

Becoming a Personal Trainer

How *you* can turn your
passion for fitness into
a successful career

Overview

Many people just like you are passionate about living healthy, fit lives and inspiring others to do the same. With a current landscape plagued by a growing public health crisis of lifestyle-related diseases, many of which are the direct result of a lack of regular physical activity, there's no better time than now to turn your passion into a profession by taking the next steps on your journey to becoming a personal trainer.

While the profession of personal training continues to grow year after year thanks in large part to increased consumer demand for fitness-related services from various demographics, this field is also thriving due to the diverse and highly rewarding career options available to professionals.

It can be exciting to have the ability to work in a number of settings specializing in different aspects of fitness, but for those new to the field of personal training the plethora of choices can prove overwhelming. Prospective personal trainers must navigate everything from workplace and certification organization options to how to assess income potential and future opportunities in the evolving field.

While there's not a "one-size-fits all" approach when it comes to pursuing a career in health and fitness, this career guide offers a comprehensive view of the profession of personal training, complete with a detailed look at the current and future state of the industry as well as an assortment of popular career track options and the pros and cons associated with each.

In addition to demystifying the process of becoming a personal trainer, this guide features unique insights from currently practicing personal trainers as to how they have integrated their skills and passions into long-lasting careers in this flourishing field, and how you can too.

“Today’s health and fitness consumers need and demand comprehensive programs that are truly individualized based on their physical activity levels, current health status, and unique needs and desires.”



SCOTT GOUDESEUNE

ACE President and CEO
San Diego, CA

8 Reasons why a Personal Trainer career may be right for you

If you've been thinking about becoming a personal trainer, it's time to stop thinking and start doing. Here are eight reasons why you should consider turning your passion for fitness into a career.

- 1 You can make a living by helping others change and improve their health and overall well-being.
- 2 You get to see tangible results of your work when clients reach their health and fitness goals, making it a very rewarding career path.
- 3 You have the opportunity to work with a diverse group of people with a variety of needs.
- 4 You are able to decide which niche you'd like to specialize in, giving you complete control over your career path.
- 5 You develop skills in a profession projected to be one of the fastest growing careers in the next 20 years.
- 6 Once you establish your fitness business, you have flexibility in creating your own work schedule.
- 7 Unlike other industries in the American economy, personal trainers are not at risk of losing their jobs to overseas labor markets.
- 8 You have the opportunity to play a huge role in helping to eradicate the obesity epidemic.

Career Path Options

One of the most exciting aspects of a career as a personal trainer is the wide array of career path options that exist in the industry. The career paths addressed in this section are not an all-inclusive list of opportunities in this progressing field. They are intended, however, to serve as examples of some of the most common career choices personal trainers pursue.

FULL-TIME: DIRECT EMPLOYEE

GYM OR STUDIO TRAINER

With 52% of trainers working for a health club, the direct-employee model, in which the personal trainer is paid a flat rate when working with a client as a full-time employee of the facility, is still one of the most common career options for newly certified and seasoned trainers alike⁴.

“As a trainer employed at a small private studio I am able to gain valuable experience without having to worry about overhead expenses like rent, utilities and marketing costs. It makes me happy to come to work. I think that joy comes across to my clients and helps make me a better trainer overall.”

ROCHELLE DIEM, ACE CERTIFIED PERSONAL TRAINER
AT A STUDIO IN SAN DIEGO, CA

PROS

- + Consistent clientele and compensation
- + Well-established support system and mentoring opportunities with fellow trainers
- + No major business expenses, such as rent or utilities

CONS

- + Pre-determined training session wages, resulting in a reduced hourly rate compared to working independently
- + Potentially less freedom in the development of workouts and programming
- + Space & scheduling limitations, especially in smaller studios

CLINICALLY BASED TRAINER

For individuals intrigued by working more closely with other members of the allied healthcare community while serving clients who need specialized programming due to health considerations, full-time employment within a clinical setting, such as a hospital or outpatient facility, can serve as a truly rewarding experience.

“Working as a personal trainer in cardiac rehab is definitely a rewarding career with so many positive aspects. It’s completely different than creating programs for healthy individuals who can tolerate most exercise regimens, but it’s a great feeling at the end of the day just knowing that you’re truly helping to restore functional capacity and improve quality of life for individuals.”



