Sources of Work–Family Conflict Among Certified Athletic Trainers, Part 1

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Research AND discussion in the field of athletic training have begun to focus on quality-of-life concerns. Mensch and Wham¹ posed the question, Are certified athletic trainers (ATCs) more or less miserable than any other working professional? A 2002 NATA survey conducted by the Women in Athletic Training Committee revealed that family or personal life was a vital concern for ATCs.² This finding created a need to examine the presence of work–family conflict (WFC) and potential consequences. WFC is a phenomenon that arises when individuals are unable to meet the demands of their personal lives because of the demands of their professional lives.³ Previous research conducted in athletic training has focused on constructs linked to WFC, such as work hours,⁴ attrition,⁵ stress, burnout,⁶ and job satisfaction.⁷ The purpose of this two-part column is to examine theoretical and practical issues related to ATCs’ quality of life. In the first part, we will identify concerns facing ATCs regarding quality of life and the capacity to balance work-related and non-work-related issues. In the second part, we will focus on techniques to help athletic trainers and administrators create life balance.

Practical Implications

Our research on the impact of WFC has identified three major themes associated with ATCs’ quality of life: time, locus of control, and staffing patterns.⁸ The outcomes from this research are based on results gathered from the qualitative portion of a mixed-methods study examining WFC among Division I-A ATCs.⁹ The participants in our study cited each of these three variables as a catalyst for instances of work–life conflict. In the following sections we will demonstrate how the unique job-related responsibilities of ATCs predispose them to WFC.

Time

The reality for ATCs working in business, college, or high school settings is not the traditional 9-to-5 workday or a 40-hr workweek.⁹ For this particular group, 9- to 10-hr days and 60- to 70-hr workweeks were normal during their in-season sport coverage. Extensive time demands for ATCs become a major factor limiting the amount of time available for their personal lives. We found an assistant athletic trainer who simply stated, “It seems as though more and more time is taken up by my job.” The same ATC also went on to describe the overall picture and said, “Work definitely impedes upon my time spent at home or with my family. The time I spend away from home due to my work schedule or travel limits the amount of time I can be with my family.”

Questions:
- How many important social events have you missed during your career as an ATC? Do you have any regrets?
- Would time away from family be less of an issue if you made more money?

Locus of Control

Control over work schedules and flexibility in the workday have been cited as key components in allowing employees to manage their personal affairs. In our
study, ATCs discussed lack of control, inflexible work schedules, and long work hours as the primary factors contributing to conflicts between their professional and personal lives. For instance, Jamie, a head athletic trainer, stated that her lack of control over her work schedule negatively affected her life:

I am always on someone else’s schedule. For example, if my team practices on Christmas then I obviously have to be there. It is the way our job is set up. I do not have control over the situation or schedules.

Many ATCs, particularly the younger professionals, discussed how the inconsistency in their work schedules affected their ability to schedule personal time or attend social gatherings. Harrietta, an assistant athletic trainer, noted missing out on a variety of social gatherings because of her position:

I have no flexibility. I am dictated with what day I have off and do not. Just yesterday I got a wedding invitation in the mail. I found out it was the only day I could not get off. When you do sit back and think about it, I can count how many weddings I have missed, or a funeral, or you weren’t at something that you should have been at and it all can be contributed to my work.

Questions:
• Are you aware of any ATCs who exhibit some control over coaches and administrators? For example, practice will not be held at 6 a.m. on Sunday, because you will not have an ATC present. Or is a lack of control just a reality for ATCs in certain settings?
• Do you see a trend in athletic training students and young professionals who refuse to cover practice outside the required class or school time? For example, not all students are willing to cover preseason football practice if school is not in session or there is no assigned class for the clinical experience.

Staffing Patterns
ATCs working in the interscholastic settings are often overworked because of an inadequate number of full-time staff athletic trainers. Many ATCs think that they are understaffed based on the criteria outlined by the NATA task force regarding appropriate medical coverage. ATCs we surveyed were aware of the guidelines, and one stated, I know we do not have as many staff as the profile (set by NATA) says we should have. . . . With the numbers and teams at our institution we need three more staff members to be in compliance.

Others openly accepted the situation and were able to manage the long work hours that spanned a full in-season sport coverage, considering them part of their job-related responsibilities. Even so, they did become overwhelmed once the long work hours continued beyond that season, something they directly attributed to inadequate staffing patterns. Comments included “I get frustrated and experience the most difficulty in juggling my responsibilities (work and home) when I complete one sport season and then go right into another in-season sport, while still managing the out-of-season sport.”

Questions:
• Are your current responsibilities (administrative and clinical) equal to that of two or more ATCs? If so, are you compensated appropriately?
• Can you find ATCs at similar universities or schools with job responsibilities similar to your own?

Discussion
Undoubtedly, the profession of athletic training has unique time-related responsibilities that predispose ATCs to conflicts in balancing professional and personal issues. Current ATCs indicate that hours worked, inflexible work schedules controlled by others, and inadequate staffing patterns influence their ability to experience work–life balance, which is consistent with previous WFC research. An important next step in this research and for practicing ATCs is to communicate these issues and proposed solutions to those who are in control (i.e., head ATCs and athletic administrators) to facilitate movement toward an improved quality of life for ATCs working in professional, intercollegiate, and interscholastic environments.

Consider the following statements and questions:
• To be an athletic trainer, students and young professionals must realize that they will sacrifice a certain amount of family or personal life.
• What should program directors and ATCs tell female students who are considering a career in athletic training and ask, “Can I be an athletic trainer and have children and some sort of family life?”