

Preparing Personal Trainers for Client Service – Education, Certification and/or Practical Training?

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The fitness industry has been focused on the qualifications of fitness professionals, particularly personal fitness trainers, for many years. The level of concern on the qualifications for such personnel dramatically increased in the late 1990s and into the early 2000s. During that time period and even thereafter, a number of lawsuits dealing with the qualifications – or lack thereof – of fitness professionals were filed and determined. These lawsuits in turn led to industry action to address the perceived issue as to what background, education, certification and/or practical training is necessary for fitness professionals, particularly personal trainers in their delivery of fitness services to clients.

The liability concerns put forth on this issue centered upon allegations that some fitness professionals lacked sufficient training, experience, certification and/or other qualifications and knowledge to properly, reasonably and safely instruct, direct or guide consumers in the conduct of prescribed or supervised fitness activities. Claims put forth against the employers of such fitness professionals included allegations that employers negligently failed to hire qualified fitness personnel or that they failed to adequately train fitness professionals in the provision of appropriate fitness services. Other claims dealing with these issues were also put forth based upon allegations that fitness personnel failed to provide adequate emergency response services when needed to assist clients in distress. Some of the claims in this area also centered upon employers' failures to require sufficient or adequate education, training and/or certification for their fitness professionals, including personal trainers.

In response to all of these concerns, sometime in late 2001, a number of fitness organizations, including ACSM, ACE, AFAA, NSCA and the Cooper Institute were invited by the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association (IHRSA) to provide input to it in an effort designed to improve the training and certification standards for personal trainers. As a result of IHRSA's request and in an effort to put into place the recommendations it developed, IHRSA, through its Board of Directors, adopted a resolution on October 9, 2003 which provided as follows:

Whereas, given the increasing importance personal training plays in health, fitness and sports clubs, IHRSA recommends that, as of December 31, 2004, member clubs hire personal trainers who hold at least one current certification from a certifying organization/agency that has obtained third-party accreditation of its certification procedures and protocols from an independent, experienced, and nationally recognized accrediting body.

Furthermore, given the twenty-six year history of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) in establishing quality standards for certifying agencies, IHRSA has identified

the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), the accreditation body of NOCA, as being an acceptable accrediting organization. Other equivalent accrediting organizations may be recognized as well, as they come to IHRSA's attention.

The resolution was shortly thereafter amended prior to December 31, 2005 which provided as follows:

Whereas, given the increasing importance personal training plays in health, fitness and sports clubs, IHRSA recommends that, as of December 31, 2005, member clubs hire personal trainers who hold at least one current certification from a certifying organization/agency that has obtained third-party accreditation of its certification procedures and protocols from an independent, experienced, and nationally recognized accrediting body.

Furthermore, given the twenty-six year history of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) in establishing quality standards for certifying agencies, IHRSA has identified the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), the accreditation body of NOCA, as being an acceptable accrediting organization. Other equivalent accrediting organizations may be recognized as well, as they come to IHRSA's attention.

This resolution was then later amended prior to January 1, 2006 to provide:

Whereas, given the increasing importance of personal training in health, fitness and sports clubs, IHRSA recommends that, beginning January 1, 2006, member clubs hire personal trainers holding at least one current certification from a certifying organization/agency that has begun third-party accreditation of its certification procedures and protocols from an independent, experienced, and nationally recognized accrediting body.

Furthermore, given the twenty-six year history of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) as an organization dedicated to establishing quality standards for certifying agencies, IHRSA has identified the National Commission for Certifying Agencies, the accreditation body of NOCA, as being an acceptable accrediting organization.

IHRSA will recognize other, equivalent accrediting organizations contingent upon their status as an established accreditation body recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and/or the United States Department of Education for the purposes of providing independent, third-party accreditation.

The amendments to the original 2003 IHRSA resolution were made after considerable industry debate and reflection about the initial IHRSA action. The debate in this regard centered upon IHRSA's recommendation as well as the impact of that recommendation on the marketplace, the rather short time limits for compliance with IHRSA's action and the single accreditation source as listed in the original IHRSA resolution. As to the amendment adding other IHRSA approved

accrediting organizations, USDE and/or CHEA recognized organizations were placed on an equal plane with the NCCA for the purposes of the IHRSA resolution and fitness certifying organizations' compliance therewith.

As indicated in an IHRSA published article, some certifying organizations opted to become certified by NCCA while others opted to be certified by different accrediting bodies recognized, as provided in the final IHRSA resolution, by the USDE and/or CHEA. As a consequence of the foregoing actions, the NCCA, as well as, all other accrediting organizations recognized by the USDE and/or CHEA became IHRSA recognized accreditors of fitness professional certifying organizations. These organization included the NCCA and the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) now known as Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC).

The industry as a whole has extensively debated this issue. As a result, some segments thereof recommend certification only by an accredited certification organization such as NCCA while others strenuously argue for a combination of education, including ongoing educational requirements, certification and practical training for all fitness professionals, particularly personal trainers.

As an effective risk management tool, fitness professionals, particularly personal fitness trainers, should strive to achieve a combination of credentialing – not just for a “paper” qualification but also to establish their practical qualifications to provide fitness services to clients. A combination of education, practical training and testing along with certification can go a long way to demonstrate competence and therefore proper and appropriate service in the delivery of fitness services to clients while also assisting in efforts to avoid claims and suits or at least defend against those lawsuits which are filed.

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Adapted from a Declaration of Principles of the American Bar Association and Committee of Publishers and Associations

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