JILL GOLA

ACE Certified Personal Trainer and exercise physiologist
specializing in cardiac rehabilitation in New Rochelle, NY

PROS

- + Fulfilling career helping people with complex medical issues exercise safely and effectively
- + Ability to work alongside other allied healthcare professionals, such as doctors, nurses, physical therapists and occupational therapists
- + Exposure to a variety of health care issues and professional growth opportunities

CONS

- + Advanced degree (master’s degree or higher) and specialized training typically required
- + Can be emotionally challenging working in a clinical setting with clients who may not fully recover from procedures and chronic diseases
- + Currently, medical organizations cannot bill insurance companies for fitness services, meaning individuals must pay out-of-pocket, which can be limiting

Career Path Options

FULL-TIME: SELF-EMPLOYED

IN HOME TRAINER

With busy schedules and a desire to train in the comfort and convenience of their own homes, many clients seek independent trainers who have dedicated their careers to providing high-quality, one-on-one and small-group training sessions in the clients' residences.

"I have found that clients are more comfortable in the private and familiar settings of their own homes, which allows us to foster a deeper level of rapport. As an in-home trainer, I get to see how they live, how they eat, and also their family culture of health and fitness."



JUSTIN SEEDMAN

ACE Certified Personal Trainer and owner of JustinFit, offering in-home personal training in Broward County, FL

PROS

- + Convenient for both the trainer and the client
- + Offers the ability to establish personal-training session rates, resulting in higher hourly rate
- + Allows for a more flexible work schedule

CONS

- + Upfront and ongoing costs involved with purchasing equipment, commuting between clients, and securing sufficient professional liability insurance
- + Can initially be challenging to develop a consistent client base, especially in a limited geographic region
- + Must have reliable transportation and allot adequate time to travel from client to client

ONLINE TRAINER

As technology has evolved, so too has the field of personal training. With the ability to connect with individuals around the world with just a click of a button, many self-employed personal trainers are expanding their pool of prospective clients by offering an assortment of online training solutions, including but not limited to, pre-designed workout plans, customized fitness programs and virtual training sessions via video-based platforms.

"As an online personal trainer, be prepared to respond to and send emails and to post and reply to social media channels as quickly and effectively as you can. Online clients need to know that you are there for them as often as they need."



FRANKLIN ANTOIAN

ACE Certified Personal Trainer and founder of iBodyFit.com based in Delray Beach, FL

PROS

- + Flexibility to reside anywhere in the world
- + Ability to work with more clients across various geographic locations
- + Minimal overhead costs (no studio rental fees, commission fees, etc.)

PROS

- + Can be difficult to attract new clients given that online personal training is still in its infancy
- + Can be challenging to gain a client's trust without the backing and brand recognition of a major gym or studio
- + Must be proficient with, and up-to-date on, the most current technology in order to enhance your services and maximize your reach

Career Path Options

FACILITY OWNER

For many personal trainers, the vision of being one's own boss ultimately comes to fruition in the form of owning a dedicated space in which to conduct training sessions. From large traditional gyms and health clubs to smaller, private personal-training studios, many self-employed trainers are taking the entrepreneurial leap of owning and operating their own brick and mortar business.

"To get started in the fitness industry you have to have a passion for helping people, and as you take the leap of owning your own facility you then have the ability to set all the rules in terms of what you truly believe is the best way to help your clients be successful. There's also this incredible feeling of accomplishment that comes along with having a vision and seeing it come to life. As a personal trainer and a business owner I never could have grown as much as I have without owning my own business."



MIKE DEIBLER

ACE Certified Personal Trainer and owner of San Diego Premier Training in Carlsbad, CA

PROS

- + Full control over your career, from equipment and training techniques to the hours you work and the clients you train
- + Ability to grow the business however you choose, including hiring the staff and determining the kinds of services offered
- + High income potential and the opportunity to establish a recognized entity in the community where individuals can come together with the common goal of improving health and fitness

CONS

- + Large expense associated with opening a facility
- + Sales and marketing expenses to develop a member base and begin turning a profit
- + Can be stressful making critical business decisions on a daily basis

When determining the career path that is right for you, consider exploring an area of specialization, which can also help to set you apart in a growing industry. Whether you are passionate about designing exercise programs for active aging clients, creating small-group training sessions for youth, or offering additional nutritional insight, identifying a target demographic or area of focus that you are truly passionate about can help position you for longstanding success as a personal trainer. It can also help provide you with clearer direction as to how to continue to further your knowledge and skills in the years to come through ongoing continuing education and professional development.

