

Achieving Work-Life Balance in the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Setting, Part I: The Role of the Head Athletic Trainer

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Context: Supervisor support has been identified as key to the fulfillment of work-life balance for the athletic trainer (AT), yet limited literature exists on the perspectives of supervisors.

Objective: To investigate how the head AT facilitates work-life balance among staff members within the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I setting.

Design: Qualitative study.

Setting: Web-based management system.

Patients or Other Participants: A total of 18 head ATs (13 men, 5 women; age = 44 ± 8 years, athletic training experience = 22 ± 7 years) volunteered for an asynchronous, Web-based interview.

Data Collection and Analysis: Participants responded to a series of questions by journaling their thoughts and experiences. We included multiple-analyst triangulation, stakeholder checks,

and peer review to establish data credibility. We analyzed the data via a general inductive approach.

Results: Four prevailing themes emerged from the data: *modeling work-life balance, encouraging disengagement from the AT role, cooperation and community workplace, and administrative support and understanding.*

Conclusions: Head ATs at the Division I level recognized the need to promote work-life balance among their staffs. They not only were supportive of policies that promote work-life balance, including spending time away from the role of the AT and teamwork among staff members, but also modeled and practiced the strategies that they promoted.

Key Words: organizational support, quality of life, work schedules

Key Points

- Athletic trainers with supportive supervisors, especially with respect to work-life balance, were more likely to demonstrate strong professional and organizational commitments, higher levels of job satisfaction, and limited concerns related to work-life balance and burnout.
- Head athletic trainers and supervisors are encouraged to support the personal and professional pursuits and obligations of their employees by being flexible and sensitive to personal and professional goals.
- Communication among staff members is critical in promoting the teamwork that is essential to finding work-life balance in the collegiate setting.

Athletic trainers (ATs), like many working professionals, must balance multiple job and family roles, which may include employee, spouse, and caregiver. Each role places different time constraints and demands on the individual that can lead to *conflict*, often referred to as *work-family conflict*. The occurrence of work-family conflict predominately is documented in the college athletic training setting,^{1–3} but it also has been explored recently in the secondary school⁴ and clinic-outreach settings.⁵ Experiences of work-family conflict appear to occur regardless of marital or family status¹ for the AT and other working professionals^{6,7}; therefore, the phrase *work-life balance* has been used to describe the conflicts experienced by working professionals balancing multiple roles within their lives. Although the phrases are transposable, *work-life balance* may portray a more descriptive representation of the concerns facing the working profes-

sional. Simply, *work-life balance* recognizes that single working professionals, despite not having parental or spousal roles, still have personal obligations and interests that compete for their time.

Antecedents of work-life conflict can be multifactorial, and Dixon and Bruening^{8,9} suggested it can exist at the individual, sociocultural, and organizational levels. In their model, the individual level reflects the personal and family values, coping skills, and personality of the professional.^{8,9} Most notably, they suggested neuroticism as an indicator for experiences of work-life conflict.⁸ Individuals who are characterized as *neurotic* often demonstrate a reactive, emotional behavior that leads to higher levels of stress, especially when trying to balance multiple competing roles. The sociocultural context is rooted in social meanings and societal values, particularly as it relates to parenting and gender roles. Traditionally, women have been viewed as

domestic caretakers for whom working roles are secondary to childrearing. Additionally, the traditional gender ideology reflects that women tend to have a greater sense of parenting, difficulty managing the roles of working and motherhood, and a greater sense of guilt when away from home.⁸ Finally, organizational-level factors relate to workplace characteristics, which include family-friendly policies, the workplace climate, and job pressures and demands. Within this context, work hours, organizational structure, and workplace roles can contribute to experiences of conflict.^{8,9}

Work-life conflict in athletic training has many reported causes, including work schedules, long work hours, job demands, expectations of coaches, and travel.^{1,3-5} If compared with the model illustrated by Dixon and Bruening,^{8,9} these factors suggest that organizational factors contribute heavily to the experiences of work-life conflict for the AT and align with previous literature within the sport culture.⁸⁻¹¹ The ability to balance personal and professional obligations has been identified as an important retention factor, especially for those working in the sport culture,^{2,12-14} as it can improve job and life satisfaction¹²⁻¹⁴ and increase professional and organizational commitment.^{10,15} Organizations that help their employees find a balance between their personal and professional lives have developed policies and programs, such as flex time, child care, personal paid time off from work, and on-site fitness facilities.^{10,16}

