



THE COMPONENTS THAT MAKE A TRAINER SUCCESSFUL

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Professional personal trainers have been working in the fitness industry for many years, but the first certified personal trainer (CPT) certification offered to fitness professionals did not come until the late 1980s. This new certification brought with it more justification as a legitimate profession for personal trainers, even though these trainers had been training clients as a part-time profession for well over 50 years with no guidelines or certifications. During that time, many different stereotypes of fitness professionals evolved, but two types emerged as the most typical.

The first group of professionals typically talks a great game, over-charges for their services, and makes a good living doing so. These trainers talk like salesmen, produce minimal physical results with their clients, and often do not know a whole lot about how the human body works. But, they have a good following of clients because they are so personable, motivating, and inviting. Professionals in the second group invest their own time and money into learning more about the science of training. Education is typically their primary focus and they spend countless hours learning about program design, training techniques, and assessment strategies. In their eagerness to train clients, they may either under-charge for their service or give it away at no cost. Though not as personable, they have a loyal following of clients and make a decent living financially.

Both of these groups of professionals are capable of developing successful careers despite their different approaches, and have done so over the years. However, in recent years, fitness professionals have started combining the best attributes of both personality types to create an elite fitness professional. This merger has brought a higher level of education and a desire to learn, and mixed it with a personable and motivated personality to create a new standard for fitness professionals with very successful career paths. These career-driven individuals share some specific key components that have assisted them in upholding this new high standard.

EARNING AND MAINTAINING AN ACCREDITED CERTIFICATION

Obtaining and maintaining a legitimate certification is an important component for the fitness professional, yet many personal trainers do not possess a certification. As of January 1, 2013, it is estimated that over 254,000 personal trainers claim to be employed in the fitness industry. However, the accredited certifying agencies that are recognized by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) do not recognize that many personal trainers as “certified.” This leaves thousands of trainers currently working in the field who are classified as “uncertified.”

PROFESSIONAL LIABILITY INSURANCE

Many CPTs practice their trade without obtaining professional liability insurance, which leaves them unprotected if any legal issues should arise. Most companies cover their CPTs under their insurance policies, although there are some that do not. CPTs should both obtain liability insurance as a professional standard and as a preventative measure.

THOROUGH ASSESSMENTS

There are some CPTs in the fitness industry that do not assess their clients or perform a health history review and physical activity readiness questionnaire (PAR-Q) prior to training. Assessments (including body measurements and movement screens) can provide the opportunity for CPTs to learn about their clients’ physical limitations and training goals as well as to establish clients’ baseline physical statuses. This process provides the trainer the information needed to decide if the clients are both willing and able to participate in fitness programs. Potentially, it is negligent on the trainer’s part not to assess a client prior to participation since the risk for injury is greatly increased if a baseline of physical status is not established.

CONSTANT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

The fitness industry is growing so quickly that some information thought to be correct as recently as five years ago is now being researched and found to be unsupported. There are many great minds working diligently within the fitness industry and their findings are available to fitness professionals. Conferences, clinics, seminars, webinars, online educational courses, books, journals, and self-studies are some of the many ways CPTs can increase their education. Continuing education is not only needed to maintain a certification, but it is also helpful in providing the CPTs' clients with the most up-to-date, scientific information available.

CPTs can also continue their education by studying for and earning secondary certifications. Not only do secondary certifications bring increased knowledge of specific subjects, but potentially a higher income as well. According to a 2010 study conducted by the American Council on Education, a secondary certification will earn, on average, an extra \$2,000-2,500 per year for part-time and/or full-time CPTs (1). These earnings are believed to be on an upward trend as the era of increased demand for high quality fitness professionals has begun.

These key components may seem rather basic, because they are. The problem in the past was that fitness professionals did not do them, or failed to do them consistently. However, things have changed dramatically over the last decade or so. The desire of trainers to be seen as reputable and of a high standard of quality has increased with this new generation of CPTs. They are committed to improving, keeping their certifications current, and taking the proper steps to not only protect themselves

professionally, but to assess their clients' abilities and help them reach their goals.

