



Career Advancement Committee

Pathways for Career Advancement in Athletic Training

White Paper

Thank you to the members of the NATA Career Advancement Committee for their service to this project and the members we serve.

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Introduction

According to iHire's 2023 Talent Retention Report, one in five employees who left a job in the past year cited "a lack of growth and advancement" as a contributing factor¹. In athletic training, the absence of clearly defined career pathways has led to ambiguity in professional growth opportunities, potentially affecting athletic trainers' (ATs) job and career satisfaction as well as their retention within the profession. Unlike other health care professions that offer more structured advancement options, athletic training often lacks standardized pathways for progression beyond entry-level roles. This lack of clarity may contribute to feelings of stagnation and subsequent job or career dissatisfaction.

The purpose of this white paper is to describe how ATs can intentionally shape their career paths by identifying opportunities for advancement both within and beyond traditional athletic training workplace settings. This includes preparing for roles in leadership, education, research, administration and emerging health care sectors where the skills of ATs are highly valuable. By defining career advancement and outlining available pathways for career growth across a variety of practice workplace settings, this document aims to provide ATs with practical guidance to support ongoing development and long-term professional success.

Chapter 1: What is Career Advancement and Why is it Important?

Indeed.com defines career advancement as the process by which professionals use their skill set to achieve new career goals and job opportunities.² In athletic training, this process often involves the intentional pursuit of advanced knowledge, experience, certifications or formal degrees that expand one's expertise in a specialized area of clinical practice, administration, research or education. While not all ATs may seek formal promotion or advancement, those who do must often go beyond meeting minimum professional standards. Demonstrating added value whether through leadership, innovation or specialized competency is typically necessary to stand out in competitive environments and to be considered for higher-level roles.

Career advancement may also include expanding an AT's roles and responsibilities in a way that creates opportunities to demonstrate their impact, skills and value within their organization and the profession. For those interested in growth, these opportunities can serve as pathways toward promotion or the attainment of leadership positions. Leadership roles allow ATs to influence decisions, drive change and contribute at a broader level. This chapter explores the importance of purposeful knowledge and skill development, the strategic expansion of roles and responsibilities and the significance of organizational and professional leadership to career advancement in athletic training.

Types of Career Advancement

Knowledge and Skill Development

The foundation of career advancement lies in knowledge and skill development. As a minimum standard of practice, the [Board of Certification's \(BOC\) Practice Analysis](#) outlines that ATs must demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of human anatomy, exercise physiology and biomechanics, coupled with the ability to apply skills in injury prevention, evaluation, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation. However, ATs can advance their careers by acquiring advanced knowledge and skills that align with the evolving demands of athletic training and health care.

Continuing education (CE) is a form of professional development envisioned to advance ATs' knowledge and skill beyond entry-level practice.⁴ This education is necessary to maintain competency, fill gaps in current practice and remain current with best practices in athletic training.⁵ CE is not only beneficial to ensuring continued competence of existing knowledge but also for assisting ATs with developing or advancing their clinical expertise.⁵ While required by regulatory agencies as a method of protecting the public and ensuring the provision of quality health care, obligation does not appear to be a motivating factor in the selection of CE opportunities. Instead, ATs often assume a clinician-centered approach to their selection of CE opportunities, choosing sessions based on their own perceived weaknesses, perceptions of patient needs or routine issues encountered in their daily practice.^{5 6} Thus, relevance to clinical practice ultimately has the biggest influence on an AT's decision to act on a CE

opportunity.⁵

CE through workshops, conferences and advanced degrees is crucial for staying current with the latest research and techniques.⁷ Using CE opportunities to build expertise in specialized areas (e.g. manual therapy, diagnostic imaging, therapeutic interventions, surgical techniques and rehabilitation protocols) can contribute to enhanced patient care by improving patient outcomes and satisfaction. Furthermore, staying current with advancements in evidence-based practice through continuing education courses, workshops, certifications and formal degree programs not only deepens clinical competence but also signals a commitment to professional growth. Acquiring specialized knowledge and skills differentiates professionals and positions them as experts in their field; thus, differentiating them in an increasingly competitive job market.

Roles and Responsibilities

As ATs gain experience and further their education, their roles and responsibilities often expand. Early professionals are often focused chiefly on clinical practice and patient care. However, as ATs gain advanced knowledge, skills and experience, they are often presented with opportunities to expand their responsibilities and their roles. Expanded responsibilities can provide ATs with opportunities to broaden their scope of practice, whether through specialized roles such as caring for premier sports, managing complex cases, leading specialty clinics or increased autonomy in positions that require practice that is more independent or advanced clinical decision-making.

Diversifying an AT's responsibilities can significantly enhance their organizational and leadership skills, preparing them for roles with greater responsibility. Taking on higher-stakes decision-making, contributing to strategic planning or branching into areas like sports administration, education or research, may position ATs as leaders capable of influencing others and driving organizational goals. Expanded responsibilities often align with promotional pathways, such as transitioning from staff roles to supervisory or director-level positions, which offer opportunities to shape policies, systems or patient care standards. By contributing more to an organization's strategic goals, ATs can earn raises, gain advanced titles or access positions that are more influential. Ultimately, taking on increased responsibilities can signal readiness for career advancement to supervisors and employers while contributing to professional growth through enhanced autonomy, influence and recognition. These opportunities can lead to tangible benefits such as higher salaries and advanced career titles. Moreover, expanded roles allow ATs to make a broader impact, benefiting both the profession and the populations they serve.

