

Personal Training: Challenges to Consider

Lon Kilgore PhD

Kilgore Academy Journal

Volume 3

Article 2

November-December 2024

kilgoreacademy.com

director@kilgoreacademy.com

Personal trainers, or fitness trainers as the Bureau of Labor Statistics terms them, are products of a multitude of diverse training and certification programs. Superficially, the occupation seems quite vibrant as do the motivations of those entering it. The desire to help others and a strong interest in fitness and health are the most common reasons trainers give as to why they chose to earn a credential and work within the field. This interest in exercise, fitness, and making a difference in someone’s life attracts people, customers, to a convoluted mass of pathways leading to occupation of the job title “personal trainer” or any of the similar terms used in the industry, but that essentially mean the same thing. Most colleges and universities offer programs leading to a related diploma or degree, commercial enterprises offer more direct training leading to a certificate, and even gym businesses and franchises offer their own internally delivered training for those who want to be personal trainers. But if we lift the hood and poke around a bit within the occupation, we see a few issues, not with the trainers but with the operations that create them and employ them.

Financial Health

Lots of organizations who provide education, certification, or both, to individuals who want to be personal trainers, currently tout an annual median salary of \$46,488 for the occupation. This is a truly deceptive and largely untrue statement. The data the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) publishes is a median hourly wage of \$22.35. The BLS and the recruiting media of those organizations providing education or certification extrapolate this by simply multiplying that pay rate times 40 hours per week, then times that by 52 weeks to arrive at the \$46K earnings. But there are other sources of data that provide different wage outlooks.

Recruiters

Indeed	\$28.95 (annual full time wage of \$60,216)
ZipRecruiter	\$32.00 (annual full time wage of \$66,560)
Salary	\$31.73 (annual full time wage of \$65,998)
Glassdoor	\$29.88 (annual full time wage of \$62,150)
Talent	\$23.44 (annual full time wage of \$48,755)

Average \$29.20

Surveys

IDEA Sponsored Survey (2015)	\$20.84 (annual full time wage of \$43,360, inflation adjusted)
ACE Sponsored Survey (2013)	\$32.59 (annual full time wage of \$67,800, inflation adjusted)
PTCD Sponsored Survey (2019)	\$22.88 (annual full time wage of \$47,592, inflation adjusted)

Average \$25.43

Government Data

United State Bureau of Labor Statistics	\$22.35 (annual full time wage of \$46,480)
---	---

Table 1. Comparison of median wages for Personal Trainers from current recruiting websites, organizationally sponsored surveys, and official US government wage data. Note that recruiting sites seem to overstate wages by about 30% compared to actual government reported wage and taxation data. Surveys estimate wages that are about 13% higher than government wage and taxation data.

Although it seems that there is significant inflation of potential wages in recruiting websites, the averages of both recruiting sites and sponsored surveys are in the \$25+ range, at least in broad proximity of the Bureau of Labor Statistics median estimate of \$22.35. Regardless of actual wage, there is a problem that is not addressed in any of these calculations.

If we consider the actual work load of personal trainers, we see that 56% of the workers in the occupation are part time workers and 44% can be considered full time. Why the prevalence of part-timers? Tax and benefits. It is potentially more profitable to hire a few part time trainers instead of fewer full time trainers, as the employer is not required to provide as many, if any, payroll benefits to if the employee can be defined by legal statute as part-time.

If we do some very crude calculations, considering the percent full time and part time, we can create a loose estimate of average annual combined full-time and part-time earnings of about \$29,000 per year, based on government wage data. There is also a massive variation in hourly wages paid, from as low as \$12.91 up to \$38.82 according to their data, depending on a number of market factors. The median numbers bandied about by recruiters, fitness corporations, and academic programs overestimate wages for rural areas and underestimate wages for populous high end market areas.

Also of note is that more than 60% of trainers work for a fitness company. As such their wage is derived from them selling and delivering personal training sessions within the gym, fitness center, or recreation center where they work. Part and parcel of this arrangement is that the company employing the personal trainer generally keeps the fee charged customers for personal training services, or simply deducts the hourly wage for the trainer from the fee charged customers. Although it is common to see published “average” ranges for the price charged for personal trainer services, with figures roughly between \$25/hour to \$500/hour, these estimated ranges are guesses. However, hourly wage must be linked to service fee charged to the customer. Paying a trainer \$22.35 per hour and charging a customer \$25 means no viable profit for the company. If the bottom end wage range, \$12.91 per hour, is paid to the personal trainer, in this circumstance there is viable profit at the \$25 price point for the company, if the number of clients is sufficient. The higher the fee charged the client, the higher the wage can be paid to the trainer, and the better the profit for the employer.