Regardless of the clinical setting, fulfilling work-life balance for ATs can be realized by establishing boundaries at work, seeking personal time away from their roles as ATs to rejuvenate, having a support network at home and work, and creating a separation between work and home life.¹⁷ Supervisor support is also critical for ATs to find work-life balance.^{3,4,17,18} Supervisors are the gatekeepers to establishing a workplace environment that promotes a family-friendly atmosphere and to helping their employees realize work-life balance. Authors¹⁹ of organizational research also have suggested that, in addition to formal workplace policies, informal workplace policies are necessary for work-life balance. Supervisor support and understanding regarding work-family issues have been identified as important informal workplace policies.^{15,19} Despite the existing literature that highlights supervisor support as an important factor for the AT seeking work-life balance,^{3,18} no researchers have gained the insight of the AT serving as the supervisor. Therefore, the purpose of our study was to investigate the workplace dynamic that occurs at a National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I university and its effect on work-life balance. The central research question guiding our study was, how do head ATs facilitate work-life balance for their staff members? In part II of this study, we examine the personal experiences of work-life balance of the head AT, specifically the factors that relate to the occurrence of work-life imbalance and the methods used to achieve work-life balance.

METHODS

The topic of work-life balance has become a central research focus in athletic training, especially in the Division I clinical setting.^{1,3-5,12} Although the research has extended to other clinical settings,^{4,5} the attention to the Division I

setting is purposeful mostly due to the demands placed on the AT in that setting, which make finding work-life balance challenging at times.^{1,3} Finding work-life balance can be very individualized; investigators¹⁸ recently have suggested the importance of personal strategies to help achieve it and the need for supervisor support. Therefore, using a qualitative paradigm was most appropriate to evaluate our 2-fold purpose.²⁰⁻²²

Participant Recruitment

We used a purposeful-sampling strategy to recruit head ATs who met our preselected criteria (criterion sampling),²⁰ consisting of the role of head AT and employment in the Division I clinical setting. We sent e-mails to individuals who met the criterion of having previous relationships with the researchers (convenience sampling), and we requested contact information for additional potential participants (snowball sampling) from individuals who volunteered for participation. This snowball-sampling strategy is common practice in qualitative studies,^{21,22} especially when using a specific criterion for recruitment. Recruitment of participants ceased when data saturation was obtained, which occurred with our 18 participants.²⁰⁻²²

Participants

A total of 18 head ATs (13 men, 5 women; age = 44 ± 8 years, athletic training experience = 22 ± 7 years, employment at the current university = 14 ± 6 years) volunteered to participate in our asynchronous, Web-based interview. Of the 18, 15 (83%) were married or partnered and 3 (17%) were single. Eight of 18 (44%) were married with children. The head ATs represented 6 National Athletic Trainers' Association districts, and 17 (94%) had received master's degrees. Only 1 (6%) of our head ATs did not have travel duties associated with job responsibilities, whereas 13 (72%) traveled with 1 team, 3 (17%) traveled with 2 teams, and 1 (6%) traveled with 3 teams.

Participants implied informed consent by completing the Web-based study, and the study was approved by the University of Connecticut–Storrs Institutional Review Board.

Data-Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted online using Survey Monkey (www.SurveyMonkey.com, LLC, Palo Alto, CA), a secure data-tracking Web site designed for research purposes. All participants were sent an e-mail containing the link to the interview questions, and reminder e-mails were sent 2 and 4 weeks after the initial recruitment e-mail. Participants were instructed to provide basic demographic information (ie, age, marital status, years in the profession, number of children). After completing the background information, they were prompted to respond to a series of open-ended questions (Table 1). In total, the participants journaled their responses to 12 open-ended questions that were derived from a previous study in which the researchers investigated work-life balance and the workplace¹⁸ and existing literature on work-life balance in athletic training.^{1-5,23} The questions were adapted to include a specific focus on the supervisor role of the head AT and workplace strategies to promote work-life balance.