Organizational and Professional Leadership

Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping professional growth and expanding opportunities for career advancement. Engaging in leadership not only enhances professional visibility but also allows ATs to contribute to the progression of the field by

influencing policy, education and patient care practices. In athletic training, leadership can be viewed from two distinct perspectives: appointed leadership roles, which are assigned within an employee's organization (e.g., administrative or supervisory positions, service roles unrelated to primary job responsibilities, etc.) and voluntary leadership roles, which are actively pursued outside of one's primary employment (e.g., service to professional committees or advocacy groups).⁸

One of the most direct pathways to leadership is assuming roles within the AT's employer. ATs can seek leadership roles such as head athletic trainer, clinical supervisor or director of sports medicine, which provide administrative experience and oversight of personnel and program development. Leadership within an organization often requires strong interpersonal skills, vision, ethical decision-making and a commitment to mentoring others, all of which are identified as key characteristics of effective leaders in athletic training.⁸ Those in leadership positions within their institutions are often tasked with advocating for resources, ensuring high-quality patient care and fostering professional development for their department.

Beyond workplace leadership, active participation in professional organizations offers another route for career advancement. ATs can engage in leadership roles at the local, state or district level in addition to national organizations like the NATA, the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) or the BOC. Opportunities include serving on executive boards, committees, task forces or work groups. Research has shown that involvement in professional networks and leadership roles within athletic training organizations fosters career advancement by expanding connections and providing access to mentorship opportunities.⁸

Leadership development is often influenced by mentorship and networking. Many established leaders in athletic training credit strong role models and mentors for shaping their leadership philosophy and career trajectory.⁸ Seeking mentorship from experienced professionals and actively participating in professional development workshops can help emerging leaders refine their leadership skills and gain the confidence to take on higher-level roles.

Chapter 2: Common Challenges and Barriers to Career Advancement

Career advancement is a critical factor in the professional growth and retention of ATs yet many face significant barriers that hinder their ability to progress in the field. A lack of opportunities for growth such as limited access to leadership roles or advanced clinical positions remains a persistent challenge within the field. Additionally, disparities related to sex, gender, race and socioeconomic status create unequal access to resources and career pathways, further complicating advancement for underrepresented groups. Navigating career transitions, whether shifting into leadership roles, transitioning between workplace settings or advancing within the profession, adds another layer of complexity often requiring significant support and resources that are not universally available. Understanding these challenges is essential

for developing strategies to create equitable and sustainable career pathways in athletic training.

Lack of Opportunities for Growth and Advancement

About 56% of ATs in the collegiate workplace setting consider advancement opportunities a major factor in their selection of employment and decision to remain with an employer.^{18 19} More opportunities for promotion and career advancement have been shown to positively impact job satisfaction, organizational commitment and retention across athletic training workplace settings.¹⁵ Conversely, limited prospects for advancement have historically been a factor contributing to attrition among ATs,¹⁶ particularly in the collegiate workplace setting.^{18 20} Terranova and Henning identified career advancement as a key predictor of both job satisfaction and intent to leave among collegiate ATs.¹⁷ However, even when roles and hierarchies are well-structured, advancement opportunities may be limited by a colleague's tenure in a higher position, often compelling ATs to seek opportunities elsewhere to progress in their careers.¹⁹

Disparities in Career Advancement

In addition to lack of opportunities for career advancement, sex, gender, race and socioeconomic status can serve as additional barriers to career advancement within athletic training. Only 12% of ATs in the collegiate workplace setting identify as Black, Indigenous or Persons of Color (BIPOC) with only 9.2% being in a director or head athletic trainer role.²¹ Over the past two decades, the number of BIPOC ATs in the college/university workplace setting has increased by 123% but the growth in BIPOC individuals holding head athletic trainer positions has been much slower with only a 30% increase.²¹

Likewise, racial and ethnic diversity has also long served as a barrier to attaining leadership positions within athletic training's professional organizations. Despite the implementation of various diversity, equity, inclusion and access (DEIA) initiatives, representation of diverse individuals is still significantly lacking. In 2023, 10.5% of NATA Board of Directors members and committee leaders self-identified as racially and ethnically diverse while 14.9% of committee members identified as Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Hispanic, Multiethnic or Other.²²

Women across all racial and ethnic identities face additional difficulties in career advancement. Most frequently, stereotyping and discrimination are the biggest barriers to pursuing new roles of advancement.²³ More research is needed to determine the levels of gender disparity in emerging workplace settings; however, data in the collegiate workplace setting shows that 32% of head ATs are women, and 11% of head ATs who are women also identify as BIPOC.²³ Similar to BIPOC individuals, there may be a lack of mentorship for women in athletic training which serves as a consistent barrier to advancement. Additionally, women ATs are particularly at risk of struggling with balancing the roles of AT and parent. Evidence suggests that women who have had mentors who were women are more positive about the prospect of balancing job

demands and parenting.²⁴ Direct mentorship from women in leadership positions is not always available; however, increasing the number of women in leadership positions in athletic training can demonstrate that it is possible to advance your career while balancing other demands of life.²³ The prospect of parenthood creates uncertainty for many women in athletic training, particularly in traditional workplace settings where work-life integration is already a challenge. Many ATs have reported feeling like their work compromises family life, leading them to forgo advancement at their current institution in favor of positions better suited to their family needs.²⁵

Lack of Resources for Career Advancement

Economic stability may also serve as a source of constraint on career advancement in athletic training. ATs burdened with student loans or with limited disposable income may choose to sacrifice additional professional development or CE opportunities that may aid in their career growth. These ATs can also be more inclined to choose a practice workplace setting based on salary alone as opposed to choosing a workplace setting that aligns with their career goals.²⁶ Career advancement often comes with increased financial incentives such as salary increases, bonuses and improved benefits.

