Assessing Strategies to Manage Work and Life Balance of Athletic Trainers Working in the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Setting

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Context: Certified athletic trainers (ATs) working at the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I level experience challenges balancing their professional and personal lives. However, an understanding of the strategies ATs use to promote a balance between their professional and personal lives is lacking.

Objective: To identify the strategies ATs employed in the Division I setting use to establish a balance between their professional and personal lives.

Design: Qualitative investigation using inductive content analysis.

Setting: Athletic trainers employed at Division I schools from 5 National Athletic Trainers' Association districts.

Patients or Other Participants: A total of 28 (15 women, 13 men) ATs aged 35 ± 9 years volunteered for the study.

Data Collection and Analysis: Asynchronous electronic interviews with follow-up phone interviews. Data were analyzed using inductive content analysis. Peer review, member checking, and data-source triangulation were conducted to establish trustworthiness.

Results: Three higher-order themes emerged from the analysis. The initial theme, antecedents of work–family conflict, focused on the demands of the profession, flexibility of work schedules, and staffing patterns as contributing to work–life conflict for this group of ATs. The other 2 emergent higher-order themes, professional factors and personal factors, describe the components of a balanced lifestyle. The second-order theme of constructing the professional factors included both organizational policies and individual strategies, whereas the second-order theme of personal factors was separation of work and life and a supportive personal network.

Conclusions: Long work hours, lack of control over work schedules, and unbalanced athlete-to-AT ratios can facilitate conflicts. However, as demonstrated by our results, several organizational and personal strategies can be helpful in creating a balanced lifestyle.

Key Words: work–family conflict, organizational support, professional satisfaction

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Key Points

- Although professional demands, inflexible work schedules, and inadequate staffing patterns can cause conflicts, work–life balance is achievable for athletic trainers at the Division I level.
- To promote work–life balance, administrators should encourage teamwork, and athletic trainers can set boundaries and priorities.
- A strong support system, both at work and at home, is the critical link that allows athletic trainers to balance their professional and personal lives.

Juggling the demands of a career and a personal life is a challenge confronted by many certified athletic trainers (ATs).[1–3] Recent organizational research suggests that working professionals, regardless of marital status, will experience conflicts between their professional and personal lives,[4,5] which is also true for those ATs working at the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I level.[1,2] Decreased time for family and personal obligations and an inability to create a balance between work and home have been linked to attrition among working professionals in sports.[6–9] Furthermore, the successful fulfillment of work–family balance has been linked to increased levels of job and life satisfaction,[10] as well as reduced turnover for working professionals.[10,11] As a

result, many corporations and organizations are implementing policies such as flexible work schedules, on-site day care, and family leave as ways to help employees find a balance between their work and home lives.[12–15] These strategies are often viewed as organizational support, which may mitigate the occurrence of work–family conflict (WFC) and minimize job and life dissatisfaction.[11,14,16]

Some of those organizational policies, however, may not be transferable to the profession of athletic training, particularly at the Division I level. Previous research within the athletic training profession suggests that WFC occurs because of a variety of organizational factors (eg, work time, inflexible work schedules, work overload)[1,2,17] and affects both married and single ATs. Because WFC

occurs for ATs regardless of marital and family status, the term *work–life conflict* is more descriptive, but the terms are transposable. Such strategies as proper nutrition, time management, exercise, saying no, setting priorities, teamwork, support networks, and establishing sport-coverage policies have been suggested to help ATs meet the challenges of balancing work, family, and personal interests.[18–22] Additionally, the theory of integration,[22] by which an individual prioritizes both work and personal time, has become an increasingly popular technique to promote a balanced lifestyle.[18,22] For example, some major-league baseball teams have opted to provide players with benefits such as on-site child care and family lounges to help players create more time for family and personal obligations.[23,24]

Although recently published literature has provided insights into the causes of WFC and quality-of-life issues,[1–3,17] to our knowledge, no authors have yet investigated strategies or techniques used to promote balance among ATs. Ascertaining how ATs attempt to achieve a balanced life may provide valuable information regarding how to improve the quality of life enjoyed by ATs, which may in turn reduce the occurrence of job burnout, job dissatisfaction, and attrition within the athletic training profession. The purpose of our study, therefore, was 2-fold: (1) to confirm the sources that contribute to WFC and (2) to determine the practices, if any, currently used by ATs to promote a balanced lifestyle.

METHODS

Qualitative methods are often employed by researchers seeking an in-depth understanding of human behavior and perspectives on particular experiences.[25,26] Our goal was to gain insight into strategies used by ATs to achieve a balanced life and the influence that workplace dynamics have on achieving that balance.

Participants

A total of 28 ATs, 15 women and 13 men, participated in the study. At the time of data collection, 19 ATs were employed at the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision level and 9 at the Division I Football Championship level. The ATs had been certified by the Board of Certification for 12 ± 8 years, and their age was 35 ± 9 years. Of the 28 ATs, 7 were head ATs (HATs) and 21 were assistant ATs (AATs). The average work week for the participants was 64 ± 16 hours during the in-season and 45 ± 11 hours during the off-season. Table 1 provides demographic information for the ATs, who represented 16 National Collegiate Athletic Association universities and National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) Districts 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, and 10.

