

# Taking the Leap to Working Full-Time in the Fitness Industry

by Amanda Vogel, MA

What does it take to successfully make the transition from working part-time to full-time in the fitness industry? Is it a passion for helping others? The right credentials? The discipline to plan ahead? All of the above and more, say the fitness professionals, who recently took the leap themselves.

If you're thinking of leaving your non-fitness job to carve out a career as a personal trainer, club manager, group exercise instructor or program coordinator, you must first map out the road ahead. Discover how others did it, and find out how to forge your own path to full-time employment in the fitness industry.

## Deciding to Go Full-Time

Before you quit your regular job, contemplate whether working in the fitness industry full-time is really for you. Carolyn Ryba is the General Manager of Frogs Club One in Encinitas, California. When deciding whether to leave the security of her behind-a-desk job, she reflected on what made her happiest. "I kept asking myself 'What do you really want to do?'" she recalls. "It always came back to the fitness industry—the gym is where I love to be."

A passion for fitness is a must, but you'll need more to survive as a successful full-time fitness professional. If you're interested in personal training, for example, "be honest about whether you can really see yourself working with clients," advises Dina McDermott, MFA, who, after suffering several serious injuries, went from being a professional dancer to owning Athletic Aesthetic Personal Training Systems in Seattle, Washington.

It's one thing to work with a handful of clients on a part-time basis, but are you enough of a people person, and do you have the patience and drive, to train them from morning to night most days of the week? "If you can arrange to tag along with full-time trainers," McDermott suggests, "you'll get a sense of what they do."

The type of clients you hope to train may also have a bearing on your decision to go full time. "Identify your target market," says Rosemary Quinn, the owner of Fitness Works Personal Training in Victoria, British Columbia. Is your potential client base widespread enough to support a full-time job? For instance, if you specialize in working with elite athletes and train out of an all-women's club, you may have trouble keeping busy without expanding your target market.

## Reaping the Rewards

Many full-time fitness professionals are self-employed and consider this to be a major perk. "I set my own policies and schedule and am my own boss," says McDermott. Quinn feels the same, adding that watching your own business flourish is extremely rewarding.



Whether they are entrepreneurs or employees, the fitness professionals interviewed for this article agree that helping people meet their health and fitness goals all day long—not just part-time—is one of the most gratifying aspects of a full-time fitness career.

Boredom is also less likely than it might be at an office job because personal trainers and group exercise instructors often work at various locations instead of staying in one spot. Plus, the fitness industry, unlike many others, holds boundless opportunities. “There are so many avenues you can take, from fitness competitions to presenting to managing to training to teaching,” Ryba says. You might also start on one path and end up happily on another. “I never thought my career in group exercise and personal training would take me to managing a club!” laughs Ryba.

## Facing the Challenges

Like with any career, going full-time in the fitness industry has its trials. You may be a great fitness instructor or sought-after trainer, but if you don’t have marketing, management or administrative experience, you’ll have to learn some or all of these skills if you want to be an entrepreneur, program director or club manager.

When starting as a full-time, self-employed personal trainer, says McDermott, it can also be challenging to recruit and retain new clients. So, if you plan to be a contractor, it pays to garner leads before going full-time.

Even with an ample client base though, you may find money is initially tight. “Income can go up and down weekly, according to clients’ availability.” notes McDermott. “This takes some getting used to, especially if you’re accustomed to a predictable and steady paycheck.”

To help ease money worries, start saving before you leave your 9-to-5 job; establish a solid cancellation policy early on, so you won’t lose money when clients cancel at the last minute and determine other ways to supplement your one-on-one income, such as presenting fitness seminars or group training. Or, if possible, retain some of the steady income you currently have: Ryba put in one day a week at her old office, and for several years, Quinn juggled both personal training and her job as an insurance manager.

If you aspire to make a substantial portion of your earnings from teaching group exercise classes, you’ll face some unique challenges. When Isabelle Guay, a former physical education teacher, made a cross-country move last year, her livelihood came from teaching classes while she looked for full-time work. “I was sore and tired at the end of the day, and when a recurring knee injury started to bother me, I had to turn down offers for more classes—and money,” says Guay, who is now the Group Exercise Coordinator at FitCity for Women in Vancouver, British Columbia.

When you’re teaching a lot, getting the flu can wipe out a week’s worth of earnings, and sustaining an injury could put you out for a lot longer. “It’s tough on the body to teach full-time,” says Guay. “Learn to instruct other formats, like yoga and stretch classes.”



### Staying Certified

How important are credentials to a full-time career? Very. “Get a nationally recognized certification,” recommends Ryba. McDermott agrees, saying, “clients are becoming much more savvy about asking what certifications you have.”

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How important is a fitness-related degree? “It depends on where you want to work and what kind of pay you want, but it does help—absolutely,” says Ryba. “[When hiring staff], one of the things I look at first and foremost is whether someone has a degree,” she adds.

If you don’t have a degree, do you still have a chance at a fitness career? Of course. In addition to credentials, Ryba looks for employees who show a desire to make it in the fitness industry by staying on top of continuing education and gaining hands-on experience with internships.

### Looking Ahead

As more people discover the rewards of a full-time fitness career, now is the time to create a niche for yourself by planning ahead and connecting with other fitness professionals, prospective clients and/or employers. “Get your name out there,” advises Ryba, “so when you go from part-time to full-time, you’ll already have an established rapport with others in the industry.”

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Spinning® Instructor News, March 2004, Volume 8, Issue 2

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