Competitive compensation packages have been linked to retention in the athletic training profession,^{11 12} and may be especially important as ATs face increasing educational costs and financial pressures that come with life transitions such as marriage, homeownership, parenthood or caregiving. Financial well-being has a direct correlation with job satisfaction and retention in preferred practice workplace settings and in the profession as a whole.²⁷

Geographic location can serve as a significant barrier to career advancement in athletic training, particularly for individuals who are unable to relocate due to personal, familial or financial constraints. ATs who are rooted in a particular area may find that local job markets offer limited opportunities for upward mobility, especially in rural or underserved communities where the number of employers or positions is small. In some cases, individuals may keep to a geographic region due to caregiving responsibilities, employment of a partner, the cost of living or access to affordable housing. These factors could make it difficult to pursue promotions or specialized roles that require relocation. As a result, some ATs may feel professionally stagnant despite having the skills and experience to take on more advanced roles.

The absence of mentorship or administrative support can also potentially hinder career advancement. Without guidance or advocacy from experienced professionals, ATs may struggle to identify opportunities for growth, access professional development resources or gain visibility for their contributions. When mentorship or leadership support is lacking, ATs may find it more difficult to navigate career decisions, pursue new roles or build the skills needed for advancement. Thus, institutional and interpersonal support systems likely contribute to shaping professional trajectories of ATs' career advancement. Likewise, opportunities for specialized training and advancement into leadership or specialized roles can reinforce an organization's

appreciation for an AT's contributions. Feeling valued and supported in one's career not only promotes satisfaction but also encourages long-term commitment to the organization and the profession as a whole.

Chapter 3: Preparing for Career Advancement

In addition to technical expertise or experience, career advancement may also require a strategic blend of interpersonal skills and proactive engagement with interested parties. Central to this process are the interconnected pillars of networking and mentorship both playing a critical role in shaping an individual's trajectory toward professional growth and leadership.

Networking is defined by [Merriam-Webster \(2025\)](#) as "the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business" and serves as a foundational aspect for career advancement.²⁸ through networking, professionals gain access to new opportunities, diverse perspectives and resources that might otherwise be out of reach. Networking fosters relationships that can lead to mentorship, partnership and avenues to leadership roles. Equally important is mentorship or the guidance provided by a mentor who is an experienced person in a company or educational institution that acts as a catalyst for personal and professional development.²⁹ Mentorship can provide invaluable insights, constructive feedback and support systems that help individuals navigate the complexities of career progression. Experienced mentors can offer guidance on setting goals, making informed decisions and overcoming obstacles all of which can be beneficial for sustained career growth. Networking, collaboration and mentorship collectively contribute to preparing individuals for career advancement.

Networking

Networking can be a valuable tool for development at every stage of a professional's career journey. It extends beyond securing promotions or new job opportunities as it can foster relationships that enhance knowledge sharing, mentorship, collaboration and overall career growth. Despite its importance, many professionals neglect networking viewing it as optional rather than essential. However, research and industry insights underscore that strategic networking can be a game-changer in long-term career success.³⁰

A strong network often provides access to opportunities that may not be publicly available increasing the likelihood of learning about new roles, collaborations and leadership positions.³⁰ it can also enhance professional visibility ensuring that key decision-makers recognize an individual's contributions. Through networking, professionals gain access to insights from experienced colleagues helping them utilize best practices and strategize ways to stay ahead of industry trends. Additionally, in times of career transitions having a well-established network offers essential support, guidance and potential job leads making professional shifts smoother and more successful.³⁰

In athletic training, networking plays a key role in shaping professional trajectories. For many, the relationships formed early in their career have influenced their long-term success. There is strength in casual connections we have with people beyond long-time trusted friends. These extended networks are essential as they serve as bridges and connectors to new opportunities.³¹ [Athletic Trainers' Association of Florida \(ATAF\) President Pradeep Vanguri, PhD, LAT, ATC](#) credits his early networking experiences with introducing him to the profession and supporting his career growth.³² His interactions with mentors and peers not only reinforced his passion for athletic training but also helped him navigate leadership opportunities.³² President Vanguri states "Service to my profession has allowed me to network with other athletic trainers across the country. As this will always be a people-profession, volunteering in athletic training has led to working relationships, research connections and most importantly friendships." This reflection exemplifies how networking can create meaningful professional relationships that last throughout a career.

Many ATs may feel uncertain about how to begin networking, as formal education programs do not always explicitly teach these skills. For those early in their careers or just beginning to extend their professional connections; networking should focus on showing up to professional events such as state, district and national meetings or engaging with peers encountered in clinical or educational practice and working to develop meaningful professional relationships.³⁰ Establishing a strong peer network is critical as these connections can grow into leadership roles over time. Genuine interactions are often viewed as more impactful than transactional exchanges. For that reason, professionals should offer value to their network before seeking benefits.³⁰ this can include mentoring others, sharing resources or simply staying in touch with thoughtful follow-ups.