Procedures

The study used online, asynchronous, in-depth interviewing through Husky CT (University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT), a Web-based management system. Online data collection is growing in popularity, particularly in-depth interviewing, as the method circumvents many of the difficulties presented by in-person interviewing, such as time, cost, and access to research participants.[25–32] Follow-up phone interviews were also used to validate findings of

Table 1. Demographic Data

Variable	No. (%)
Men	13 (46.4)
Women	15 (53.6)
National Athletic Trainers' Association District	
I	8 (28.6)
II	6 (21.4)
III	6 (21.4)
IV	6 (21.4)
IX	1 (3.6)
X	1 (3.6)
Head athletic trainer	7 (25)
Women	2 (7.1)
Men	5 (17.9)
Assistant athletic trainer	21 (75)
Women	13 (46.4)
Men	8 (28.6)
Sport coverage	
Football	11 (39.3)
Basketball	8 (28.6)
Track	4 (14.3)
Soccer	3 (10.7)
Other	2 (7.1)
Married	17 (60.7)
Women	9 (32.1)
Men	8 (28.6)
Single	11 (39.3)
Women	6 (21.4)
Men	5 (17.9)
With children	13 (46.4)
Women	5 (17.9)
Men	8 (28.6)
Without children	15 (53.6)

the study and to allow participants to clarify or expand upon their initial thoughts and responses to the questions. After gaining approval from the University's institutional review board, we purposefully selected participants for interviewing.[27,28] At the outset of the study, we identified inclusion criteria for participation (criterion sampling),[29] which included Board of Certification certification, employment within the Division I collegiate setting as a full-time staff member (HAT or AAT), and a minimum of 3 years of full-time experience. Initially, we contacted individuals with whom we were acquainted for study participation (convenience sampling)[26,33] and then asked those participants for access to additional participants (snowball sampling).[17,26,28,33] Recruitment of participants ceased once data saturation occurred and maximum-variation sampling was achieved.[28] Maximum-variation sampling ensured that we involved both sexes, both single and married participants, and those with and without children. We also involved ATs covering different sports and having different levels of responsibility (ie, HATs, AATs). This sampling procedure was chosen instead of a homogeneous sampling to gain a more global perspective of the work and life balance paradigm in collegiate athletics.[25,26,28] All participants were recruited via an e-mail, which included a description of the study, methods, and steps for participation. Consent was conceded by enrollment in the study.

After acknowledging interest in the study and completing the background (13-item) questionnaire to provide basic demographic information (eg, age, marital status, family status, years in the profession, number of hours worked in a week, travel schedule, and current sport assignment or position), each participant was e-mailed a log-in name and password for interview completion. Participants completed a series of 3 questions each week for 4 weeks (12 total questions). When they logged on, they had access to only the set of questions posted for that week, but they had the freedom to respond to the 3 questions at any time during the week; this allowed them to reflect upon the questions before answering. Questions were derived from the previous WFC literature[1–5,7] and were open ended (see Appendix 1 for the interview guide). To decrease the chance of misinterpretation or miscommunication of the material presented in the interview questions, a common concern with online interviewing,[30] we called on a panel of experts (n = 5) to review the interview guide for content and clarity. The panel included 2 athletic training educators, a qualitative researcher with 15 years of experience, and 2 ATs employed at the Division I level. Feedback from the panel was synthesized, and several minor changes were made to the text to increase the clarity of the questions before data collection.

Once data collection was initiated, participants received a weekly e-mail notification. Those who failed to respond to a posting were e-mailed a reminder. The rationale behind this time frame and data-collection method was to provide participants with demanding schedules the time and opportunity to express their opinions.[31] Once the participants completed the online portion, we contacted them by telephone to clarify findings, gain more in-depth information regarding their work environment, and substantiate the initial findings of the online portion of the study. Appendix 2 displays the follow-up interview questions. This step was added to ensure that those participants who were less fluent writers than speakers had the opportunity to accurately articulate their thoughts.[30] All follow-up interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all textual data were placed into a word-processing document for analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using an inductive content analysis[34,35] by one researcher with previous experience in qualitative analysis. The analysis was performed by coding textual data with a conceptual label to capture its meaning. The coded concepts were then organized into lower-order themes (thematization).[28] As data analysis progressed, all themes and data were reevaluated and reorganized as necessary and, consistent with inductive content analysis[35,36] and other studies[37,38] using this method, the lower-order themes were grouped together to derive the higher-order themes. The process continued until 3 levels of themes emerged. Once data analysis was complete, the researcher shared the findings and transcripts with a second researcher who had previous inductive content analysis experience to validate the findings (the study's peer debriefer). The analysis process is consistent with basic, or generic, qualitative research

studies by Wiersma and Sherman[35] and other qualitative researchers.[29,36]

Trustworthiness was established by member checking, peer review, and data triangulation.[26,28,35] After transcription of the follow-up interviews, the researchers shared the transcripts with all the participants as a form of member checking for clarity and accuracy. Additionally, the findings were shared with 5 participants so that we could be certain the emergent categories were viable and credible based on their personal experiences. The 5 participants were randomly selected and all agreed with the study's findings. Interview transcripts, coding sheets, and theme interpretations were shared with the peer debriefer, who had previous qualitative research experience. The peer, an athletic training educator with more than 15 years of research experience and a strong background in qualitative methods, ensured methodologic rigor. Data triangulation was established by interviewing ATs with years of athletic training experience who were employed in various positions (HAT, AAT) and at various levels within Division I (Football Bowl Subdivision level, Football Championship level) and by using both electronic- and telephone-interviewing techniques.

Results

Three higher-order themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) antecedents to work–life conflict (Figure 1), (2) professional factors, and (3) personal factors. The themes of professional and personal factors characterize promotion of a balanced lifestyle. The overall dynamic, as perceived by this sample group of ATs, within Division I athletics regarding effective strategies to balance career and life demands is illustrated in Figure 2. Frequencies and percentages for the themes generated during data analysis are shown in Table 2. Each theme is presented below with supporting quotes. In all instances, pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality.

Antecedents of Work-Life Conflict

The higher-order (third-order) theme, antecedents of work–life conflict, reveals aspects of the Division I athletic training role that lead to perceptions of conflict. The third-order theme was derived from 3 second-order themes: demands of the profession, control and flexibility of work schedules, and staffing patterns. All participants, regardless of age, years of experience, or marital and family status, experienced challenges during their careers regarding WFC, noting that their personal experiences may have differed in description, but their stories were comparable. The aforementioned themes capture their reflections regarding their experiences.

