Work–Family Conflict, Part 2:
How Athletic Trainers Can Ease It

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In the last issue of Athletic Therapy Today we outlined several issues related to work–family conflict for certified athletic trainers (ATCs). Much of the scholarly debate regarding quality-of-life issues for ATCs revolves around strategies to prevent job burnout, reduce job-related stress, and maintain a balanced life. Many of the factors that lead to these problems stem from long work hours and travel, inflexible work schedules, and inadequate staffing, as identified by the participants in Part 1. The purpose of Part 2 is to present strategies suggested by ATCs for administrators and supervisors to help reduce the work–family conflict of ATCs. The strategies discussed here emerged from individual interviews with 12 ATCs working at NCAA Division I universities.

Too Much Time

ATCs often have to choose between their professional and personal lives rather than enjoying a balance or integration of these two realms. Finding a balance between work and personal time is difficult for most ATCs. Consider the following examples of how two current ATCs increase the amount of their quality personal time.

Mark, an athletic trainer for 16 years and a father of two, discussed how he balanced his work responsibilities and family time: “I try to include my daughters in as many work-related things as possible. One of my daughters is enthralled with the concept of college sports, so I bring her to as many practices as possible.” To overcome the long work hours that diminished the amount of time Mark was able to spend at home with his daughters, he used Sunday-morning treatments or weekday practices as a means to spend more time with them, a way to balance his personal and professional lives.

Davis, an assistant athletic trainer of 22 years, husband and father of two, meets his wife for lunch while the athletic training room is closed as a means to spend more time with her. “When there is extended downtime during my workday I try to spend some time with my wife. We usually try to meet up for lunch on campus.”

For an ATC, long work hours coupled with travel and inflexible work schedules are inherent to the profession. Nonetheless, if professional organizations, individual colleges and universities, and ATCs adopt and encourage the integration of family and work, ATCs’ experiences of work–family conflict could be reduced. It is important for administrators to encourage and support integration—by doing so they can help their employees increase time spent with family.

Discussion Points:

• Would children be welcome at your clinical site? Is it fair to others (athletes, patients, peer ATCs) to bring your family to work?
• Could a more family-friendly work environment have a negative impact (informally) on future hiring criteria? In other words, with all things equal, would an
unmarried ATC with no children look more attractive to some coaches and administrators?

- Don’t coaches have the same problem? Do they bring their families to practices?

**Locus of Control**

Practice and game schedules, travel, and staffing patterns are not controlled by ATCs but rather by the coaches and administrators for whom they work. Locus of control, which has also been linked to attrition and job burnout in athletic trainers, was a major contributor to feelings of job dissatisfaction and work–family conflict among the ATCs we interviewed. Flexibility in work schedules, previously linked to job satisfaction, is a facet of work not experienced by athletic trainers. Several ATCs discussed taking opportunities to go home early, take mornings off, or have their peers cover practices or games in order to attend to personal matters. Consider the following example.

Madison, an assistant ATC, talked about having a peer ATC cover a practice one day in order to attend her child’s parent-teacher conference. “Take advantage of coworkers. If there are five people working in the athletic training room and there is not much going on, send individuals home. Teamwork is the best way; find a way to help one another out.”

Positive peer work relationships were consistently cited as one of the best attributes of being an athletic trainer. By using peer ATCs as a support system and a means to gain control over work schedules, ATCs can find a way to improve their overall quality of life. Administrators, particularly head ATCs, should continue to support and encourage teamwork among their staff in order to alleviate time pressures, as well as to promote a healthier, balanced lifestyle.

**Discussion Points:**

- When was the last time you completed hours in the athletic training room with more ATCs present than were actually necessary?
- Have you ever worked with a coach who solicited your input regarding appropriate practice times? Have you ever said no to a coach who is trying to reschedule a practice at the last minute? How about a conditioning session?
- If a star athlete asked to receive treatment before or after normal treatment hours, would you accommodate the athlete? What if the head coach asked you to treat this athlete?

**Staffing Issues**

In Part 1 of this column, several of the participants discussed staffing patterns as a factor in increased workloads and decreased nonwork time. By increasing the number of full-time ATCs, athletic administrators will be able to decrease their workload (e.g., number of athletes, intensive time pressures over long periods) and reduce the occurrence of work–family conflict. Lack of staffing is often dictated by budgetary constraints, but consider the following suggestions.

Hire per-diem ATCs. Per-diem ATCs can reduce the load of the full-time staff members by covering off-season practices and games, and they do not have the same costs associated with them as full-time staff members.

Establish firm sports-coverage guidelines. Many of the ATCs we interviewed suggested establishing clear sport-coverage guidelines, especially for the off-season. “The first thing that must be done [to reduce workload and time spent at work] is to establish clear guidelines for staffing patterns and sport coverage.” By simply reducing the contact hours and sport coverage for the off-season teams, ATCs can maintain a more reasonable workload and better quality of life.

Reduce or reassign time-intensive administrative duties (e.g., teaching or student supervision).

Without question, the participants in this sample overwhelmingly believed that by addressing the staffing shortages at their universities, they would be able to diminish the number of hours worked, thus having more personal time. Therefore, head ATCs should continue to lobby for adequate staffing patterns at their universities to comply with the guidelines established by the NATA, and administrators need to evaluate their current sports-medicine staff and ways to alleviate the heavy workload imposed on ATCs.