According to Herminia Ibarra from [Stanford VMware Women's Leadership Innovation Lab](#), a successful networking strategy includes cultivating three types of networks:

- 1) Operational networks or day-to-day relationships that enable work to be done,
- 2) Personal networks or informal relationships with friends and family and
- 3) Strategic networks or the blend of internal and external relationships that allow you to stay informed on things happening in the profession.²¹

Strategic networks are purposefully developed with people who can offer insight, mentorship, collaboration or access to new roles and resources. For ATs, this might include supervisors, administrators, peers in other institutions, educators or leaders in professional associations who can help connect them to leadership roles, continuing education or emerging practice workplace settings. Effective strategic networks are broad because they focus on connecting with people beyond those who are similar to you, connective because they bridge across different departments, companies or industries and dynamic as they are continuously growing as you meet new people and bring them into your network.³¹

Networking takes many forms from traditional in-person events to virtual platforms and informal conversations. Attending industry conferences, alumni gatherings and professional association meetings can help establish connections while online spaces such as LinkedIn, X, Facebook and industry-specific forums provide opportunities for engagement beyond geographical limitations.³⁰ Informal networking such as casual conversations with colleagues or mutual connections can also play a significant role in career growth.

Gender bias can also play a role in networking challenges particularly for women in fields dominated by men. Men's professional and personal networks tend to overlap more making networking more time-efficient whereas women often build broader networks that expand further when family or caretaking responsibilities come into play.³¹ early research examining the experiences of the first women to enter into the athletic training profession revealed significant oppression and exclusion. These women were often denied access to the same resources available to men, including programs, facilities, equipment, budgets, high-risk sports and supervisory opportunities.³²

However, more recent research suggests that women in athletic training are experiencing greater opportunities for appointment and career progression particularly in positions with men's sports teams.³³ Unlike earlier reports of restricted access and exclusionary hiring practices at the NCAA Division I level, Pike et al. reported women today are less likely to face the same barriers to employment.³³ Today's women ATs are building on the progress of the trailblazers before them and continuing to break through the limitations that once excluded them. Support from supervisors particularly head ATs was identified by Pike et al. as a key factor in reducing gender bias in the collegiate workplace setting.³³ Equally important was mentorship with many women participants in their study highlighting the value of a supportive staff as essential to their success in their current roles.³³ With that said, instead of trying to engage in all networking opportunities, women may benefit from strategically focusing on key relationships and investing in areas where they can have the most impact. Rather than viewing networking as a transactional effort, professionals should focus on the value they bring to their network building trust and confidence in that relationships.³¹

Professionals should cultivate a diverse network that includes personal connections, operational contacts who help navigate workplace challenges and strategic mentors who provide career guidance and sponsorship. To actively grow a network, professionals should evaluate what opportunities they can invest in both inside and outside their organization and identify who they already know and how those connections can introduce them to new people and groups.³¹ Maintaining and expanding a network requires ongoing effort including checking in with connections, sharing professional updates and offering assistance when possible.³⁰ Networking is not a one-time effort but an ongoing process that should be integrated into daily professional life. By investing time in building and maintaining connections, professionals can access new

opportunities, gain valuable insights and establish long-term career success.³⁴ Prioritizing networking today creates a foundation for continued growth and professional fulfillment in the future.

Mentorship

Mentorship is a powerful tool for career advancement in athletic training fostering both personal and professional development. A strong mentor-mentee relationship provides guidance, skill development, networking opportunities and emotional support helping ATs navigate career challenges and achieve long-term success. While mentorship benefits both mentors and mentees, access to structured and equitable mentorship opportunities remains inconsistent particularly for women and underrepresented groups.³⁵

Traditional mentorship, a one-on-one relationship between mentor and mentee, has been one of the most common models used in professional development. This approach has shaped mentorship structures across various health professions including athletic training.³⁵ However, this dyadic model of mentorship is largely influenced by a man's socialization framework emphasizing competition, hierarchy and independence. While these aspects can be beneficial, they may not always align with the needs of all mentees particularly women who may thrive more in mentorship environments that emphasize encouragement, collaboration and equalization rather than rigid hierarchies.³⁵

Recognizing these challenges, many professionals have advocated for multiple mentorship models in which a mentee learns from several mentors across different areas of expertise. This approach can allow for a broader exchange of knowledge, increased professional connections and greater adaptability in career growth. Additionally, peer mentorship where colleagues mentor each other fosters a collaborative environment that promotes mutual learning and reduces traditional power imbalances.³⁵ While mentoring is often viewed as one person giving and the other person receiving, [Stacy Blake-Beard, Professor of Management at Simmons College](#), defines mentoring as a dynamic and mutually empowering relationship where both parties learn and benefit.³⁶ This perspective highlights the value of mentorship as a reciprocal process that strengthens both mentors and mentees in meaningful ways.

It should be noted that productive mentoring relationships can face challenges particularly in the form of protective hesitation and defensiveness.³⁶ Protective hesitation occurs when a mentor withholds critical feedback or important information out of fear of offending the mentee ultimately limiting growth opportunities.³⁶ Conversely, protective defensiveness happens when a mentee builds personal walls to avoid critical feedback preventing them from receiving valuable insights.³⁶ Overcoming these barriers requires establishing trust, ensuring that both parties believe feedback is given with the best intentions. To foster a healthy mentorship relationship, it is essential to approach feedback constructively. One effective method is the feedback sandwich. The feedback sandwich begins with a positive observation, followed by constructive

criticism and closes with another statement of positive reinforcement. Feedback should be framed as an opportunity to learn rather than a critique, and mentors should approach conversations with empathy.³⁶

Finding the right mentorship model is an essential step in professional development and career advancement. Some ATs benefit from formal mentoring programs while others thrive in informal, organically developed mentor-mentee relationships. Identifying whether a one-on-one, group or peer mentoring approach is most beneficial is crucial for career growth. Effective mentorship requires intentionality, with mentees taking the initiative in defining their career goals, asking for feedback and engaging in discussions about skill development. Likewise, mentors should provide guidance tailored to the mentee's specific aspirations while fostering a supportive and challenging environment.