Personal Trainers as Corporate Revenue Generators

Memberships are the primary revenue stream for fitness facility income, comprising a massive 63% of a gym business’s income. “Pay for access” is the dominant business plan operating, provision of goods and services pale in comparison. Personal training

services do factor in however, providing 15% of an average facility's revenues, followed closely by merchandise sales, including food and beverage, at 13% of total.

US Fitness Market Revenue	\$31,200,000,000.00	--
Membership Revenue	\$19,500,000,000.00	63%
Personal Training Revenue	\$4,680,000,000.00	15%
Merchandise Revenue	\$4,056,000,000.00	13%
Other Sources of Revenue	\$2,808,000,000.00	9%
		100%

Table 2. Estimated revenues within the fitness industry, total and by revenue stream. Data derived from IBIS World Report for 2023 and 2024.

Fitness industry data estimates that the fitness/gym industry produces an approximate value of \$31.2 billion dollars per year. Within that figure, approximately 15% of it is comprised of revenues (not profit) of about \$4.68 billion dollars spent by customers on personal training services. That means, personal training is a multi-billion dollar industry. While impressive sounding, if we consider the US governments current enumeration of how many personal trainers there are in the US, 329,500 of them, we can calculate a different picture. That \$4.68 billion, divided by the number of the taxpaying personal trainers (329,500), we arrive at the number indicating that the average personal trainer delivers an average gross revenue of \$14,203 per year through personal training. This is what is charged the customer, collected by the employer, and is not what is paid to the trainer.

If, in the absence of a concrete average amount charged for per hour personal trainer service, we use \$60 per hour as a crude conjecture of an average per hour fee for personal training, we can make a relatively profound back-calculation. We know from published industry and governmental data that the average personal trainer making median wage would work to deliver personal training for about 236 hours per year ($\$14,203 \div \$60/\text{hour}$). This equates to about 4.5 hours working per week. This is barely 10% full time work. This level of low work hours and low earnings by personal trainers is not considered a problem by corporate/franchise fitness employers. This is because, as with this example, the company profits about \$170 each week from the trainer's efforts while the personal trainer is paid \$100 for the week. Again, if we probe a little further in a different direction we can see that if there are 329,500 active working personal trainers in the USA and there are between 113,326 (IBIS World Report) and 115,000 (Statista) gyms, health, and fitness training business in the USA. Those data indicate that the average gym business employs an average of 2.9 personal trainers working a total of 668 hours during the fiscal year (each personal trainer would work an average of 4.5 hours per week).

But let's do a little more exploration. If we take the revenues for personal training (\$4.68 billion) and divide that by the average price tag for an hour of personal training (\$60/hour) then we can arrive at a crude estimate of how many personal training hours were delivered in a calendar year, 78 million. Now, as 44 percent of the trainers in the USA are stated to be full time (by legal definition, those who work 35 or more hours per week), we can take the total number of trainers (329,500) and multiply that by 35 hours worked per week to arrive at the fraction of available personal training hours they provide, a staggering 91% of available and paid hours (about 71.5 million). That leaves only a bit more than 6.4 million hours available for the 184,520 part time personal trainers, which works out to 35 hours per year each, far less than an hour per week.

If actual fitness sector financials indicate actual personal training services do not add up to the average annual wage reported by personal trainers, then they must be earning income in other endeavors, either in the gym performing other tasks or by working for multiple employers as a personal trainer. It is highly unlikely that a personal trainer delivers 35 hours of personal training per week, face to face with customers. You cannot effectively provide hour upon hour personal training effectively and safely without spending time creating and individualizing training plans for a spectrum of customer types, goals, and current states of fitness. It is in fact extremely common for personal trainers to possess additional certifications in allied fitness delivery skills, such as yoga, group exercise, or others related to delivering exercise and fitness, in order to create additional revenue streams.

Personal Trainers as Corporate Customers

Another problem within the occupation is the turnover rate. Current data indicates that the average time in position for any personal trainer new hire is one to two years. Again, this is not really considered problematic by corporate/franchise fitness employers as there are currently an estimated 480,000 certified trainers in the USA. That represents a worker surplus of approximately 114,000. Any time availability (surplus of certified trainers) is larger than demand (available positions) prices (wages) are compressed. If we consider that a massive majority of personal trainers highly rank their satisfaction with their occupation, and the popularity of the occupational training is very high, it is quite probable that personal financial limitations, not the job itself, push workers to exit the field for more fiscally beneficial employment.