Demands of the Profession. Consistently, the nature of the profession was discussed as the catalyst to conflicts arising between an AT's professional and personal lives. The nature of the profession was summarized as the demands placed upon the AT to accomplish job-related responsibilities. Two major factors were defined by the demands of the profession: (1) hours and travel and (2) coaches' expectations and influence. Laney honestly said, "I think it is hard to focus on personal life when so much of my time is spent with people that I deal with professionally, not socially." Dan recounts similar experiences:
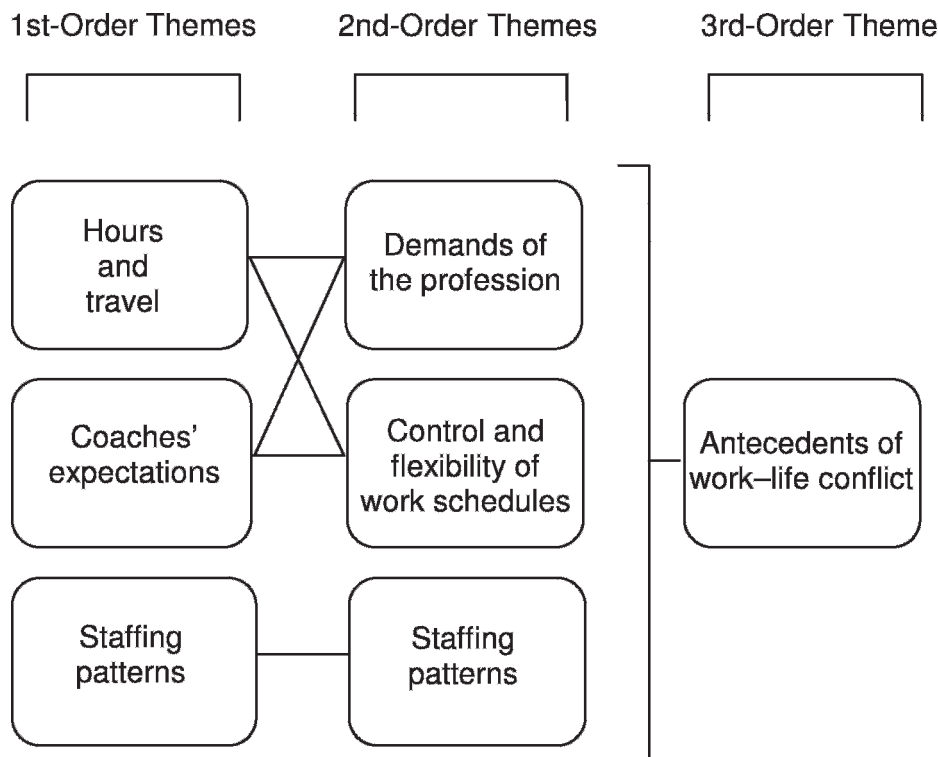
Figure 1. Sources of work–life conflict.

I work so many hours that I don't have time to do the things that I like to do. I don't have the time to see my family and often miss holidays and family events. I would even go long periods of time without seeing friends that I didn't work with.

Brianna discussed how the long work hours affected her ability to connect with others outside the workplace:

I have experienced challenges finding a balance between my personal and professional life. First it is important to realize the time constraints and travel requirements with being a Division I AT. I feel the most difficult thing for me personally to do is meet people outside of work in the area that I live.

Emma reflected on the chaos traveling causes to her work–life balance:

Weekend after weekend of traveling can become very taxing. I never feel that I have any time for myself during the season. It becomes hard to keep up with simple daily things like grocery shopping, laundry, or corresponding with loved ones.

Kara summed it up by asking the question, "How do I have the same energy for my husband I have for my job after a 13-hour day?"

Several ATs mentioned the role of the coaching staff in allowing them to maintain a balanced lifestyle. Ultimately, the coach determines practice and game schedules. Many ATs felt that the coaches' expectations and the last-minute changes made to schedules created (or potentially created) conflicts. Milly, while commenting on what she could change about her current position, said, "I would like to

see more coaches with their athletic trainers work as a team and work with their schedules. The coach needs to understand the sacrifice they're [the ATs] making at times." Scott talked about the evolution of daily practices and the expectations of the coaching staff for the AT to be present. "I know coaches who want coverage no matter the time. I have had coaches want practice at 6 AM and then again at 8 PM and expect medical coverage." Jen discussed the coach's ability to change practice schedules as the most problematic factor:

Ultimately, if I could change something [that would help me manage more effectively], I would like to have more control over what the practice schedule is and not changing a planned practice time [it is the biggest thing that affects your day-to-day activities].

The role of the coach, specifically, including his or her control over practice schedules and expectations of their staff members, was discussed as an impediment to life balancing for ATs. As shown in Figure 1, the coach's expectations and control over work schedules can directly affect an AT's ability to manage professional and personal time.