A strong mentorship network should extend beyond a single individual. ATs should cultivate a broad network of mentors across different workplace settings, including clinical practice, education and service or leadership roles. A diverse mentorship group provides exposure to various career pathways and opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.³⁵ However; accessibility to mentorship is not always equitable. Women and professionals of color often face differential access to mentors due to the prevalence of white men in leadership, limiting their career development opportunities.

To mitigate these barriers, institutions should encourage mentorship models that prioritize inclusivity, psychological safety and flexibility. Mentees, particularly women, should seek out mentors who recognize and support their professional aspirations while acknowledging the unique challenges, they may face.³⁵ Expanding mentorship programs and ensuring accessibility for all individuals is critical for fostering a more inclusive profession.³⁶

To initiate a meaningful mentorship relationship, ATs should begin with a self-assessment. This involves identifying personal strengths, challenges and the unique value they bring to a mentorship dynamic. Identifying these characteristics can occur through informal methods such as reflective journaling, Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis, 360-feedback as well as more formal tools like CliftonStrengths, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) or DISC assessment.

Additionally, setting clear objectives (e.g., understanding what one hopes to gain from mentorship) can help to guide the relationship's direction. Conducting research and speaking with a broad range of professionals can also provide insight into potential mentors who align with your career aspirations.³⁶

Mentorship is not a one-way relationship. While mentors provide guidance and support, mentees bring fresh perspectives, new skills and unique experiences that can enrich the mentor's professional journey. By fostering a reciprocal mentorship relationship, both parties benefit from career advancement and professional fulfillment. Whether through

traditional dyadic models, multiple mentorship relationships or peer mentoring, engaging in mentorship can open doors to professional growth, leadership development and long-term career satisfaction. Actively seeking mentors, setting clear goals and embracing diverse mentorship approaches can position ATs for sustained success in the field.

For those looking to secure a formal mentor, professional organizations often offer structured mentorship programs to help facilitate meaningful connections. The NATA Mentor Match program provides an opportunity for ATs of all career stages, workplace settings and demographics to connect with experienced professionals for guidance and support. This program offers opportunities to mentors and mentees to express preferences in respect to workplace setting, years of experience, career stage and professional interests (e.g., business, education, leadership, governmental affairs, ethnic diversity etc.). This allows connections between mentors and mentees who share identities or experiences, helping to create a stronger bond of community, sense of belonging and understanding. Concordant mentorship, in which the mentor and mentee share perspectives, can enhance communication and support. Additionally, the NATA Research & Education Foundation's Doctoral Student and Faculty Mentor programs help connect emerging researchers and educators with experienced faculty members to foster academic and professional development. These programs serve as valuable resources for those seeking mentorship opportunities tailored to their specific career goals.

Chapter 4: Marketing and Self-Promotion

In today's competitive job market, career advancement extends beyond technical expertise and experience; it requires strategic self-promotion. For ATs, this includes developing a strong personal brand, which is the way an individual presents and communicates their unique strengths, values and contributions to others in the profession. Personal branding is the intentional and strategic practice of defining and expressing one's value, ensuring that career opportunities align with professional identity and career goals.³⁷ A personal brand helps colleagues, supervisors or hiring committees understand what the AT brings to the table and why they stand out from others in the profession.

What is a Personal Brand?

Harvard Business School Senior Lecturer Jill Avery describes personal branding as a way of "marketing" oneself, meaning promoting your value to others much like a company would promote a product.³⁷ This includes defining and communicating a "value proposition," or a clear explanation of what makes the individual a valuable asset in their field. Just as organizations build brand recognition through messaging and engagement, ATs can use personal branding to display their unique clinical focus, leadership style or professional interests. Without intentionally shaping this message, others may rely on assumptions that do not accurately reflect their expertise or goals. It is important to note that a personal brand is not the same as the brand of the athletic

training profession. While both should share common goals of promoting competence, professionalism and patient care, a personal brand should reflect an individual's passions, strengths and aspirations. In some cases, a personal brand may complement or extend beyond the traditional AT identity through a specific focus such as athlete wellness, DEI initiatives or health information technology.

Developing a strong personal brand begins with defining one's purpose. ATs should identify their values, strengths and career goals by asking themselves what they want to be known for within the profession. From there, they can assess their current reputation and identify gaps between how they are currently perceived and how they want to be perceived. This involves assessing credentials, connections across the profession and how others perceive their area of expertise in athletic training.³⁷ Identifying gaps between current and desired brand perceptions provides an opportunity to refine messaging and strategic positioning.

The Importance of Self-Promotion

Self-promotion plays a key role in career advancement. For some, particularly women or members of underrepresented groups, struggle with advocating for themselves in the workplace due to cultural norms and implicit biases that discourage self-promotion.³⁸ However, speaking confidently about your skills and accomplishments is essential for advancement. ATs can highlight their impact by tracking achievements, presenting at conferences, mentoring, publishing scholarly work or posting professional content on social media. These efforts build awareness and reinforce your value to others.

Storytelling is a powerful and essential element of personal branding. Rather than simply listing credentials and accomplishments, ATs should construct authentic narratives that communicate who they are, what they value and the unique perspective they bring to the profession. As noted in [The Art of Storytelling](#), authenticity builds trust and trust is the foundation of lasting professional relationships.³⁹ A compelling brand story should reflect an individual's experiences, passions and values, weaving these elements into a cohesive message that resonates with others.³⁹ To put storytelling into action, ATs can start by describing defining moments in their careers including major successes, challenges overcome or pivotal experiences with patients that can illustrate their clinical expertise or leadership approach.³⁹ These stories can be shared in job applications, interviews, networking conversations or online profiles to help others understand your professional identity. Maintaining consistency in your message across platforms builds trust and reinforces your credibility.