Table 3 (*see following page*). Number of currently valid certified personal trainers by fourteen certifying organizations. Not all possible organizations are listed as many are obscure and many do not publish data about their activities. "Current" indicates how many valid certificates are active according to published organizational data; "current*" indicates that the value presented is mathematically estimated from incomplete public data from the organization. Non-CPT personnel that overlap into the personal training space (group fitness instructors, CrossFit trainers, strength and conditioning coaches, yoga instructors, etc.) are not included in this data.

<u>Organization</u>	<u>Certified Personal Trainers</u>	
International Sports Sciences Association (ISSA)	96,480	current*
National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM)	75,020	current
American Council on Exercise (ACE)	63,200	current
Athletics and Fitness Association of America (AFAA)	26,923	current*
National Council on Strength & Fitness (NCSF)	26,130	current*
National Strength & Conditioning Association (NSCA)	16,434	current
American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM)	12,297	current
National Federation of Professional Trainers (NFPT)	9,257	current*
National Exercise & Sports Trainers Association (NESTA)	6,875	current*
National Personal Training Institute (NPTI)	4,500	current*
International Fitness Trainers Association (IFTA)	3,000	current
National Council for Certified Personal Trainers (NCCPT)	2,083	current
American Muscle and Fitness (AMF)	1,241	current*
National Exercise Trainers Association (NETA)	912	current*
TOTAL	344,352	

At any given time, there are approximately 100,000 individuals in the certified personal training education/examination pathway. As such the 69,000 vacant or new positions each year can be readily filled with brand new certificate holders at lower end wages. Further, competition for personal training work comes from closely allied certified exercise personnel such as strength coaches, group fitness instructors, CrossFit instructors, running coaches, weightlifting coaches, powerlifting coaches, etc.

It should be obvious that the popularity of the idea of being a personal trainer is quite high. The surplus of certified personal trainers speaks to this. This also sets up a demand for education and certification to become a personal trainer. The exercise and fitness education and certification sector is large, varied, and commercial. So, as there is a rapid production of certified trainers by a massive number of organizations, with about 100,000 new trainers created per year by corporate provision (this does not include college and university programs), it should be obvious that certifying businesses are responding to customer demand, not to the demands of the occupation nor to their customer's future financial stability.

Enterprising individuals have long leveraged the desirability of being a personal trainer into profitable education or certification business plans; training personal trainers is more financially productive than being a personal trainer. This is apparent, and actually seen, in the real world via the sheer volume of businesses offering education and certification. That can further be attested to in that the top three most popular certification bodies for personal trainers can easily and completely satisfy the annual demand for personal trainer hiring, about 69,000 vacant and new positions annually according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. College and university programs that include personal training as a possible target career for their graduates add to the

volume of over-production of trainers and to the arguments about what type and how much preparation is needed to be a personal trainer.

In the current economic environment of having MBAs staffing the C-Suite of exercise certifying organizations (both profit and non-profit), MBAs with no background in the delivery of personal training as a career, the intention is always to find ways to expand market share and increase profit (“surplus” in non-profit terms). It is unlikely that any such organization would voluntarily limit revenues by matching its customer sales to anticipated industry demand for personal trainers. Organization websites talk a good game about caring for the success of their customers, their aggressive pursuit of more customers and a bigger bottom line portrays something different. This is not necessarily a fault, making money is generally the goal of any business. It is however, short-sighted and simply means that corporate fitness management is working to maximize profit in the near term without truly considering the consequences of overproduction for the career field in the short, medium, or long term.

Spending Habits and Personal Trainer Use

There are reportedly 66,500,000 individuals in the USA that have a membership to a gym or fitness center (IHRSA 2024). It is important here to consider that the average American who does have a gym membership of some type, spends an estimated \$37 per month on access to a facility (RunRepeat 2021) and the most visited gym system in the USA is Planet Fitness who charges a \$10 per month membership for gym access. Most gym customers will not spend more than the cost of membership, limiting spending on additional services such as personal training. In fact, 41% of customers who stop their memberships cite affordability as the reason (YouGov 2024). This is further reflected in the gym and fitness center sector’s decline in consumer spending in 2023 (-10%) and 2024 (-19%)(Facteus 2024) and the loss of personal trainer jobs from the marketplace. In 2019, the Bureau of Labor Statistics published the count of personal trainers of 373,000. It appears, from the current number of 329,500, that 43,500 positions were lost during and post-pandemic. This likely reflects an increase in utilization of home and online fitness activities (pre-recorded video, AI interactive, or other non-trainer-involved delivery digital method).

Regardless of prevailing economic circumstances, personal trainers are utilized by the public, with numerous sources report differing utilization statistics. The values published generally fall between 10 and 20% of a given gyms membership.

