, personal training was still a stressful occupation for them. This suggests that the facets influencing job satisfaction had a profound influence on the levels of stress experienced by personal trainers. Herrera and Lim (2003) support these findings and concluded that stress could have a negative effect on job satisfaction, organisational behaviour and on an individual's health. The main reason cited by personal trainers for their high levels of stress was the unrealistic expectations that clients had of them with regard to achieving their training goals.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results show that self employed trainers experienced greater levels of satisfaction than commercially employed trainers. Male personal trainers experienced greater levels of job satisfaction than female personal trainers. Personal training is a very stressful profession. It was noted that the stress levels of both commercial and self-employed trainers were high, and contributed to lower levels of job satisfaction.

Is it fair for commercial gymnasiums to constantly change the commission structures of personal trainers? This ultimately results in lower degrees of job satisfaction leading to uncertainty in the profession. Finally, most personal trainers felt strongly that they should not be paid the same salary and that they should be graded according to their qualifications and years of service.

The following recommendations with respect to job satisfaction should be considered:

- Service providers should organise more continuing education workshops to enhance existing skills and keep personal trainers abreast of the latest trends in the fitness industry.
- A National Fitness Association should be established. This would afford an opportunity to personal trainers to protect their specialised skills, establish guidelines that would regulate the personal training industry and establish codes of ethical behaviour.
- There should be a clear attempt to strike a balance between qualifications and remuneration.
- Companies can improve working conditions by making personal trainers feel part of the staff contingent, including them in decision making processes, creating a safe and hazard free environment and supplying personal trainers with consulting rooms for consultations.

In the fitness industry personal trainers are assets to the overall success of health clubs. It is highly recommended that employers of these trainers follow the recommendations proposed by this study to enhance job satisfaction in commercial gymnasium environments.

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(Subject editor: Prof. P. Singh)