Consistency is also key: maintaining a unified message across platforms, helps build a recognizable personal brand. For those unsure of where to begin, tools like [Canva](#) can help design branded visuals while [LinkedIn](#) can provide a platform to share stories and engage within professional communities.³⁹ though self-promotion may feel uncomfortable, reframing it as storytelling for highlighting your professional values and

contributions can make it feel more authentic and approachable.³⁹

Strategic networking is another key component of self-promotion. This involves building relationships that support your growth and visibility. A strategic network includes both internal contacts within an AT's workplace or organization and external connections from other institutions or professional associations. These relationships can include mentors who guide the AT, sponsors who advocate for the AT and influencers or gatekeepers who can provide the AT with access to opportunities. Building a multi-dimensional mentorship team including mentors, peers, coaches and sponsors can be particularly effective in securing career advancement opportunities.³⁸ Of note, like with storytelling, consistency is essential. ATs should engage regularly with their network, contribute to conversations and offer support to others to help keep their brand active and visible.

Adding Value to a Personal Brand

ATs seeking career advancement should be prepared to quantify their value. Keeping a record of 'other duties as assigned' and additional contributions such as mentoring, presenting at campus or organizational events, volunteering or leading initiatives can serve as evidence of value during performance reviews and salary negotiations.³⁸ Many professionals overlook the importance of tracking their impact, but documentation is a critical component of advocating for raises, promotions and appointments to leadership roles. ATs can do this by regularly updating their resume or curriculum vitae (C/V) or maintaining a running list or digital portfolio of accomplishments throughout the year. For example, they might track the number of students mentored, presentations delivered at departmental meetings or professional conferences or initiatives led such as launching a new injury prevention program or implementing a patient satisfaction survey. They can also log hours volunteered for community outreach or departmental or institution service.

ATs should develop a plan for collecting and reporting outcomes that can further demonstrate the impact of their contributions. For example, to track injury rates, ATs can use electronic medical records (EMR) or injury surveillance tools to monitor the frequency, type and severity of injuries across a team, department or population over time. Comparing the number of injuries before and after the implementation of a preventive training program can provide clear evidence of impact. Additionally, reporting metrics like days lost to injury, recurrence rates or return-to-play timelines can offer quantifiable insights into care effectiveness. Likewise, patient outcomes can be documented using standardized patient-rated outcome measures (PROMs), pain and function scores (e.g., Visual Analog Scale or Lower Extremity Functional Scale) and return-to-activity benchmarks. Collecting patient satisfaction surveys or testimonials can also help illustrate the quality of care and patient experience provided.

Furthermore, when evaluating clinic efficiency, ATs can track metrics such as number of patients treated per day, appointment no-show rates or average time from injury to

evaluation. Reductions in these metrics over time can demonstrate improved operational performance. Also important to many administrators is cost savings. To demonstrate cost savings, ATs can document reductions in external referrals, emergency department visits or unnecessary imaging through improved triage, on-site management or early intervention. They can also quantify the financial value of preventing missed practices or games, reducing workers' compensation claims or lowering re-injury rates, especially in occupational or tactical workplace settings. Collaborating with administrators to translate these outcomes into financial terms can significantly strengthen an AT's case for advancement.

By collecting and presenting this type of outcome data, ATs not only demonstrate their individual value but also elevate the visibility of athletic training services within their organizations. These efforts support meaningful conversations around compensation, workload and leadership potential while also contributing to broader recognition of the profession's impact. Importantly, they also reinforce an AT's personal brand by highlighting measurable results that reflect their expertise, initiative and leadership. When ATs can clearly articulate how their work improves outcomes, saves costs or increases efficiency, they strengthen their reputation as high-value professionals. This alignment between documented impact and personal brand enhances credibility and positions ATs for future advancement opportunities.

Conclusions

Personal branding is not a one-time effort but an ongoing process that evolves with career growth. Career-advancing ATs should engage in the quality improvement process by reassessing and adjusting their branding strategy regularly in addition to seeking feedback from trusted colleagues and mentors. If career goals shift, branding efforts should adapt accordingly to reflect new skills, experiences and aspirations.³⁷ a well-defined personal brand not only opens doors to new career opportunities but also fosters professional confidence and recognition within the field. ATs who proactively shape their brand can better position themselves for leadership roles, career advancements and broader industry impact. By taking strategic steps to build and promote their brand, they ensure their professional identity aligns with their long-term goals. For example, an AT with interest in advancing in the public safety workplace setting may begin by sharing insights on tactical athlete care through social media, presenting at conferences and collaborating with local fire departments. Over time, this targeted branding effort can lead to consulting opportunities, invitations to serve on task forces or a leadership position in a national committee focused on tactical health care. By intentionally aligning their expertise and visibility with their goals, the AT is able to shape their expertise, the trajectory of their career and expand their influence in the profession.

Chapter 5: Career Advancement through Education

ATs play a crucial role in the prevention, diagnosis, and rehabilitation of sports-related injuries and work-related injuries. Lifelong learning is essential for ATs to remain

effective and relevant in their roles. Once an AT graduates from an accredited professional education program, they have the entry-level skills to demonstrate competency and get a job in the field of athletic training. Some skills are used largely in certain workplace settings than others. The skills that are not utilized often can lead to skill decay, or the loss of previously acquired skills over time, as soon as 6 weeks after learning the content.⁴⁰ the rapid advancement within the athletic training profession solidifies that continued education is imperative to providing high-quality health care.