If we use 15%, the mid-point of estimates, we can create a ballpark estimate of the volume of potential customers for personal trainers; $66,500,000 \times 15\% = 9,975,000$. Interestingly, when we divide that result by the number of actively employed personal trainers in the USA, we arrive at a number indicating that there are approximately 30 customers served by each personal trainer from the Bureau of Labor Statistics data. This looks promising as 30 customers per week over the entire year would indicate a decent

economic outlook for current personal trainers. However, the data obtained on personal training service utilization included those that used such a service at least once in a year, with no information of actual frequency of use presented. One research paper did specify that the average personal trainer had an average of 50.6 customers per week BUT despite saying that the data was for personal trainers, the paper stated the trainers worked with an average of 7.8 customers per session (Waryasz et al, 2016). That is a group fitness instructor by definition, not a personal trainer so that data is moot. To get a bit more perspective on this topic we can examine data on overall gym attendance by those who possess memberships:

<u>Average per week visits</u>	<u>Percent of Members</u>
0	6.3%
1	43.8%
2	22.6%
2+	27.3%

Table 4. Estimated volume of current gym members training zero, once, twice, or more than twice in a commercial fitness facility in the USA (Finder 2024).

The ISSA teaches that a CPT should work with a client 3-6 months before leaving them to their own devices. If we consider trainer numbers, attendance data, and this short-term service delivery approach to personal training in mind, the average 30 customers per trainer looks less true. If the ISSA’s approach is typical, then that calculates to the equivalent of between 7.5 and 15 customers per month, average, for the year. There would still be 30 customers served by the individual trainer in total for the year, but the short durations of retention lowers the time providing personal training services and the number of customers at any given time. Essentially, the ISSA approach is always to recruit, reload, and turnover the client base quickly rather than fostering long term relationships with customers in the manner of sport coaches who generally provide long term, multi-year services to their athletes (not quite an apple-to-apple comparison, but close).

To get a handle on how membership and attendance affect the trainer’s economic health, we refer back to average per hour wages (\$22.35), the estimated number of clients served (7.5 to 15), and typical customer attendance rates (1 to 2 times per week), we can calculate a few income scenarios:

Table 5 (see following page). Mean wage for personal trainers, average customer load, likely frequency of training customers, and the resulting estimates of earned annual wages.

Hourly Wage	Clients/Week	Sessions/Week	Gross Annual Income
\$22.35	7.5	1	\$8,717
\$22.35	7.5	2	\$17,433
\$22.35	10	1	\$11,622
\$22.35	10	2	\$23,244
\$22.35	12.5	1	\$14,528
\$22.35	12.5	2	\$29,055
\$22.35	15	1	\$17,433
\$22.35	15	2	\$34,866

What this data implies is that personal training is a pretty good “side hustle”. Current employment statistics support this notion, with nearly 60% of all personal trainers working on a part-time basis.

Balancing Personal Income Potential with Costs of Entry into the Occupation

Pursuant to the analysis of likely financial circumstances that a personal trainer must navigate in the work space, it is absolutely prudent to consider the actual costs associated with becoming one. We cannot come up with an “average” cost of becoming a personal trainer because the fitness educational sector is massively fragmented with large numbers of corporations and institutions competing to attract customers/students to their preparatory pathway.

One consideration is that in the USA (circumstances differ elsewhere) there is no USA law or statute requiring that personal training staff be certified. As such, the lowest possible cost to become a personal trainer is \$0. This path however is quite limited as USA fitness customers have become accustomed to seeing the term “certified personal trainer” and have been convinced that certification equates to expertise and ability, which it does not. Further, most fitness delivery businesses require some form of certification attesting to basic knowledge of the field. Many require certification from very specific providers. Some employers of personal trainers enter into agreements with certifying businesses that essentially provide a financial kick-back to the gym business for every in house student they send to the certifying organization. Thus, in this circumstance, personal trainers provide two revenue streams for their employer; (1) as a pre-condition of continued gym employment the trainer pays for certification to a gym’s partner certifying body, for which a portion is routed back to their employer, and (2) as a result of their personal training work within the gym or fitness center. So, you can work for yourself as a personal training business without a certification (not too common) or you can work for a gym or fitness center initially without a certification but, under the pre-conditions that a certification is paid for by the employee and taken from a specific provider within a specific time limit.