The consistent practice of all of these key components is vital to the success of fitness professionals entering the field today. Not only will these high standards improve the quality of professionals working within the fitness industry, but possibly their annual income as well. At one time, this was a part-time job that included a free gym membership, but it has now developed into a highly productive, successful, and financially vibrant career path. It is now up to the new generation of CPTs to uphold these standards, improve the quality of the service they provide, and become successful personal trainers.

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TABLE 1. AVERAGE ANNUAL INCOME FOR PERSONAL TRAINERS (1)

	PART-TIME ANNUAL INCOME	FULL-TIME ANNUAL INCOME
Certified Personal Trainer	\$18,650	\$53,322
NCCA Accredited	(\$25.14 per hour)	(\$25.71 per hour)
Secondary Certifications	\$20,588	\$55,771
Tactical Strength and Conditioning	(\$26.23 per hour)	(\$26.74 per hour)
Olympic Lifting		
Suspension		
Health & Fitness Specialist	\$25,470	\$47,163
Corrective Exercise		
Special Populations		
Weight Management		
Elite Certified Personal Trainers	\$60,000+	\$100,000+
Attained Secondary Certification		
Attained Specialist Certification		



TAKING THE PROPER STEPS TO IMPROVE THE INDUSTRY

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What do medical doctors, dentists, physical therapists, and chiropractors all have in common? They all have a governing body that oversees their professional certification, conduct, status, and ability to perform the duties of their profession. For the purposes of this article, one can presume that the average American goes to the doctor and dentist once or twice a year and the physical therapist or chiropractor maybe once or twice a month, obviously the frequency of these visits will vary based on the individual. The certified personal trainer however, is a different story.

Clients will meet two, three, or even four times a week for regular workout sessions with their certified personal trainer (CPT) yet the personal training industry does not have a governing body. Clients may go twice a year to see their doctor compared to potentially 100 or more times a year to see their personal trainer, yet the disparity between the professional standards for each field is quite large. This leads to the question of why certified personal trainers do not have a governing body.

CPTs likely have more “hands-on” contact with their clients than any other profession, yet there is no governing body present to oversee their professional conduct and standards. CPTs have certifying agencies that encourage them to act in a professional manner and to train clients appropriately; however, they have no mandated requirements other than a high school diploma and a valid cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) certification to earn their personal training certification. The only time these standards are revisited is when the recertification period comes around every two or three years (depending on the agency), which requires trainers to keep current with their continued education.

The certifying agencies attempt to hold their certified professionals to high standards by providing quality, continued education opportunities at conferences and clinics; however, many fitness facilities do not keep track of the CPR and recertification period of their trainers once employed. This often leads to an expired certification and a fitness professional lacking the most recent and updated education required to provide a quality product to their clients.

The committed client deserves to work with an exceptional fitness professional. They invest their hard-earned money and time into training, and the product should match their efforts. Many CPTs earn their certification and simply “start working” with no attempt to improve themselves in any lacking areas or excel in specific areas of expertise. It is the trainer’s professional duty to bring a high-quality product to their client and deliver it in an exceptional way.

The committed trainer deserves to progress through the ranks of the fitness industry as they continue to improve themselves through educational opportunities and application. CPTs that consider training their clients to be a “career” (not a job) have dedicated their efforts to becoming exceptional. They hold themselves to high standards and by doing so, they reap the benefits. Increased pay rate, increased clientele, and an increase in professional respect from within the fitness industry are all benefits of CPTs that are growing their reputations for being career-driven professionals.

The fitness industry is lacking a governing body and, in turn unfortunately, the industry has a reputation for producing some professionals that are below standard. The question becomes, how do we fix it? Until a governing body is established, there is nothing the industry, as a whole, can do. As individual CPTs however, there are many things that can be done to become and remain a highly qualified and exceptional fitness professional:

- **Earn and Maintain a Valid NCCA Accredited Certification**
Certifications accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) are the gold standard for fitness professional certifications. These certification exams are peer-reviewed and written to test the knowledge of the exam being taken and to ensure that the test takers possess the knowledge that was provided within the confines of the learning materials (e.g., textbook, etc.). There are more than 60 certifying agencies available to fitness professionals to choose from; however, only 12 currently carry the NCCA approval with their certification.