PART-TIME: SECOND CAREER

PART TIME PERSONAL TRAINER

Since 2010, the average salary for part-time personal trainers has increased by 12%, with individuals earning an average hourly rate of \$264. These passionate professionals are able to enjoy the rewarding aspects of a career in health and fitness while also working in complementary or alternative

"I have always worked as a trainer on a part-time basis in which I train clients before and after work at my full-time job. The one piece of advice I would give someone considering a similar career path would be to make sure you are comfortable managing your time, as you have to consider all aspects of your life and ensure you still make time for friends, family and fun while working your full-time job and living your passion for health and fitness."



CHRIS GAGLIARDI

ACE Certified Personal Trainer in San Diego, CA

PROS

- + Ability to live your passion for health and fitness while simultaneously working in another field
- + Opportunity to supplement your income

CONS

- + Maintaining a work-life balance can be challenging with a secondary career
- + Limited timeframes during which to train if working a full-time job

Industry Landscape

A growing health crisis of obesity and inactivity coupled with a greater global focus on preventive health measures has resulted in a strong demand for personal trainers. As reported by IBISWorld, the personal-training industry has enjoyed steady growth over the past five years, fueled predominantly by rising demand for weight-loss services and greater interest in customized workout programs³.

SNAPSHOT OF THE CURRENT PROFESSION

Despite the recession, the total number of gym memberships in the United States rose from 40.3 million in 2009 to 54.1 million in 2014 as Americans have become increasingly more interested in personal fitness, especially in light of worsening nationwide health trends. This heightened focus on fitness and wellness has enabled the field of personal training to thrive, with an estimated 6.5 million Americans utilizing personal-training services in 2014, up from 4 million in 1999, according to the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA)³.

With increasing consumer demand, the majority of personal trainers are currently employed in health clubs and gyms, as 91% of these facilities are currently offering personal-training services to their members³. Given the evolving nature of the field, however, many personal trainers are self-employed, working out of clients' homes or their own homes, training in studios, working with clients in outdoor settings, or training clients virtually utilizing Web-based technology. Additionally, personal trainers are employed in a wide variety of non-traditional settings, such as hospitals, schools, resorts, wellness and recreation centers, and corporations³.

Given the dynamic nature of the industry, the hourly rate and yearly salary for a personal trainer can vary greatly based on a number of factors, including, but not limited to geographic location, years of professional experience, and type of services offered. A 2013 American Council on Exercise (ACE) survey of more than 3,000 certified fitness professionals nationwide found that full-time personal trainers on average earn \$52,537 annually⁴.

AMERICANS UTILIZING
PERSONAL TRAINING
SERVICES

1999
4 MILLION

2014
6.5 MILLION

\$52,537

FULL-TIME PERSONAL TRAINER
AVERAGE SALARY IN 2013

Future of the Profession

With the continued evolution of the industry and intensified consumer demand for tailored health and fitness solutions, employment of personal trainers is expected to increase by 13% over the 10-year period between 2012 and 2021. The projected growth is attributed to a number of factors, including:

- + Increasing number of baby boomers who want to stay healthy, physically fit and independent
- + Increase in businesses opening on-site fitness facilities and offering incentives for employees to join gyms
- + Growing concern about childhood obesity, driving parents to increasingly invest in individualized exercise programs for their children
- + Increasing health club memberships among young adults concerned about physical fitness
- + An aging population seeking relief from arthritis and other ailments through individualized approaches to exercise

In response to these diverse populations seeking training services, from 2014 to 2019 the number of industry establishments is projected to rise at an annual rate of 2.4%, to an estimated 68,601 facilities throughout the United States³. This will include both large, traditional health clubs and gyms as well as smaller personal-training studios, many of which will be owned and operated by personal trainers.

OPPORTUNITIES IN HEALTHCARE

With decades of research validating the pivotal role that physical activity plays in ensuring optimal health and well-being, there exists a great opportunity for qualified personal trainers to fill a much-needed role in the patient-centered model of care, particularly as it pertains to the prevention and treatment of chronic disease such as diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular disease. With fitness professionals, such as personal trainers, perfectly poised to offer practical, science-based wellness solutions, several leading health and fitness certification organizations are calling for public policies that recognize properly credentialed health and fitness professionals as those who are equipped to deliver programs and interventions for the treatment of lifestyle diseases on the healthcare continuum. This includes, but is not limited to, the establishment of systems and processes by which physicians and other healthcare professionals may refer patients to well-qualified health and fitness professionals for health-related interventions that are both affordable and readily accessible.