Table 1. Structured Interview Guide

1. What is your personal work-life balancing philosophy?
2. What factors influence work-life balancing for you?
3. What strategies do you use personally to promote a balanced life?
4. What strategies do you rely upon to help your staff find a balance?
5. How do you think your staff would describe the working environment as it currently stands?
6. What do you enjoy most about your current position?
7. What potential obstacles/challenges do you come across in your current position and how do you negotiate them?
8. What is your supervisor's philosophy regarding work-life balancing?
9. Describe your administration's support of the athletic training staff.
10. Describe your working relationship with the coaches you work with. What role do they play in the fulfillment of work-life balance for you and your staff?
11. What do you do to stay professionally motivated?
12. What advice would you give to your students or a young, newly certified athletic trainer on how to be successful in the athletic training profession while maintaining a work-life balance? (This advice can be for success at the Division I setting and/or any athletic training setting.)

Data Analysis

The analysis procedures followed the general inductive process, which is a common method used in health and social science research described by Creswell.²⁰ We selected this method of analysis to help uncover the most dominant themes from the data as they related to the promotion of work-life balance. Initially, we reviewed the transcripts in their entirety to gain a sense of the data. The holistic evaluation of the data allowed us to develop an initial impression of the emerging trends in the data. Next, we focused on questions that related to the purpose of the study (Table 2). We reviewed the data multiple times before assigning conceptual labels to the textual data. The conceptual labels then were organized into like categories and given thematic labels to capture their meanings.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an umbrella term used to describe how qualitative researchers establish credible, dependable, and transferable data.²¹ Many methods exist to secure trustworthiness of the data, and Creswell²² suggested implementing a minimum of 2 strategies. In this investigation, we used multiple-analyst triangulation, stakeholder checks, and a peer review, all of which qualitative researchers commonly employ.²⁰⁻²² Following the procedures outlined in the Data Analysis subsection, 2 authors (S.M.M., A.G.) independently coded the data. Before coding, they discussed the procedural steps to be taken during analysis. Next, they communicated about the findings and agreed on the final themes and descriptions, completing our multiple-analyst triangulation. Two of the supervisors who completed the study were selected to review the data as part of the stakeholder checks. The purpose of our member or stakeholder checks²⁴ was to present the initial findings from data analysis, as previously agreed on by the 2 researchers, to the participants for their confirmation. This method of member checking differs slightly from the standard member check, as it allows the participants to confirm the analysis rather than just confirm the accuracy of their interview transcripts.¹² Stakeholder checks were

Table 2. Questions Used in Analysis

1. What strategies do you use personally to promote a balanced life?
2. What strategies do you rely upon to help your staff find a balance?
3. How do you think your staff would describe the working environment as it currently stands?
4. Describe your administration's support of the athletic training staff.
5. Describe your working relationship with the coaches you work with. What role do they play in the fulfillment of work-life balance for you and your staff?

selected due to the Web-based data-collection procedures, which limit interactions between researchers, especially when follow up is plausible.²⁵ The supervisors agreed with the final presentation of the findings. A peer (W.A.P.), who had more than 15 years of research experience, reviewed the final presentation of the findings after completion of the stakeholder checks. He evaluated the data and themes and confirmed the findings as presented in the Results section.

RESULTS

Four prevailing themes emerged from the data analysis: *modeling work-life balance*, *encouraging disengagement from the AT role*, *cooperation and community workplace*, and *administrative support and understanding*. Each theme is defined and discussed with supporting quotations from the participants.

Modeling Work-Life Balance

The supervisors discussed the importance of being strong role models for their staff members by not only possessing personal work-life balance strategies but also implementing them into their daily lives. One participant, who was the father of 2 children, simply said, “[I try to] set a good example.” The example he provided was “focusing on family when not working and exercise for stress relief. When you do not have to work, make [a] commitment to spend time with family.” Another head AT with 18 years of clinical experience and 1 child shared, “[I] allow them [my staff] to be part of my life so that maybe they see that they can have balance, too.” When instructed to discuss the ways he finds a balance, he shared:

[I] don't waste time, either at work or at home. When the work is completed in the athletic training room and there is no one to treat, [I] go home. Take advantage of the times that you can. I am willing to give up free time I had before becoming a father (ie, golf, going out with friends, etc) and replace it with more time with my family. It's more rewarding and just as enjoyable. [I] take what time I have and give it to my wife and son, make it quality, and enjoy it.