Continuing Education

The BOC requires ATs to complete 50 hours of CE every two years to maintain their certification. CE is designed to ensure continuous competence, development of current knowledge and skills beyond entry level and enhancement of professional skills throughout a career in athletic training.⁴¹ CE options can be chosen based on professional interest, skill development and career advancement as long as the CE increases knowledge, skills and abilities related to the practice of athletic training. Continuing education units (CEUs) can be obtained through synchronous or asynchronous events (i.e. conference, webinar, seminar), post-certification coursework from a post-professional athletic training program, serving as a speaker or author of scholarly work and/or completing a CAATE-accredited residency or fellowship program. More information regarding the breakdown of each category can be found in the [BOC Certification Maintenance Requirements](#).

A study performed by Edler and Eberman looked at factors influencing continuing education selection and participants reported that they chose their CEs by their perceived needs and/or area of weakness, what would benefit their patient population, and sessions specifically related to the workplace setting they practice in.⁴⁰ The BOC encourages ATs choose their CEs based on their perceived or identified weaknesses and desired areas of improvement. Thus, the [BOC Professional Development Needs Assessment \(PDNA\)](#) and the [Orthopedic Specialty Needs Assessment \(OSNA\)](#) were created to help ATs formulate a plan for meaningful CE. These tools are intended to empower ATs of all experience levels to engage in self-reflection with the goal of assessing professional development needs across the five domains of athletic training practice. The results of these assessments are intended to identify professional growth opportunities, link current skills and abilities to critical job skills and performance plans, and assess learning needs prior to transitioning to or re-entering a specific area of practice.

Specialty Certification

There is a variety of ways to obtain continuing education opportunities, but if an AT is looking to become credentialed as a “specialist” in a distinct area of athletic training then specialty certification from the BOC is recommended. Specialty certification is an advanced credential that recognizes an AT’s expertise in a specific area of clinical practice, such as orthopedics. Unlike general certification, specialty credentials require extensive knowledge, skills, and experience in a focused domain. The [BOC Orthopedic](#)

[Specialty Certification](#) is the only BOC orthopedic specialty credential for ATs with advanced knowledge, skills, and experience in orthopedics.

ATs can pursue the Orthopedic Specialty Certification (BCS-O) through the BOC as a way to demonstrate advanced clinical expertise in orthopedic practice beyond the entry-level requirements of the profession.⁴² to be eligible, candidates must be BOC certified athletic trainers in good standing and meet the criteria outlined by one of two approved pathways. The first option requires completion of a CAATE-accredited orthopedic residency program, along with at least two years of professional experience, which may include one year of full-time work either before or after the residency. The second option allows candidates to qualify by completing at least 260 hours of professional development in orthopedic care, such as continuing education, journal reviews or grand rounds, in addition to a minimum of four years of post-certification practice. This experience must include at least 3,500 hours of orthopedic patient care, with 1,200 hours being mentored and 1,000 completed within the year prior to applying.⁴² once eligibility is confirmed, candidates must pass the Orthopedic Specialty Certification Exam to earn the BCS-O credential. This certification formally recognizes a high level of orthopedic knowledge and skill, helping ATs stand out as specialists and positioning them for career advancement in focused clinical roles.

ATs can pursue specialty certification for a variety of reasons. One of the most significant advantages is enhanced career mobility and professional recognition. Holding a specialty certification can distinguish an AT in the job market, increasing their likelihood of securing leadership positions, gaining additional responsibilities and negotiating better compensation. The BCS-O certification can be useful for ATs seeking employment or advancement in the physician practice workplace setting, particularly those who assist in the operating room.^{42, 43} This credential also underscores an AT's ability to increase clinical efficiency, optimize patient care and serve as an extension of the physician.⁴²

Beyond extrinsic benefits, many ATs seek specialty certification for professional validation and personal fulfillment. Research has shown that intrinsic rewards, such as personal satisfaction, increased confidence and professional growth, are among the strongest motivators for obtaining specialty certification.⁴³ ATs who earn these credentials report a greater sense of accomplishment and fulfillment in their careers, as the certification serves as an affirmation of their expertise and dedication to the profession. Furthermore, certification can expand an AT's professional network, providing opportunities for collaboration with specialists in related fields and enhancing interdisciplinary teamwork.⁴³

Despite the clear benefits, barriers such as financial cost, time commitment and lack of institutional support can deter ATs from pursuing specialty certification. However, as the profession continues to evolve, the recognition and value of specialty-certified ATs is

expected to grow, making these credentials an increasingly valuable asset in career advancement.

Post-Professional Pathways

Post-professional graduate degree programs equip ATs with the advanced clinical expertise, research skills, and scholarly training necessary to elevate patient care, enhance outcomes and improve health-related quality of life.⁴⁴ these programs build upon foundational professional education, expanding students' knowledge, skills, and abilities beyond entry-level practice as defined by the CAATE. By integrating essential competencies for advanced clinical practice, post-professional athletic training programs prepare graduates to excel in specialized roles within the field.

Post-Professional Master's Degree

The post-professional master's degree in athletic training (MAT) was designed for certified athletic trainers credentialed at the bachelor's level or through the former internship route who sought to advance their knowledge and skills... These programs focus on developing advanced clinical expertise through didactic coursework, scholarship, and in some cases, specialized clinical experiences.⁴⁴ MAT programs emphasize core competencies aligned with advanced practice, leadership, and scholarly engagement. However, with the transition of professional athletic training education to the master's degree level, post-professional MAT programs have been largely phased out, with only a handful remaining in the United States. For this reason, in 2019, the CAATE made the decision to discontinue accreditation for post-professional athletic training programs including those for the post-professional master's and Doctor of Athletic Training (DAT) degree.⁴⁴ While post-professional MAT programs still serve as a valuable mechanism of continuing education for ATs without a graduate degree, the educational landscape has shifted to emphasize other graduate-level opportunities such as the DAT and research or teaching-focused doctoral degrees.