13%

EXPECTED PERCENT INCREASE IN THE EMPLOYMENT OF
PERSONAL TRAINERS BETWEEN 2012 AND 2022

Personal Training Defined

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) stated that personal trainers currently serve as the primary profession within the fitness industry¹. The DOL went on to define the role of personal trainers as:

- + Working with a single client or small group
- + Training within a gym or in clients' homes
- + Assessing client levels of physical fitness and helping set and reach fitness goals
- + Demonstrating various exercises and helping clients improve their exercise techniques
- + Maintaining records of clients' exercise sessions to monitor clients' progress toward physical fitness
- + Advising clients on how to modify their lifestyles outside of the gym to improve fitness

Personal training is a service-focused profession centered on educating, motivating and inspiring individuals to live healthier, more active lifestyles.

SCOPE OF PRACTICE

Scope of practice refers to the specific boundaries, based on knowledge and skills, in which a professional can work. The people-oriented profession of personal training is one that serves a diverse client demographic throughout their careers. However, the majority of personal trainers will primarily focus on developing and implementing safe and effective fitness programs for apparently healthy individuals or those who have a physician's release for exercise.

"I became a certified fitness professional and ultimately a fitness educator because I wanted to help elevate the general public's perception of what fitness professionals do and how they can play a pivotal role in promoting good health."



PETE MCCALL

ACE Certified Personal Trainer and fitness industry educator in San Diego, CA

Becoming a Personal Trainer

Increasing access to well-qualified health and fitness professionals—such as personal trainers—will do much to promote safe and effective physical activity and the establishment of lifelong healthy behaviors among people nationwide. To achieve that goal, several leading certification organizations in the United States have created quality certification programs aimed at helping aspiring professionals gain the knowledge and skills they need to begin their careers. There are hundreds of other certification options, however, that are not as comprehensive as the programs offered by some of the industry's veteran organizations.

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF A PERSONAL TRAINER

By definition, certification exams should give an objective evaluation of an individual's ability to safely perform the job in question. A critical component of the certification process for any profession, including personal trainers, is to first conduct a role delineation study in order to identify the primary tasks performed by professionals on a regular basis. The specific tasks and accompanying knowledge and skill-related components are initially established by a role delineation panel of personal training subject matter experts, whose work is then validated by several thousand practicing personal trainers.

The end result is an outline of domains (which represent the major areas of responsibility of the profession), tasks (individual functions for certain aspects of the job), and associated knowledge and skills (necessary to perform the indicated tasks) that serve as the minimum level of proficiency and theoretical knowledge required to practice as a competent and safe personal trainer.

CLIENT INTERVIEWS AND ASSESSMENTS

Create credible and trusting relationships with clients to obtain relevant health and lifestyle information necessary for successful program design and outcomes. This includes, but is not limited to, obtaining health, medical, and exercise history and lifestyle information, and identifying the need for medical clearance and referrals.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Create client programs that focus on healthy lifestyles through the development of individualized physical activity, nutrition and education necessary to improve and maintain health, fitness, weight, body composition and metabolism.

PROGRAM PROGRESSION AND MODIFICATIONS

Monitor, evaluate and modify programs designed to improve health, fitness, weight, body composition and metabolism, and maintain client adherence.

PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT, SAFETY AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Fulfill responsibilities through ongoing education, collaboration and awareness of professional standards and practice necessary to protect clients, stakeholders and the personal trainer. This includes, but is not limited to, knowledge of basic procedures for injury management and emergency response within the scope of practice for a personal trainer, and skills in recognizing common liability exposures for personal trainers.

An expanded version of this framework ultimately serves as the blueprint from which the certification exam to become a certified personal trainer is developed.

Becoming a Personal Trainer

THE IMPORTANCE OF CERTIFICATION

One of the most important decisions you will make as you embark on your career as a personal trainer is which certification to obtain. While there are hundreds of personal trainer certifications available, the reality is they are not all created equal, nor do they all offer the same level of professional credibility and array of diverse career opportunities.

UNDERSTANDING NCCA-ACCREDITED CERTIFICATIONS

Professional certifications should obtain third-party validation from an independent organization that explicitly accredits certification programs. Originally formed as the National Commission for Health Certifying Agencies with initial funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the now National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) has reviewed and accredited certifications for most allied healthcare professions, including credentials for registered dietitians, athletic trainers, nurse practitioners and personal trainers.

Within the fitness industry, IHRSA and the Medical Fitness Association (MFA) both recommend health club owners and medical fitness facilities only hire professionals with NCCA-accredited personal trainer certifications. Based on this long-standing recommendation from two respected organizations within the fitness industry, many employers now view certifications from an NCCA-accredited program as one easy way to identify a qualified job seeker from an unqualified one.