A married female head AT discussed a former supervisor as being a positive role model, which inspired her philosophy on promoting balance among her staff members:

My first boss/mentor I had as a full-time staff member embodied this [balance] and encouraged us to take time off and enjoy time away from work. Having a husband, close family, and planning on children only gives me

that much more motivation to ensure I promote a healthy life for myself and my staff.

Modeling a balanced lifestyle was an important factor in helping the head ATs promote work-life balance for their staffs. In many instances, the modeling was performed to show their staffs that disengaging from one's athletic training responsibilities was acceptable; this relates to the theme *encouraging disengagement from the AT role*.

Encouraging Disengagement From the AT Role

Encouraging their staffs to take time away from the workplace role was discussed by this group of head ATs as an important way to help facilitate work-life balance. For example, a male head AT with more than 17 years of experience commented, "[I] emphasize that they need to take advantage of the opportunities to leave the office, as they arise, given those moments are few and far between." A female head AT echoed a similar philosophy:

[I] encourage out-of-athletic activities [time outside of the athletic training room]. [I] encourage friends outside of athletics, [and having] a standing appointment each day to get away and take care of themselves.

To encourage this healthy life and balance for her staff and herself, this female head AT used and encouraged multiple strategies to disengage from the role of the AT:

Although the university does not recognize "comp" time, I allow my staff to take weekdays off when their teams are not participating to make up for a long work weekend. I generally build in additional days for my staff around holidays for more time with family. I also close the [athletic] training room at lunch to encourage my staff to make plans to leave campus or close their door to distractions; this way they can have lunch with a friend, spouse, or have uninterrupted quiet time.

Outside interests and time away were viewed by these supervisors as a means to recharge and avoid burnout from the job. A head AT explained, "I always tell them [to] have other interests than just athletic training because I think it keeps you a little bit more, 'not stale,' I guess." Another head AT said, "make time for yourself outside of work." The rationale behind making "you" time was further addressed by a participant who said, "work-life balance is extremely important for longevity in the profession of athletic training." Allowing staff members to make their own decisions regarding when to take time away was mentioned by another supervisor. She recognized the importance of time for rejuvenation but believed the staff member should be allowed the autonomy to decide when it was appropriate. This head AT stated:

I just encourage them to do what works for them since everyone can be so different. I let them know that my expectation is that they have their team covered, but if they can work around that, I support them. I try to remind them often to think about taking time off, leaving early, coming in late, etc, particularly when their team also has some down time.

Supporting and encouraging time away from the role of the AT was important for this group of supervisors in endorsing work-life balance. Taking time away from the AT role was made possible by of the level of cooperation and community fostered by administrators in the workplace. This is described in the next theme.

Cooperation and Community Workplace

Many head ATs noted their workplace environments boosted cohesion and teamwork. The creation of a group of staff members working toward the same goals and supporting one another was viewed as a means to gain work-life balance in the collegiate setting. A female head AT who was married with children described her mentality related to the workplace as, "a team approach. [It] allows others [on the staff] the opportunity to set and reach goals [professionally or personally]." Several others shared similar thoughts. For example, 1 participant noted, "[my staff] help[s] each other out as much as possible," whereas another added, "[I] encourage staff to utilize other staff members for treatments and/or rehab[ilitation]s when possible." Communication was discussed as instrumental in facilitating a workplace that uses teamwork to promote work-life balance, as demonstrated by this head AT: "I promote communication about injuries so [my] ATs can feel they can get away without compromising care of the student-athlete."

Administrative Support and Understanding

Many head ATs believed their athletic administration supported their work-life balance philosophies and their abilities to supervise and manage their sports medicine staffs. A single female head AT said of her supervisor, "We are a unit managed by our medical director. He supports us in our mission of enhancing our quality of life." Another head AT, who was new to his role, found his supervisor to be very supportive of work-life balance:

I assumed the head athletic trainer position last summer after working here for many years. He made a point of saying that work-life balance was something he thought was important for both me and for my staff. It's nice to know that we have that support.