Control and Flexibility of Work Schedules. Many ATs discussed the lack of control or the inflexibility of work schedules as the source of conflicts in managing their personal responsibilities. Scott stated, "Ultimately, I think if we had a little more control over scheduling instead of always having to be reactive, it would help in the job we do [and minimize the number of conflicts I personally have]." Harrietta discussed the sacrifices she has made personally to meet her job-related responsibilities and the effect of not determining her own schedule: "If coach schedules practice or there is a game—I'm there. I have no control over the
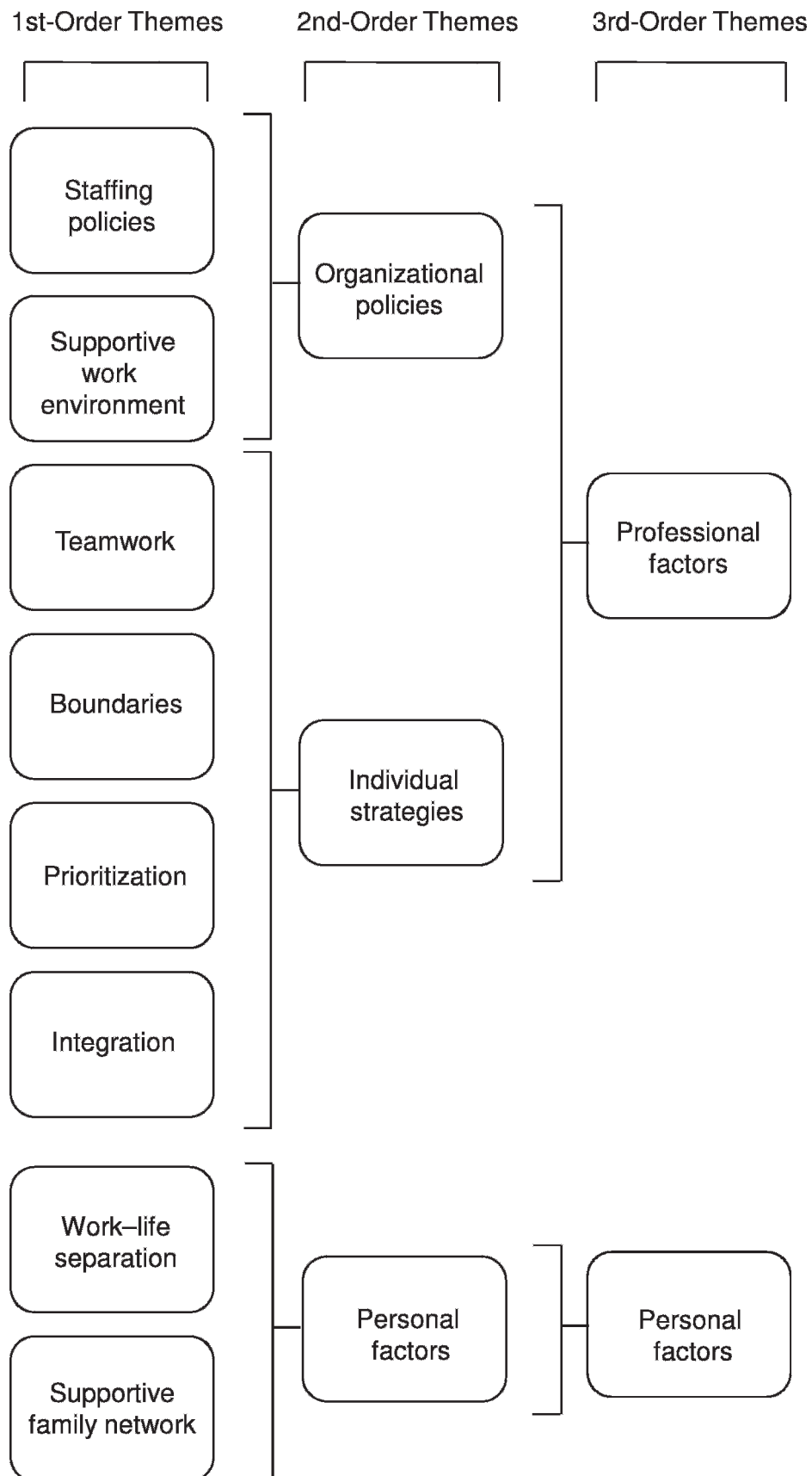
1st-Order Themes   2nd-Order Themes   3rd-Order Themes

Figure 2. Strategies to promote work–life balance in the Division I clinical setting.

Table 2. Frequencies of Responses by Themes for Achieving Balance

Theme	No. (%)[a]
Professional strategies	
Organizational policies	
Staffing patterns	16 (57)
Supportive working environment	18 (64)
Individual policies	
Teamwork	19 (68)
Boundaries	10 (36)
Prioritization	14 (50)
Integration	6 (21)
Personal strategies	
Separation	10 (36)
Supportive family network	25 (89)

[a] The total number of responses for each theme was 28.

basic schedule of my day. I have sacrificed a lot of personal time due to my work schedule.'' Jen acknowledged the last-minute changes in work schedules as challenging in managing her family responsibilities, ''… adjusting schedules at the last minute. With 2 small children in day care, the last-minute change of practice time can cause problems and is most challenging.'' Adam faced similar challenges in spending time with his children because of scheduling changes: ''I try to make an effort to be flexible in my schedule when I can, but this is very difficult when you are on someone else's [coach's] schedule.''

Staffing Patterns. A lack of staffing was also mentioned by many of the ATs as a precipitating factor to work–life conflict. Tammy stated, ''I spent 2 years as an assistant AT … as 1 of 2 full-time ATs in charge of 15 sports. I frequently spent 85–90 hours per week working and traveling.'' As previously mentioned, Ken worried about his own as well as his staff's quality of life resulting from staffing patterns and budget cuts: ''… balancing everyone's schedules to maintain personal/professional balance will be difficult [if we lose staff].''

Thus, a combination of factors, as illustrated in Figure 1, contribute to WFC in the Division I clinical setting. Furthermore, experiences of WFC due to the aforementioned factors affect ATs regardless of their age and marital or family status.

Professional Factors

The higher-order theme of professional factors is characterized as those strategies that can be applied to the workplace by either the organization or individuals. The professional-factors theme was derived from 2 second-order themes: (1) organizational policies and (2) individual strategies. Supportive working environment and staffing patterns were first-order themes, which typified the organizational-policies category. The second-order theme of individual strategies was derived from several first-order themes: (1) boundaries, (2) prioritization, (3) integration, and (4) teamwork.

