EREPS Member and Employer Surveys, April/May 2021

Summary

The results from the latest EREPS member and employer surveys are indicative of the turmoil Covid-19 has created over the last 18 months. Fitness professionals and clubs have been negatively impacted individually and collectively. However, despite these tough times both groups are planning for the future and the opportunities that this will bring. Of note are a continued emphasis on the importance of fitness professional's communication and customer service skills as well as trends toward a broader focus on whole-person health, working with at specialist/risk groups and online, digital provisions. The information given in these surveys will be invaluable in identifying the training needs of the future. This will further inform EuropeActive's educational standards development work in line with the Standards pillar of the Sectoral Manifesto for EuropeActive' Horizon 2025 [Sectoral Manifesto for EuropeActive's Horizon 2025 | www.europeactive.eu]

Main text

The European register of Exercise Professionals (EREPS) has just completed a new survey of its membership together with a parallel survey of some European fitness employers. The intention of the surveys has been to gain more insight into the impact of Covid-19 on both employees and employers, and to start to track likely future trends in the fitness and physical activity sector as we go through the recovery period.

It is unsurprising, but of course regrettable that Covid-19 has, in the short term, had a negative impact on fitness professionals. The survey showed that 22% of the EREPS members who replied have been made redundant during the pandemic, and 54% are working on reduced hours or income. Many had in fact undergone significant reductions in income with 70% experiencing a 60% reduction or more. Of those still working, 70% were providing some online services to their clients and with 27% providing a high amount of these services. A large percentage(70%) of respondents said that they were confident to work with online tools to provide training options to their clients.

The recognition of the importance of online options now and in the future was further reflected in the fact that, when asked about how they intended to upskill in the next 12-18 months 42% of trainers indicated training in virtual/online options, and with 31% tracking of client health and well-being data through digital devices. Training for specific populations including children, older adults, pre- and post-natal, diabetic, or overweight clients also scored highly with 47% indicating this as an area in which they intended to undertake further training. Exercising in an outdoor environment (44%) and communication/behavioural management skills (30%) also rated highly as areas for further upskilling.

It is concerning that from a personal perspective, 12% of respondents indicated that their current state of personal health and well-being was poor or extremely poor, and 39% indicated that their current activity levels were lower or much lower than their pre-Covid levels. While these figures indicate the negative impact of Covid-19 on many fitness professionals there were other more positive indications. When asked regarding their attitude toward their future in the fitness industry, 70% of respondents were either positive or very optimistic about their future. It is even more pleasing that 93% are likely to remain in the industry post Covid-19.

With regards to the employer survey the clubs 68% of respondents had remained closed, 10% had a mix of closed and some open and only 22% had re-opened at the time of the survey. When asked whether the number of fitness trainers they employ or work with will differ as the industry returns post Covid-19, 59% indicated that this number would decrease. Of these respondents, 22% stated that this would be 60% or lower than their pre-Covid levels.

When presented with a series of options as to how they might adapt their delivery model for fitness services because of the impacts of Covid-19, only 29% of employers indicated that there would be no change in their delivery model. The most prevalent adaptation was to develop opportunities for members to join in fitness sessions in an outdoor environment with 43% identifying this change. This was followed by 40% having more fitness sessions that address the social and mental well-being of clients; 29% more live and on-demand virtual/online training options; 28% more tracking of client health and well-being data through digital devices; and 26% more programmes for specific populations, including children, older adults, pre- and post-natal, diabetic or overweight clients.

In line with previous employer surveys, in rating the skills required of trainers personal/communication and customer service skills rated the most highly with 67% and 64% respectively of respondents rating these as 'essential'. Specific technical skills and the ability to prepare/supervise effective exercise programmes were identified as 'essential' by 41% of respondents, and existing experience only received this rating form 17% or respondents.

72% of employers indicated that they either nearly always, or always had to give additional training to the fitness professionals they recruited. 67% will be providing retraining to their fitness trainers in relation to the impact of Covid-19.

Comment

The results from the EREPS member and employer survey are indicative of the turmoil Covid-19 has created over the last 18 months. Fitness professionals and clubs have been negatively impacted individually and collectively. However, despite these tough times both groups are planning for the future and the opportunities that this will bring. The feedback they have given in these surveys is invaluable in identifying the training needs of the future, and in informing EuropeActive's educational standards development work.

It is undoubtedly true that Covid-19 has accelerated a number of existing trends within the sector. There is a greater recognition that the sector needs to engage more with the allied health professions in providing preventative, activity-based healthy lifestyle solutions. This is reflected in the desire amongst trainers to upskill in working with specialist/clinical populations and clubs' intentions to offer more fitness sessions that address the social and mental well-being of clients. Whether through desire or necessity both fitness professionals and employers are also working hard to offer online, digitalised solutions. Both groups are recognising that the online environment offers new distribution channels and a greater reach, and at a lower cost beyond the confines of brick-and-mortar facilities. We can, therefore, expect to see further exploitation of digital options to create larger, stronger, more engaged, and more diverse client bases.

What should also be acknowledged is that while digital solutions targeted at supporting individuals and groups on their health journey will become more prevalent, the human element will not be lost. Employers still identify personal/communication and customer service skills as the main skill they want from their workforce. Digital options present exciting opportunities but it is precisely what can't be digitised in empathy, trust are the very attributes that are going to become more valuable. Digital options are unlikely to be effective in isolation, but instead demand that integration of human touch points. 'High tech' must be supported by high touch. Trainers and clubs can positively impact the whole-person health of their customer and digital solutions will be a great assist in this. Trainers can better watch, monitor, motivate and empower clients but this must be founded on an ability to build trust through effective and empathetic communication.

All the above will require higher skill levels from across our workforce. The ability to work with specialist populations and digital options and to refine communication skills will necessitate such further training and personal development. Furthermore, our health sector partners will only be open to working with a truly skilled and professionalised workforce. The good news is that trainers remain optimistic about the future and recognise the need for them to upskill. For their part, clubs are actively adapting their delivery models to meet future challenges and opportunities.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, for obvious reasons, both trainers and clubs have been implementing more training options in an outdoor environment through the pandemic. The results of these surveys would indicate that this trend is likely to continue beyond Covid-19 and will require specific training for instructors and an awareness from operators to ensure the safety, attractiveness, and effectiveness of these sessions.