- **Maintain Basic Professional Standards at All Times**

Fitness professionals must keep their basic operating standards current. These standards include:

- Maintaining a NCCA accredited certification
- Keeping a valid CPR, automated external defibrillator (AED), and first aid certification
- Obtaining and maintaining professional liability insurance
- Attending continued education opportunities often (suggested frequency: every three months)
- Conducting business in a professional manner (e.g., proper paperwork, scope of practice, etc.)

- **Self-Evaluation of Professional Conduct and Performance**

Fitness professionals need to be able to assess themselves with an honest and open mind. Self-evaluations can be performed to assist in maintaining or improving a professional standard. These evaluations should include the “five Ps:”

- Professionalism (are you prompted and prepared for every client; are you in uniform; are workouts prepared ahead of time; are you focused on your client for their entire session, etc.)
- Program design (are you creating program designs ahead of time; are they specific to the needs of the client; are you keeping records of all their workouts; are they achieving their goals, etc.)
- Professional and personal relationships (are you communicating well with the client; are you greeting your clients with energy; are you showing genuine interest in their needs; are you empathetic yet stern to hold them to standards, etc.)
- Professional development (are you actively trying to improve yourself; are you focused on developing areas of weakness and increasing areas of strength; are you meeting CEU requirements; are you becoming an expert in your field, etc.)
- Personal development (are you allowing yourself enough time off; are you focusing on achieving financial goals [e.g., savings, retirement, etc.]; are you making sure to not overwork or overtrain, etc.)

- **Earn a Secondary Certification**

- Statistics show that CPTs with a secondary certification can make more annual income compared to trainers who do not (1). Obtaining a secondary certification brings a level of expertise and higher learning to the trainer’s name and reputation. Trainers who develop and build a reputation for excelling at their specialty are highly sought after by consumers.

- **Focus on Business Education**

- Most CPTs spend countless hours learning how to train clients and produce results. They build a successful following of clients and then decide to branch off and go into business for themselves. They open a gym or personal training studio and start working as an independent business owner. The problem then becomes having little or no business experience. The trainer starts off well because their business is new and their current clientele feeds them referrals; however, as clients start to drop out, the financial situation becomes clear. Some trainers lack the business knowledge to stay in business.
- It is important to attend some business conferences, business mentorship programs, or business classes to learn how to start, maintain, and grow a business successfully for personal trainers looking to branch off on their own. Personal trainers are often forced to leave the field after just a few years, which can often be attributed to the inability to market to and keep clients, as well as operate a business successfully. Improving business education may help personal trainers remain successful in the field.

These suggestions will assist the certified personal trainer in building their reputation as a career-driven professional, as well as improving the quality of the product they produce and maintaining a financially sound business. As with any “good” suggestion, it comes down to the practitioner actually putting these ideas into action for them to work well.

With the lacking presence of a governing body, it is up to each individual trainer to be self motivated and to develop the “wanting need” to hold themselves to these high standards. An honest and thorough self-evaluation is one of the best tools a CPT can use to gain an objective overview of their abilities. It is important to identify what strengths and weaknesses are present and then take action toward growing or improving them.

If every certified personal trainer can elevate their professional work ability on a regular basis and take the proper steps toward improving, then the industry may begin to improve, as a whole. Trainers who take the time and make the investment to improve themselves will not only see financial growth but also an increase in their reputation and professional ability.

These are some of the important steps toward becoming an elite, certified personal trainer. Taking these steps toward professional growth will qualify a certified personal trainer to be able to say, “I am no longer part of the problem, I am part of the solution.”

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Robert Linkul is the National Strength and Conditioning Associations (NSCA) 2012 Personal Trainer of the Year and is a volunteer with the NSCA as their Southwest Regional Coordinator and committee chairman for the Personal Trainers Special Interest Group (SIG). Linkul has written for a number of fitness publications including Personal Fitness Professional, Healthy Living Magazine, OnFitness Magazine, and the NSCA's Performance Training Journal. Linkul is an international continued education presenter within the fitness industry and a career development instructor for the National Institute of Personal Training (NPTI).