Organizational Policies. Organizational policies reflect those tactics implemented by coworkers within the workplace to address work–life balance. Many such policies were a direct result of the employees themselves developing a workplace philosophy or belief, rather than the administration originating them. Participants spoke about the importance of a supportive working environment as key to successfully managing their personal and professional roles. Specifically, they commented on the need for teamwork among coworkers. This emergent theme, as indicated in Figure 1, plays a role in both the organizational theme and the individual policies discussed later in this section. Sharing and encouraging a teamwork attitude can help ATs achieve a balanced lifestyle. Many ATs bluntly stated that the key to their ability to find a balance was related to the teamwork atmosphere fostered by them, their coworkers, and the administration.

Kara stated: ''I am trying to create more balance by splitting coverage with the other football AT on staff [new position this year]. I am hoping that with 2 of us to cover the team, now things will be better.'' Sue offered,

> My coworkers are very helpful in trying to maintain a life balance. We try to help each other when we can by covering a part of practice so you can go home early, or traveling with a team so you can attend a family event.

Amy offered this advice for ATs in regard to attaining a balance:

> Surround yourself with coworkers with the same values [family oriented and team oriented]. [As a staff member] Always be willing to assist a coworker and go above and beyond, and the help will be there when you need it as well.

Jen described why, as a mother of 2 young children, she was able to maintain a balance and her sanity as a Division I AT:

> My coworkers are willing to help me out. This is why our system and staff here [at my institution] works. Our supervisors made a very strong effort to create an environment where we could feel comfortable stepping in for each other and helping out as needed. We created an environment where it is okay to have another AT once in awhile to help out.

Another working parent, Mary, discussed the role her administration and fellow colleagues played in her ability to manage a newborn with medical concerns while still meeting her professional responsibilities: ''I was able to balance this unique challenge because my administration and sports medicine colleagues supported me.'' A supportive philosophy was instrumental in creating balance for Division I ATs. A supportive work environment is necessary on many levels (eg, administration, staff), and many of the ATs discussed the need for all members of the staff to share the same vision. As Joe put it, ''my coworkers encourage personal time. We commonly offer to help cover games, etc. Our staff is close and understands the importance of life balance.'' Luke warned, ''having coworkers who don't share your vision [for life balancing] can be time consuming and hinder the vision for the program.''

Almost as important as having coworkers who support personal time is having an administration that shares the same philosophy. Gary, a HAT, discussed his beliefs:

I have worked hard to establish an atmosphere that allows and encourages us to work together and to cover for each other when possible. I never want my staff to feel like they cannot do something because they don't have coverage or help.

Another HAT, Scott, described his goal of establishing a working model that encouraged and allowed his staff more of a balance: "I think we're getting closer to it here [a balance]. It's been one of the goals [we've/I've had]." Milly vocalized the importance of administrative support for successful life balancing:

It starts with our boss. He certainly and definitively understands the need for space in our personal life and tried to accommodate our needs. He encourages us to take time off from work as needed for personal reasons and does not give us a hard time about it. He understands if we have desires to visit family or have doctor's appointments.

One caveat that did arise regarding a supportive, cohesive work environment fostered by both coworkers and administrators (HATs, athletic directors) was not taking advantage of those accommodations or of the flexible time made possible by coworkers. Amy summed it by stating, "I don't take advantage and use family as an excuse." Mike reiterated, "my coworkers have always let me have the option of going home and taking care of my personal obligations, but I also do not take advantage of this opportunity."

The number of staff members was another critical component to meeting personal obligations and finding a balance; that is, the sports medicine staff must be large enough to support a teamwork working environment. Jackson discussed the philosophy of his staff by saying, "we do a tremendous job (5 full-time and 5 GAs [graduate assistants]) of supporting each other when personal issues arise." Denise stated, "The administration has supported our department [mission for more personal time] with hiring of additional personnel." Another reflected on a previous position in which a lack of staff contributed to an imbalance within her life. Tammy said, "my biggest challenge before [at my former school] was an imbalance with staff-to-patient ratios. At my current institution, we have a rather large staff. One of the greatest benefits of our large staff is that people are willing to assist if someone requires help." Jake honestly felt that the foundation for a balanced lifestyle at the Division I level was linked to staffing: "providing enough support staff [to adequately cover and handle responsibilities]." Sue concurred, stating "I think more staff [would increase personal time]. Oftentimes you do not have one sport assignment, you get multiple ones. That is what makes the hours so long." One HAT felt he was able to help his staff the most in the last year because he had enough staff to adequately cover all practices and lifting sessions. Scott acknowledged, "that [allowing staff to have the time off] only comes when you have the amount of people you need. We have gotten very, very close to that here." Ken, another HAT, contemplated the negative effect the loss of staff members could have on work–life balance, "Should we lose position(s), balancing everyone's schedules to maintain personal/professional

balance will be difficult while maintaining the same level of care."

Individual Policies. Individual policies were specific strategies addressed by many of the ATs regarding their attempts to establish a balanced lifestyle. Many of the discussions focused on the service-oriented nature of the profession as a precipitating factor for conflicts. To avoid conflicts and allow for more personal time, many ATs discussed setting boundaries. Bruce declared, "set boundaries and stick to them [this will help to achieve] that balance that we all strive to get." Kara, while articulating advice to new ATs, said, "set your boundaries early. Let your student-athletes and coaches know what are acceptable things to call you about during evenings and weekends [and what are not]." Kim talked about using work schedules as a way to establish boundaries and a routine, which in turn helped her create a balance. "Establishing rules and daily rehab/treatment time frames for athletes and coaches to follow has been an effective way for me to have a schedule where I know when I can expect down time." Others discussed using the word *no* as a method to establishing boundaries and a way to enjoy a more balanced lifestyle. Amy stated, "learn how to say *no*, but don't overuse the word. Only say *no* when your work–life balance, relationship, or family will be affected." Milly agreed:

… concerning schedules and learning to value my time, I have learned to say *no* to things. If athletes need to be evaluated, I used [to] drop everything the minute they called. Now, I will have them wait for me.