Most popular certification providers hover in cost in the area of \$500 to \$1,000. As an example, an ISSA personal training certification currently costs \$994.30 for a standard individually paced online course. To gain a certification more quickly there is an option to pay an additional \$99 to allow the student to “Fast Track” and complete the course within four weeks. Both standard and fast track options include all learning materials and an open book online certification test. The test is 140 questions with a 2 hour time limit and a 70% required score to pass. ISSA does offer an accredited closed book online certification exam, available for an additional \$599 (+ \$79 delivery fee). This accreditation is through the NCCPT, which is owned by ISSA. The ISSA accredits their own certification. The ISSA adds an additional level of accreditation through the NCCPT’s purchase of accreditation by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) which is in turn owned by the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE). It is worthwhile to note that none of these bodies are part of the government and all note on their web pages that accreditation through their services is voluntary. There are a number of accreditations for sale within the fitness space, the following are the most common:

- American National Standards Institute (ANSI)
- International Accreditors of Continuing Education and Training (IACET)
- National Board of Fitness Examiners (NBFEE)
- National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA)
- National Council for Certified Personal Trainers (NCCPT)

Smaller volume certification businesses generally do not seek accreditation or use the lowest cost accreditation possible. Accreditation fees for a business that certifies personal trainers is passed on to the personal trainer through an increased cost of education, examination, or both.

The lowest cost certifications are often considered suspect, for a variety of reasons beyond accreditation status. Expert Training (ET) offers a \$99 online course, culminating in a 40 question multiple choice test with 40 minute time limit and 50% required score. The National Personal Training Association (NPTA) offers a slightly higher cost for certification, \$225, offering a self-paced course ending with an open book online exam requiring an 80% score. The ET and NPTA both provide fodder for other company’s derision of their offering by not including practical and hands-on teaching or more robust testing. However, the same criticisms can be made about virtually every other certification provider in the commercial space regardless of price point and accreditation status.

At the highest end of cost, personal trainer is a listed occupation for those earning a bachelor’s degree in an exercise related major. You frequently see the occupation listed on academic informational web pages of colleges and universities. The cost of a bachelor’s degree ranges from \$10,940 to \$39,400 per year for tuition and fees (books and materials not included). This calculates out to a bachelor’s degree route to

becoming a personal trainer costing between \$43,760 and \$157,600. Given the previously discussed fiscal restraints within the occupation, a bachelor's degree may not be a viable option if debt must be assumed to pay for it. Further, employers generally require university educated trainers to acquire a basic personal training certificate, the same one as non-university educated trainers. One caveat exists here; a certified personal trainer with a degree will generally be paid somewhat higher hourly wages than a trainer with a certification only.

Perspective

Despite the quagmire and misinformation about education, certification, accreditation, and economics, personal training is a valid, viable, and desirable career. For those interested in doing so full-time, it is challenging but definitely not impossible. Having a certification, diploma, or degree does not mean automatic success, it simply sets up the conditions for providing services while working for a business or operating an independent service business on your own. And personal training is just that, a business, you have to do what every other service business has to do:

1. Have a desirable service product to sell
2. Have a desirable price point that produces adequate profit
3. Be discoverable by customers
4. Have a convenient location for customers to receive the service
5. Produce results desired by the customer to create satisfaction and retention

Competition for customers is fierce because of the sheer volume of personal trainers produced each year by commercial educators and higher academia. Those with the least commitment or those that are weak in one or more of the above (1 through 5 in the above list) likely will be part of the rapid attrition and job turnover within the occupation. For those that persist, continue learning, and progressively improve their service delivery skills, early career near-poverty part-time wages can give way to better wages as by the fifth year mark, there is a point where personal trainer wages generally increase by about 24%, possibly more. That is a function of becoming better at the job and through the creation of a body of work (this means customer successes) that can be advertised to attract more customers.

Personal trainer certification, ideally representing occupational competency, is currently provided after passing tests constructed to be deliverable online. This makes them easy and profitable to deliver and score. However, this universal approach never assesses face-to-face and in-the-gym abilities. Education and certification are impotent if not married to practical ability to work effectively with clients and produce the fitness or vanity gains the customer desires. To this end, personal learning and acquiring practical skills are much more important than choice of certification to acquire.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Cohesive and complete data on this industry is not available. Published data from different organizations frequently do not align, as methods of data acquisition and analysis differ, as does the populations/organizations surveyed. Small sample size surveys of a hundred or so subjects also cannot truly be descriptive of status and conditions of 329,500 personal trainers spread across fifty states. This paper attempted to logically and arithmetically provide as objective of a view of the state of the personal trainer – as defined by a trainer who works with a single client at a time – as possible using data from multiple sources.

© 2024 Lon Kilgore PhD and the Kilgore Academy

This article is free to share and repost but must include original author attribution and inclusion of a link to kilgoreacademy.com