Obtaining an NCCA-accredited certification demonstrates your commitment to excellence and the establishment of a solid professional foundation from which to grow and thrive in the evolving field of health and fitness.

RAISING THE PROFESSIONAL BAR IN THE FITNESS INDUSTRY

In 2014, ACE joined several other leading certification organizations in the fitness industry as a founding member of the Coalition for the Registration of Exercise Professionals (CREP). The collaborative, not-for-profit corporation is committed to advancing the fitness profession and helping industry professionals, such as personal trainers, who have passed a competency-based exam using an exercise certification program that has been accredited by the NCCA earn recognition as a healthcare providers.

CREP advances its mission by maintaining the United States Registry of Exercise Professionals (USREPS), an internationally recognized registry of exercise professionals in the United States who hold NCCA-accredited exercise certifications. The registry not only supports personal trainers and other accredited fitness professionals from a career perspective in terms of advocating on regulatory issues and creating alignment between international exercise professional registries, but it also serves as a resource for the general public by which to identify well-qualified professionals from which to seek training services.

The nation's most
respected thinkers in
health and fitness agree
that NCCA accreditation
is the gold standard.

Becoming a Personal Trainer

PREPARING FOR THE EXAM

With cutting-edge educational materials expertly designed to prepare you for the personal-trainer examination, some certification organizations offer preparatory resources to accommodate different learning styles or preferred study methods.

Most personal-trainer exams are comprised of 150 application-based, multiple-choice questions, which you are allotted three hours to complete. You may choose to complete the exam at a proctored computer-based testing site located in hundreds of cities worldwide, or you may choose to take a paper-and-pencil based exam administered at a limited number of locations. With computer-based testing—the most popular exam format—you are able to enjoy the convenience and flexibility of completing the exam on a day and time that best fits your busy schedule at a location that is most convenient for you. Given the electronic format of the examination, you are also able to receive your results instantly as opposed to the paper-and-pencil format, which takes four to six weeks to receive results.

In order to register for an exam, you must be at least 18 years old with current, government-issued photo I.D. with signature as well as a current cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and automated external defibrillator (AED) certificate from a course that includes a live skills check.

“The best advice I can give someone who is interested in pursuing a career as a personal trainer is to make sure you go into this industry with the right intentions and commit to ongoing education throughout your career, including surrounding yourself with top mentors in the field.”



BETH JORDAN

ACE Certified Personal Trainer and owner of Fullest Living Inc., providing outdoor boot camp classes and in-home personal training in Jacksonville Beach, FL

STAYING AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE FIELD

Because the fields of health and exercise science are constantly evolving as new research emerges, it's imperative to remain on the cutting edge of the industry by continuing to develop and refine your practical skills and expand your theoretical knowledge through ongoing continuing education. As in other progressive industries, such as education and healthcare, in order to keep your personal trainer certification up to date while ensuring your skills stay sharp in the fitness industry, you must complete a minimum of 20 hours every two years, which is the period during which your personal trainer certification is valid.

By completing approved educational opportunities, which can include attending in-person workshops and conferences, reading professional publications and completing webinars and other distance-learning coursework, maintaining a current certificate in CPR and AED and submitting the necessary recertification dues within the two year timeframe, you'll remain in current standing as a certified personal trainer with credible fitness certification organizations. This means that you can continue to offer high-quality personal training related services to the public while reaping the many impressive benefits of being a highly regarded and consistently supported fitness professional.

Let's Get Started

If you're interested in becoming a personal trainer, your next step is to choose a certification. While there are a large number of fitness certification options out there, choosing one doesn't have to be difficult. Only consider organizations that offer programs accredited by a third-party, independent organization like the NCCA. If the process seems too easy, consider that a red flag. For many employers, a certification from an NCCA-accredited program is an easy way to identify a qualified candidate from an unqualified one. If you have a club where you'd like to work, call and ask which certifications it accepts.

By earning an ACE Personal Trainer Certification, you will not only obtain a certification that meets an industry standard, but you will also be part of an organization that advocates on your behalf every day—among policymakers, among partners who share our vision of eliminating the obesity epidemic, and among employers exploring workplace wellness solutions.

MAKE MOVEMENT YOUR MISSION

For more information on how to become an
ACE® Certified Personal Trainer contact us at
888.825.3636 or visit ACEfitness.org

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