Adam said, "don't be afraid to say *NO*." By establishing boundaries, such as setting treatment hours, saying *no*, or having specific call times, an AT can effectively do the job while still having a personal life.

Another common tactic used by the ATs was prioritization, or setting daily priorities. More often, it involved setting aside time for themselves during the day to accomplish personal tasks or obligations. Randy discussed using his lunch break as a way to fit in a workout: "… for myself, I exercise. I try to do it every weekday at lunch. This gives me time to rest and recover." Brianna echoed the value of using exercise as a stress-reduction and recovery technique: "Probably the most important thing I do [to maintain a balanced lifestyle] is I work out every day. It is the one thing I can do every day that is completely and utterly for me and no one else." Mike stressed making time for yourself, regardless of the activity, "… make sure to designate some time for yourself. Do something that you find as an outlet, and get away from work." Concurring with many of the ATs, Sue summarized finding a balance through prioritization: "I try to maintain a balance by prioritizing. I find that being able to put the things that are important to you first helps it from keeping you from getting absorbed by another aspect." Others mentioned the reality of not prioritizing the time for themselves because of work-related obligations. Kara frankly stated, "if there is a conflict, then the personal side [my time] is what gets thrown out the window."

The concept of integration was discussed only by those ATs with families and was seen as an effective tool to creating a balanced lifestyle and increasing family contact

time. Scott said, "I try to include my daughters in as many work-related things as possible." Amy described the family-friendly environment at her institution: "There are kids all over our department, at intermittent times. No one takes advantage of it, everyone gets their jobs done, and everyone is exposed to less stress because they have the alternative to have their child with them at work if need be." Rachel attributed her ability to manage her children's schedules with her work schedules to integration:

> When my children were younger, I would bring them to work with me on Sundays. We only had a few hours of treatments at that time [and it was a way to spend time with them and meet my work obligations].

Personal Factors

Personal factors were operationalized as strategies or circumstances used by the AT outside of the workplace. This higher-order theme consisted of 2 lower-order themes: (1) supportive family network and (2) work–life separation. Frequently, the ATs discussed and stressed the importance of their personal social networks, which included non-AT friends, spouses, peers, and family members (eg, parents, siblings, husband, children). Jackson stated, "My wife understands what I do and knows how my schedule (or lack of a consistent one) varies. The short version is my family accepts what I do for my career." Jen echoed this sentiment: "I am fortunate to have a very understanding husband." Harrietta acknowledged the encouragement she received from her family, which allowed her to manage her responsibilities more effectively:

> My family helps me maintain my life balance. They understand the importance of my job and the amount of time that… job takes. All in all, my family never makes me feel guilty about my life balance (or lack of balance).

Kara talked about her family's understanding with regard to scheduling of events and family gatherings:

> My family has learned to schedule around the football season, since I don't get a day off from August to December. This helps with the work–life balance so that I don't miss as many family gatherings.

A balanced lifestyle was very important to all participants, and many were able to achieve that balance more effectively through the support of their social networks.

Another frequent comment made by the ATs addressed separating their professional and personal lives. Jake bluntly stated, "Leave work at work." Taber's comments were consistent with this recommendation. He noted that the most important element in finding a balance was to "leave all of the issues and problems from work at work." Milly reflected upon her struggles with finding a balance and openly confessed not wanting her work to consume her. She found balance by

> not bringing work home [with me]. At the end of the day, if there is an individual injured, an exercise I need to make, or an evaluation I need to do better, I wait until the next day, when I am at work to do these things.

Making a clear distinction between work and personal life can help some ATs reduce the stress and challenges associated with this balance.

DISCUSSION

The impetus for this study came from data transcription and analysis from a previous study examining WFC among Division I ATs.[1,7] The purpose of that study was to determine whether WFC was occurring within the profession of athletic training and what effect it had upon such constructs as job and life satisfaction, job burnout, and job retention.[1,7] Through the data-collection process, specifically through the one-on-one interviews, it became clear that many of the participants were experiencing a certain level of WFC. Several commented on methods to combat the conflicts they were experiencing because of the demands of their positions. Many encouraged future researchers to examine the practices being used to promote a family-friendly work environment within athletic training. Also highlighting this need for further investigation has been the increase in articles within the athletic training literature. Since 2005, *Athletic Therapy Today* has published 4 separate articles[2,18–20] and devoted an entire section to elements related to work and family balance and quality of life for ATs.[19–21] Several of the articles focused on suggested practices to help promote a balanced lifestyle for an AT and, although many of the recommendations are practical, they may not completely depict the situation (eg, clinical settings). Currently, a majority of the research examining successful policies focused primarily on the traditional employment sector, with little attention to nontraditional employment settings in which the work day is not 9 AM to 5 PM.

Beyond the suggestions of study participants to conduct this line of research, the need for investigation surrounding organizational policies and personal strategies for the promotion of work and family life balance lies in its documented consequences. In separate meta-analyses, Kossek and Ozeki[16] and Allen et al[38] found that in addition to life and job dissatisfaction, employees experiencing WFC were also experiencing job burnout, thoughts of leaving their positions or careers entirely, and a host of other non–work-related variables such as depression and marital dissatisfaction. Although neither study included ATs, the occurrence of WFC has been documented in the profession,[1–3,7] and its negative effect was much stronger for ATs than for other working professionals[7]; therefore, investigating strategies and policies to help promote a balanced life is crucial.

