

Personal Trainers: Certification and Accreditation: What is the real risk?

I recently attended the Club Industry Show in Chicago and sat on a panel discussion titled Demystifying the Accreditation Certification Controversy. The discussion was the result of a recent IHRSA recommendation that by January 1, 2006, club owners should hire personal trainers holding at least one certification from an organization/agency that has third part accreditation of its certification procedures and protocols from an independent, experienced and nationally recognized accrediting body. With over 75 certifying agencies for personal trainers, it is clear that IHRSA wants to establish a third party accreditation system that will set a standard for personal trainers throughout our industry.

On the surface, I applaud IHRSA for wanting to professionalize and standardize the title of “Personal Trainer”. When a member hires a personal trainer, they should have some expectation that the trainer has achieved a certain level of expertise and understanding of the mechanics of the human body and can successfully help them achieve their fitness goals without putting them in the hospital. The basic principle surrounding personal training is simple. We want to keep the public safe and we want our members (aka “clients”) to be healthy. Personal training accomplishes this goal. We just have to figure out how to sell this proven method of Safety and Results to the general public. Club owners know that personal training is the best tool available to keep members excited about coming to the gym and in most cases, personal training is the club’s biggest profit center. As a result, whenever there is talk about accreditation or licensing, club owners can get a little anxious. How much will this cost? Will I have two or maybe even three layers of personal trainer qualifications? Is an accredited and degreed trainer any better than the rookie I just hired? Does my liability exposure increase or decrease with an accredited trainer? These are all good questions and unfortunately, there are no easy answers.

From a liability standpoint, anytime you raise the real or perceived level of professionalism in any industry, you are raising the public’s expectation of performance and results. Accreditation could certainly establish a base criteria for a safe workout environment but the argument can be made that certification also accomplishes this goal. To coin an overused cliché, at the end of the day, how does this really affect the general public? In the 18 years I have been involved with liability issues and risk management for the health club industry, I can count the number of professionally liability claims involving negligent personal training on hands and feet. To put this in perspective, we have claims data on over 5,000 incidents in the past 10 years and only 19 claims involved a negligent training incident. In other words, is the health club industry hierarchy really looking at protecting the general public, or are we promoting the agendas of the major certification agencies and accreditation bodies? The level of employee experience and training certifications that have evolved over the past 15 years has, for the most part, been spearheaded by the club owners and personal trainers themselves. I think they have done a pretty good job setting their own standards of professionalism.

Insurance companies, as a general rule, are “reactionary” by nature. In other words, underwriters analyze claim trends and then make risk management recommendations

and/or establish pricing protocols to determine profitability of a specific risk. As I pointed out in the previous paragraph, claims involving negligent acts by a personal trainer are extremely rare. The fact that a personal trainer can purchase \$1,000,000 of professional liability coverage for under \$300 a year is evidence that the insurance industry has developed actuarial data that supports the underwriters' view of this "risk" as being relatively safe. The fact that there currently is no real industry standard regarding certification of personal trainers, most insurance companies don't even verify if their policy holders have any certification or experience. As scary as this is, virtually anyone who claims to be a personal trainer can purchase insurance coverage over the internet without ever having to prove their level of professionalism.

IHRSA does a great job for our industry. They really do care about where we are headed and are an essential organization for bringing the best minds in the health club field together to promote fitness and keep the public safe. I am glad that their recommendation regarding the hiring of accredited trainers is just that, a "recommendation". I view it as a gentle push to try and standardize the level of professionalism of the personal training industry. However, if this eventually turns into a campaign to license personal trainers, I think it will open a Pandora's Box of unintended consequences.