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BUILDING A BUDGET FOR THE INDEPENDENT PERSONAL TRAINER

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The personal training industry is full of extremely passionate people who have dedicated many years of their lives to educating themselves on all the components that make up a successful workout program. Unfortunately, many of these individuals will end up leaving the industry in part because they are not proficient in the financial and business components that could keep their company in good standing. One of the first steps to success in this ever-changing industry is learning to build and maintain a personal training budget. A well-organized budget will allow personal trainers to maintain and grow their business while tracking where their money is being spent, saved, or invested (2,4).

SETTING THE STAGE

The first step is for the trainer to define him or herself as an independent personal trainer (contractor), establish their general business plan, and develop their mission statement (4). As an independent contractor, a trainer is hired as an agent who typically rents space from a gym/facility in which they train their own clients or they establish their own training studio or facility. Independent contractors can train clients in their own homes, in local parks and/or in recreational areas; however, it is highly recommended that they carry professional liability insurance. An independent contractor is not an employee of a company; they are self-employed (1,2). They collect and self report their own wages and typically, file their taxes on a quarterly basis. It is recommended that the independent contractor file for a LLC (limited liability company) or business license to validate the legitimacy of their business.

DEFINING YOUR PROFESSIONAL NEEDS

The second step to building a successful budget is to perform a needs analysis of the business components (4,5). These components can include professional liability insurance, business license, rent, office supplies, uniforms, equipment purchases, equipment upgrades, and vehicle maintenance (if the trainer is traveling to client's homes or other venues). Some needs, however, are industry staples that must be included for any personal trainer including, but not limited to, professional membership, certification (including First Aid/CPR), recertification, continued education, and telephones.

As seen in Table 1, the trainer should list off all of their budget components and estimate how much money will be afforded for each item. Remember, components can be added, excluded, or modified every quarter or calendar year depending on need (6).

EVALUATE THE NEEDS, REEVALUATE, AND START AGAIN

The third step in creating a successful budget is reflecting back on how accurate the previous budgets were. Tracking the numbers from the previous budgets will assist in forecasting for future budgets. Forecasting can assist the trainer in adjusting categories as they can fluctuate from year to year depending on certain demands (6). For example, on a recertification year a trainer may need to budget for more continued education endeavors or a higher premium on their professional liability insurance.

Forecasting future expenditures can assist the trainer in not “overspending” during certain times of the year. The goal is to always operate in the black (profit) and maintain a consistent cushion of funds in case of emergencies (3,6). Trainers should evaluate their budget at the end of each quarter or calendar year and make educated adjustments based off their forecasting model. As business increases, net profit should increase as well and a great amount of retirement funds could be saved or invested. However, if the trainer wants to be considered professional in the eyes of their clients, they need to put money back into the business (6). This does not mean that retirement should be ignored or overlooked. It is the responsibility of each contracted independent trainer to prepare him or herself for retirement.

The cycle for forecasting, modifying, and implementing changes to the budget should be repeated at the end of every quarter or calendar year as efficient budgeting is an on-going process that will keep a business minded professional successful in this ever-changing industry.

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TABLE 1. INDEPENDENT PERSONAL TRAINING BUDGET CATEGORIES – SAMPLE BUDGET

BUDGET CATEGORY	PERCENTAGE OF EXPENSES	ANNUAL AMOUNTS
Yearly Rent	13%	\$6,000
Professional Liability Insurance	1%	\$400
Professional Membership Dues and Business License	<1%	\$125
Professional Recertification - CPR, First Aid or CPT	<1%	\$35
Continued Education Self Study - Journals, books, webinars, etc.	1%	\$250
Continued Education Events - Conference registration, flight fees, room, etc.	1%	\$250
Business Cards and Schedule Books	<1%	\$75
Computer and Printer	<1%	\$250
Office Supplies	1-2%	\$500
Uniforms and Training Apparel	<1%	\$300
Telephone and Internet	3%	\$1,200
Website and Marketing	3%	\$1,500
Gas and Vehicle Maintenance	2%	\$900
New Equipment Purchase	2%	\$1,000
Clients Gifts, Rewards, Raffles, etc.	1%	\$450
Income Taxes	30-35% (on average)	\$13,500
Accounting Fee - If utilized	1%	\$350
Net Profit (Life, Vacation, Retirement, etc.)	30%	\$17,915
Total Annual Income		\$45,000
Total Annual Cost		\$27,085