Taking time for family obligations and personal interests was supported by the supervisors of many head ATs. One caveat to taking time away was task completion, as highlighted by the following statements: "as long as the job gets done, they [my supervisors] are okay with down time for personal life"; "[they] understand the demands. As long as the job gets done, [they] don't have an issue with taking time away from the office"; and "I believe he [my supervisor] feels like we do get the job done. If you do your job, no one can question you when you take a break."

DISCUSSION

The fulfillment of work-life balance has become an increasing concern for working professionals, including ATs,¹⁻⁵ and often is viewed as an important retention factor for those working within the sports industry,^{13,14} because it leads to increased job satisfaction and organizational

commitment.¹⁰ Recognizing the need to help their employees succeed in balancing the various roles they assume, many organizations have formal workplace policies and benefits, including flexible work schedules, on-site child care, and parental leave time. Many formal workplace policies used by other professional organizations do not align with the athletic training culture and workplace, but a cohesive work environment and structure in staffing patterns appeared to be the most formal policies implemented.¹⁷ In addition to formal workplace policies, informal workplace support, which occurred mostly through managerial or supervisor support or sensitivity to work-life concerns, substantially reduced conflict.^{15,16} Supervisor support has been found to be valuable for ATs, especially for those in Division I to meet their professional and personal obligations,^{3,18} and this finding was the impetus for our research study.

Our results confirm existing data, which highlight the need for time away from the workplace^{3,18,26} and a supportive workplace infrastructure.^{3,17,18} Moreover, they demonstrate the importance of the mindset of the administration about modeling and promoting work-life balance personally and among their staffs.

Modeling Work-Life Balance

Head ATs lead by enabling and modeling for their athletic training staffs,²⁷ which explains why this group used and modeled effective work-life balance strategies to help facilitate the same for their staffs. Leaders who lead by enabling provide autonomy in decision making, are supportive of their subordinates, and develop positive working relationships.²⁷ Furthermore, those who lead by modeling set a good example, establish a common vision for the group, and use clear communication regarding expectations.²⁷ Modeling how an individual handles his or her role is considered 1 aspect of mentoring, and a mentor's modeling of work-life balance reduces the family-work conflict of employees.²⁸ Modeling work-life balance and sharing a common work-life balance philosophy have been identified as important in the athletic training profession within the collegiate setting,¹⁸ as well as the more nontraditional employment setting of rehabilitation outreach.⁵ A supervisor who shares the same personal and family philosophy as his or her staff has been discussed as helpful in the pursuit of work-life balance for ATs employed in the rehabilitation setting.⁵

Encouraging Disengagement From the AT Role

Time spent away from the role of AT is helpful in providing rejuvenation, which ultimately facilitates professional and organizational commitment for the individual²⁶ and work-life balance.³ However, the AT working in the Division I clinical setting often has to manage long or unconventional work hours, which can limit the time available for outside interests, personal hobbies, and family obligations and can create the potential for conflict. Prioritizing personal time has been cited consistently in the literature as crucial for ATs to take care of themselves, their families, or both if necessary.^{3,4,17,18} Our participants' comments are comparable with findings in previous research demonstrating how personal time away from the workplace can be achieved by setting boundaries within the

work day for exercise, for social obligations with peers, and for personal errands; integrating personal interests and responsibilities within the workday (ie, lunch time); and taking advantage of downtime during the workday.^{3,17,18} Our results are in concert with the findings of Mazerolle and Goodman¹⁸ and Mazerolle et al³ in highlighting the need for ATs to have nonwork outlets for disengaging from their athletic training roles, which at times are very demanding. As in other empirical studies,^{3,4,18} our participants were cognizant of the need to create time, especially during the workday, to exercise or engage in an activity that allows them to recharge and recommit to their professional roles. Our supervisors, similar to the participants in Mazerolle and Goodman's study,¹⁸ supported their staffs by not only encouraging these outlets but also the autonomy to make their own decisions regarding work-life balance. Professional autonomy can allow ATs to have some sense of control over their work schedules, creating flexibility and the ability to manage their family needs and personal interests.