Sources of WFC

We identified several antecedents of WFC, including demands of the profession, control and flexibility of work, and staffing patterns. These findings corroborate those of previous researchers[1,2] who characterized organizational factors such as work hours, travel, and work schedules as major catalysts to WFC that are reported to have a negative influence on quality of life in this population.[17]

Although WFC has been proposed to arise because of myriad factors,[13] for ATs in this study, the catalysts were

grounded in the organizational structure of the workplace. This is not surprising, because athletic training is often characterized as a "time-intensive occupation,"[40,41] a description linked to higher reported levels of WFC.[1,7,42–44] Long work hours and travel are not unique to the athletic training profession; however, the lack of control over work schedules, coaches' demands and expectations, and inadequate staffing patterns are distinctive to the profession. Lack of control over work schedules and inadequate staffing patterns have been associated with WFC within the Division I clinical settings in the past.[1,2] These particular issues have not been associated with WFC in other professions, perhaps because of popular strategies such as flexible work schedules, flex time, and job sharing[5,12,14,45,46]; when these strategies are used appropriately, scheduling and staffing concerns no longer contribute to WFC.

Another factor that directly influenced control over work schedules was the role of the coaching staff. Understandably, last-minute changes regarding work schedules can affect an individual's ability to manage his or her personal life, and an AT is no exception. Again, organizational culture and work scheduling has been heavily associated with WFC,[12,13] and those employees who have control, or the perception of control, over their work schedules report less WFC than those who do not.[15]

Balancing Work and Family: Professional Strategies

For participants in this study, 2 distinct avenues were available for achieving balance: organizational policies and individual workplace strategies. Many of the anecdotal suggestions within the athletic training literature were comparable with our findings.[18–20] On an individual level within the workplace, the need to establish boundaries with coaches and athletes was necessary for many of the ATs to maintain work–life balance. The reality is an AT employed at the interscholastic level will never enjoy a typical workday schedule; however, once the workday is complete, the focus should be on personal interests or domestic care obligations and not additional work responsibilities, which can often wait until the next day. Many strategies to establish boundaries in the workplace exist, but as documented in the aforementioned results and in editorials by Scriber and Alderman[19] and Mensch and Wham,[20] the use of the word *no* is a highly effective method. Being a team player, which is another key to successful fulfillment of work–life balance, does not always mean that an AT has to say *yes* to every additional responsibility or last-minute schedule change. Joe Robinson, a life-balancing expert, encourages the use of the word *no* to establish work and life boundaries and guarantees its success.[47]

Almost as important as establishing workplace boundaries is setting priorities. Setting priorities, defined by this group of ATs as setting aside time during the day for non–work-related activities such as exercising, going to lunch with a friend, or doing laundry, have been recommended by several experts in life balancing[47,48] and addressed by several keynote speakers at the NATA Annual Meeting and Clinical Symposia.[48,49] Instituting priorities can empower individuals, providing them with more control over their personal and professional responsibilities and schedules. Such control is key to fulfillment of work–life

balance,[15] which is associated with a more productive, committed worker, reduced attrition in the workplace, and bolstered teamwork among staff members.[10,45]

Teamwork was especially important for this group of ATs in sustaining a balanced life. Regardless of marital or family status, ATs were able to have a sense of balance because of the teamwork culture. On many occasions, ATs were able to attend a child's recital, personal doctor's appointment, or wedding because a fellow AT was able to cover. A strong support system that includes coworkers has been mentioned previously as necessary to promoting life balance in athletic training, particularly for female ATs.[22] Furthermore, HATs and administrators should encourage teamwork among staff members because it provides a sense of organizational support, a critical link to improving work and life balance.[11,16,42,45]

The theory of integration, which has been suggested as a tactic promoting work–family balance,[18,50] was also reported by several of the married ATs as an effective way to address last-minute changes or child-care emergencies and even as a way to increase the amount of time spent with family. When appropriate, the ability to include family in the workplace environment can ease the stresses related to WFC. Integration may also be of value for other ATs, regardless of their marital or family status. As with prioritizing personal time regardless of the time of day, using integration to offset lulls or changes in schedules can help an AT achieve a balance. For example, an AT may choose to go for a run, do laundry, or have lunch with a friend during "working" hours when he or she does not have taping duties to complete, rehabilitation programs to oversee, or practice to cover. Although at work, the AT is choosing to use this period of time for personal activities and, as noted earlier, setting priorities can help an individual to find a sense of balance. A direct correlation existed between an increase in "me" time and achievement of balance.[19] Similarly, in a recent study[44] of professional role commitment, ATs identified time for rejuvenation as a critical aspect of maintaining their commitment over an extended period of time. A period of rejuvenation not only was time away from the day-to-day role of the AT but also provided time to address personal needs.

Personal Strategies

Finding a balance between their personal and professional lives is unquestionably essential for the ATs in this study, and the basis for achievement is a personal support network (Table 2). Relying on family, friends, and coworkers has been cited as a key component in fulfilling work and life balance.[22,50] Similarly, in an editorial addressing the personal and professional satisfaction of ATs, family support was highlighted as instrumental in attaining a balanced lifestyle.[21] On an individual basis, support was defined in a variety of ways, but it was typically described as the understanding and flexibility of friends and family regarding the nature of the AT's professional demands and responsibilities. Many of the statements made by the participants in this study echoed those of Kaiser,[21] who emphasized the need for time away from the workplace and the need for ATs to surround themselves with those who can empathize with the unique job responsibilities of an AT. Our findings relate to previous

research[44] in ATs that underscored the role of networks to obtain social support and succeed in one's work role.

We are not suggesting that an AT's spouse's career is less important than the AT's career, but it seemed necessary for many of the married ATs to have a spouse with a more flexible work schedule to accommodate the working demands of the AT. Future researchers may investigate the influence of a spouse's career on work–life balance as well as the overall life satisfaction of the AT. Just as a supportive organizational culture affords an employee the ability to attend to family and personal responsibilities, a supportive family network allows the AT to adapt and handle the long work hours and lack of control over work schedules. As scholars continue to investigate effective policies for fulfillment of work–life balance, the influence of supportive family networks outside the workplace should also be studied because of the current paucity of literature on the topic.

