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HEALTH

Would-Be Fitness Trainers Need Clients Way More Than Muscles

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Growing up, Brian Calkins always expected he'd work in his family's Cincinnati construction business. When it was time to enter the working world, he did. But he wasn't happy there.

"Honestly, I felt frustrated basically from day one," he said.

After seven years, he began looking for something else. He read books, talked to career counselors and took personality tests. "All roads kept coming back to coaching, personal training or something involved with fitness," says Mr. Calkins. A lifelong athlete, he liked the idea of working with people to improve their fitness, but he was unsure about it as a career move.

About six years ago, he took a step toward a change, going back to college to study exercise and nutrition. After several months, he'd stopped working full time for the family firm and took his first fitness job, teaching group classes at retirement communities. "Once I completed that first session," he said, "I knew I had made the right decision."


Like Mr. Calkins, many personal trainers enter the field as a second career. "It has high satisfaction and personal reward," says Cedric Bryant, chief exercise physiologist with the American Council on Exercise, a San Diego fitness certification and education organization. Training also can appeal to young people because of its relatively low barriers to entry.

But building a clientele and developing the business skills required to start and manage a gym or studio of one's own can be more difficult than some trainers expect. "People come in with huge passion, and that's awesome," says Gregory Florez, who owns First Fitness Inc. in Salt Lake City, a firm that, among other things, advises trainers. "But what they lack is the acumen to convert that into a business."

Some trainers earn large sums consulting to the wealthy and celebrities. Bob Greene, trainer to Oprah Winfrey, is working with **McDonald's** Corp. to promote its "balanced, active lifestyles" effort. But those kinds of career trajectories are the exception.

Trainers face challenges from marketing and scheduling to pricing and client retention. Long days, lots of personal interaction and the task of keeping exercisers motivated can take a toll, according to

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veteran trainers. "There is a high burnout factor because you're dealing belly-to-belly with people five or six days a week," Mr. Florez says. Paul Garbarino, director of operations for the National Council on Strength and Fitness, a professional organization, estimates 30% of trainers are independent contractors or otherwise self-employed.

Experienced trainers advise those interested in getting started to seek a job at a health club or an established studio. They should then build referrals by giving talks, writing articles and conducting classes. Few gyms will hire anyone without credentials from one of the professional or trade organizations. Requirements vary, but the NCSF calls for a high-school diploma and a three-hour examination on exercise physiology, Mr. Garbarino says. Some courses permit online study. An increasing number of gyms require fitness employees to have college degrees in exercise science or related fields, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Trainers earn about \$25 to \$75 an hour, with gym-based trainers generally having to share fees with the health club, Mr. Garbarino says, though some trainers can command more. Trainers who work at client sites tend to get higher rates but must absorb the cost of travel expenses and downtime.

Trainers contracting with gyms can expect to earn \$30,000 to \$45,000 annually, while the self-employed range from \$45,000 to \$100,000, according to several trainers and fitness association professionals.

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