Cooperation and Community Workplace

A cohesive workplace environment, which is created by colleague support and sharing of responsibilities, has been discussed consistently within the athletic training literature as a way to find work-life balance^{3,18} and, as demonstrated by our results, is valued by head ATs as a way to facilitate balance in a demanding work environment. Our findings also align with those of Mazerolle and Goodman,¹⁸ who demonstrated that cohesive workplaces are established by supportive supervisors who encourage teamwork among their staff members, provide opportunities for job sharing, and offer ways for employees to create more personal time by reducing their professional responsibilities.³ Regardless of the clinical setting, colleague support is beneficial for the AT, but it is particularly beneficial for the AT in the Division I setting because staffing shortages are a major catalyst to conflict for the AT.^{1,12,29} Collaborating with colleagues allows ATs a degree of flexibility within their work schedules, which are otherwise rarely flexible, because they can find the time to fulfill personal and family obligations. Workplace-support networks help ATs find more personal time, which is a necessary factor in establishing work-life balance,^{3,17} and also help renew ATs' sense of commitment and rejuvenation.²⁶

Administrative Support and Understanding

Managerial or supervisor support is an important factor in helping an individual find work-life balance,^{15,30,31} as managers are considered the gatekeepers who enforce the work-life balance policies of organizations. However, more important, as shown by our results and the work of Thomas and Ganster,¹⁶ is the perception of employees that using work-life balance policies is acceptable, which is facilitated directly by the actions and support of their supervisors. By modeling effective work-life balance strategies, such as time management, our head ATs demonstrated to their staffs that taking time for personal and family obligations was appropriate. Our findings corroborate those of Pitney et al,³² who noted that ATs who experienced low levels of role conflict articulated having administrative support. Although our data could not confirm that head ATs were modeling

the behaviors they discussed, Mazerolle and Goodman¹⁸ revealed that members of a sports medicine staff found their head ATs were the epitome of work-life balance, supporting our findings.

Limitations and Future Directions

We believe our results corroborate the existing organizational literature on work-life balance and the literature regarding athletic training employment settings. However, we recognize our study had limitations, which center on the sample size and the employment setting of the head ATs. The thoughts and opinions shared are from a small cohort of individuals serving as head ATs. Although this is common in qualitative literature, it limits the generalizability to all head ATs. Additionally, we included only head ATs employed in the Division I clinical setting; therefore, our results may speak only to the strategies that work within this setting. Staffing patterns and travel responsibilities, which are concerns central to the Division I clinical setting, are catalysts to work-life balance. Conversely, these may not be concerns for head ATs and athletic training staffs at smaller colleges or universities, which can affect the implementation of policies related to work-life balance.

Supervisor support is critical for ATs to find work-life balance; therefore, researchers need to investigate head ATs working in other clinical settings, including traditional and nontraditional settings. The data obtained can help support our findings. In addition, our results are from the perspective of head ATs. Interviewing head ATs and their athletic training staffs to determine whether their experiences and evaluations of work-life balance align would be interesting. The strategies discussed by our group of supervisors reflected more informal workplace strategies than formal policies, such as flexibility in work schedules and child care. Researchers should examine what formal workplace options are available to ATs and if they are helpful for the fulfillment of work-life balance. Finally, supervisor support appeared to be hierarchical because the athletic administration, as evaluated by our participants, encouraged work-life balance strategies. Investigators may examine the viewpoints of athletic administrators on the topic of work-life balance and its importance in athletics and athletic training. Moreover, we did not ascertain whether the head ATs reported directly to athletic directors or medical directors. Reporting lines could play a role in the ability of head ATs to facilitate work-life balance for their staffs due to the support and understanding from their direct supervisors. Investigators need to determine the effect this can have on work-life balance in athletic training.

CONCLUSIONS

Athletic trainers who have supportive supervisors, especially with respect to work-life balance, are more likely to demonstrate strong professional and organizational commitments, higher levels of job satisfaction, and limited concerns related to work-life balance and burnout.^{3,10,12} Head ATs are encouraged to support the personal and professional pursuits and obligations of their employees by being flexible and sensitive to their goals. Specifically, they should promote time away from the role of the AT; encourage outside activities and hobbies; allow for afternoons or days off to rejuvenate; and, when feasible,

afford some flexibility with work scheduling. Communication among staff members is also critical because teamwork is essential to finding work-life balance in the collegiate setting. Using weekly staff meetings as a sounding board for scheduling and practice or treatment coverage can help facilitate more time away from the office without compromising patient care.

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