The theory of separation, although becoming less popular in the literature,[50] appears to provide ATs with an effective strategy in reducing the influence of work on their personal lives. At the core, the theory of separation views work and life as distinct, independent spheres between which individuals attempt to create a distinct division.[50] Separation, an unfavorable term for many work–life scholars,[43,48,50] suggests that work is not part of life; however, for this group of working professionals, it appeared to provide the necessary relief from the pressures and stresses placed upon them in the workplace. Furthermore, the mindset of separation may allow ATs to increase both career and personal-life satisfaction by not allowing them to negatively influence one another. Several of the ATs attributed their sense of balance to time spent with family or on leisure activities and focusing all their energy while at home with their families, rather than on work issues or responsibilities, a strategy also discussed by Kaiser.[21] The theory of separation for this group of ATs may be defined more loosely: that working individuals should concentrate their energies on a specific aspect of their lives (eg, working or spending time with family) instead of trying to multitask or allowing responsibilities to spill over from one realm into the other. Furthermore, the emphasis should be on the quality of work or task completion, rather than on the time spent performing the specific activity. Ultimately, a balanced lifestyle is in the eye of the beholder (balance is defined differently by each person), and the hope is that once a balance is achieved, contentment or personal satisfaction follows.

Limitations

The strategies and policies resulting from this study may not be transferable to all clinical settings because they come from a small (although random) sample. Additionally, the suggestions and thoughts of the participants in this current study may not reflect those of all ATs practicing clinically, but these personal experiences form a foundation for understanding successful practices used to reduce the occurrence of WFC and to achieve work–life balance. This was an exploratory study used to investigate a more global picture within the Division I setting; therefore, future inquiries should be more focused on specific samples (with respect to sex or marital status, for example) within this setting.

Implications

Intuitively, every working professional at some juncture in his or her life struggles with finding a balance, but given the unique job responsibilities of an AT, the struggles are likely to be exacerbated or prolonged. Fortunately, this group of ATs demonstrated that with hard work, communication, and support, attaining a balance is possible within the Division I clinical settings. Although WFC is prevalent in athletic training, as evident by our reported results and previous AT literature,[1–3,17] and will continue to occur, several organizational policies and personal strategies can be implemented to help reduce conflicts that may arise. When integrated, the strategies can help the AT to achieve a balance between professional and personal lives. We encourage ATs to strongly consider the strategies presented in this manuscript and recommend selecting life-balancing techniques that meet the individual AT's professional and personal goals and needs. Furthermore, the results generated can assist the AT individually, the sports medicine department collectively, and the NATA globally. At any stage of their careers, ATs can learn to set boundaries and understand at times it is acceptable to "just say no," especially if their personal satisfaction or family time may be affected. Also, ATs should remember to take time for themselves by being involved with outside interests; doing so will help to promote a sense of balance and encourage a more positive outlook on life. Teamwork among coworkers should be supported at all levels, including by the individual, HATs, and administrators. This strategy by far, along with having a strong support network, was most important in giving ATs the ability to manage their career demands and personal responsibilities. Athletic administrators and HATs should also explore possibilities to allow ATs to have more control over their schedules. Flexible working schedules and control over one's work schedule are effective strategies to help employees meet their responsibilities both at work and at home.[4,5] Flexible work schedules in the athletic training environment may be more structured (eg, choosing a particular time of day to accomplish tasks, rather than working from home) than in other working environments but can still allow the AT to accomplish nonwork tasks on certain days.

In its strategic plan,[51] the NATA indicated the need for an increase in members' personal and professional satisfaction. To move one step closer, the NATA needs to investigate ways to enforce the recommendations of the Task Force to Establish Appropriate Medical Coverage for Intercollegiate Athletics[52] regarding appropriate medical coverage for intercollegiate athletics. Falling short of the recommendations, as many departments do, is often the impetus for WFC within this population. Moreover, the NATA should encourage and support teamwork and job sharing (interchangeability of staffing) within sports medicine departments. Inevitably, these accommodations will be the most important elements in helping ATs to achieve a balanced lifestyle, particular in the current economic climate. Job sharing or interchangeability of staff members simply means that each member of the sports medicine staff is qualified to provide medical care for an athlete, regardless of his or her specific sport assignment, and can do so when necessary. Future research, particularly focusing on the influence of staffing

shortages, family-friendly working environments, and organizational support on WFC within athletic training, is necessary. Furthermore, although we studied a stratified sample of participants, future authors should study a more homogeneous sample to characterize demographic categories such as single ATs, women versus men ATs, married ATs, and married ATs with children.

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Appendix 1. Semistructured Interview Guide

1. Could you give me a little bit of background about your professional career and what made you pursue a position in the collegiate setting?
2. Describe an ideal working environment in athletic training? Is it obtainable in your current work environment or another work setting?
3. What do you feel is, or has been, your greatest challenge as an athletic trainer?
4. Reflect on the challenges that you have faced and describe what you have done to effectively deal with those challenges.
5. How important is a balanced lifestyle to you? Please describe to me, if it is, how you are able to maintain a balance between your professional and personal life?
6. Have you experienced challenges finding a balance between your personal and professional life? If so, share an instance when you have faced this challenge.
7. What factors have contributed to the challenge? If not, why haven't you had challenges?
8. In what way have coworkers helped or hindered your ability to maintain life balance?
9. In what way has your administration helped or hindered these challenges?
10. How does your family (support system) help or hinder in these challenges?
11. Discuss if working in the athletic training profession provides a suitable working environment to achieve a balance.
12. If a new athletic trainer was just about to enter this work setting, what advice would you give him/her to help them maintain a balanced life?

Appendix 2. Follow-Up Interview Questions

1. If you could change anything about the intercollegiate setting that you work in, what would it be? Why?
2. Have your expectations/understanding of the job changed since your early years in the profession?
3. Reflect upon your thoughts of maintaining a balance when you first entered the profession. How does it compare to now? Has it changed? If so, how?
4. If you are having a hard time finding a balance in your life, why do you continue to work in that setting?

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