Terminal Degrees

ATs seeking to obtain a terminal degree at the doctoral level have multiple options, each catering to distinct career goals and professional aspirations. The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Doctor of Education (EdD), and DAT degrees all provide advanced training but differ in their focus, purpose, and application within the field. Understanding these distinctions is critical for selecting the pathway that aligns with an individual's professional objectives.⁴⁵ The PhD is a research-focused degree often offered in a related discipline designed to prepare scholars who generate new knowledge through original research. PhD programs emphasize basic and applied research methodologies, critical evaluation of literature and the ability to contribute to academic discourse through scholarly publications.⁴⁵ Graduates of PhD programs typically pursue careers in higher education, research institutions, or policy development, where their work helps shape the future of the profession. This pathway is well suited for those interested in conducting research, developing new ideas in the field, and teaching at the college or university level.^{45,46}

The Doctor of Education (EdD) degree focuses on the application of research to leadership, teaching, and administration. Unlike the PhD, which centers on theoretical and empirical research, the EdD is more practice-oriented, preparing professionals for leadership roles in educational institutions, program administration and curriculum development. ATs pursuing an EdD often do so to advance into positions such as academic program directors, educational researchers, or high-level administrators within athletic training programs or programs of related disciplines. This degree is best suited for those who wish to influence educational policy, develop training programs and mentor future practitioners. In contrast to the PhD, the EdD degree may have a slightly shorter time to completion and a less rigorous scholarship of discovery.

The Doctor of Athletic Training (DAT), by contrast, is an advanced practice doctorate. Often more clinically focused, the DAT degree is designed to enhance the advanced practice skills and leadership abilities of ATs working in patient care workplace settings. The DAT emphasizes evidence-based practice, leadership development, and innovative approaches to patient care, allowing graduates to take on potential roles as advanced practice providers, faculty members or health care administrators. This degree is particularly beneficial for ATs who want to shape the future of the profession through teaching, mentorship and scholarly contributions, ensuring that athletic training continues to evolve as an essential component of the health care system.^{45,46} This degree is ideal for ATs who wish to remain in clinical practice while advancing their expertise, improving patient outcomes and assuming leadership roles within health care teams or educational programs. Many DAT graduates also pursue roles in academia, administration or advocacy, particularly in areas related to quality improvement, health care delivery models and patient safety.⁴⁶

Each of these doctoral pathways provides a unique avenue for career advancement, and the choice depends on an individual's professional goals. In general, a PhD is best suited for those who want to contribute to research and academia, an EdD is ideal for those aiming to shape education and program development, and a DAT is designed for clinicians who seek to elevate their practice and leadership in patient care. As athletic training continues to evolve, these advanced degrees offer ATs an opportunity to expand their influence, shape the future of the profession and enhance the quality of patient care.

Accredited Residency and Fellowship Programs

Another route of gaining specialization is through a CAATE-accredited residency program in which an area of specialization in athletic training is chosen. There are eight approved residency specialty areas including prevention and wellness, urgent and emergent care, primary care, orthopedics, rehabilitation, behavioral health, pediatrics and performance enhancement.⁴⁷ Residency programs provide a crucial step of professional development from graduate education and practicing autonomously in a core specialty.⁴⁷ Following completion of a residency program, ATs who desire to enter a

subspecialized practice can pursue a fellowship program. An AT in a fellowship program will provide subspecialty care and expand upon knowledge.⁴⁷ For example, an AT may complete a residency program in orthopedics and then go on to complete a fellowship program in pediatrics.

Chapter 6: Career Advancement through Employment

ATs work across a broad spectrum of workplace settings that reflect the growing scope and impact of the profession. Traditionally, ATs have been recognized for their roles in secondary schools, colleges and universities and professional sports. However, more recently, ATs have expanded their reach into many non-traditional and emerging workplace settings. These include but are not limited to the armed forces, physician practice, public safety, performing arts, rehabilitation clinic and occupational health practice workplace settings.

- In the Armed Forces, ATs are integral to supporting tactical athletes by providing injury prevention, emergency care and rehabilitation tailored to the unique physical demands of military personnel.
- In physician practices, ATs work alongside doctors, enhancing clinical efficiency and ensuring high-quality patient care throughout the evaluation, diagnosis and rehabilitation processes.
- Likewise, within public safety, ATs play a crucial role in keeping law enforcement officers, firefighters and other first responders healthy and ready for duty, offering tailored injury prevention and recovery programs specific to the demands of their jobs.
- ATs also bring their expertise to the performing arts, where they support artists and entertainers who face unique physical challenges, helping to prevent and manage injuries to sustain peak performance.
- Rehabilitation clinics are another increasingly common workplace setting where ATs provide patient-centered care as part of a multidisciplinary team, guiding patients from injury through to full recovery.
- In occupational health, ATs work within workplace settings to prevent workplace injuries, improve employee wellness and reduce time loss due to work-related injuries suffered by the employee.

This range of practice environments reflects the profession's evolution and demonstrates the versatile roles that ATs occupy across diverse sectors.

Pathways to Career Advancement in the Secondary School Workplace Setting

Developed in collaboration with the NATA Secondary School Athletic Trainers' Committee

For ATs in the secondary school workplace setting, career advancement is often limited by structural constraints within the educational system. Commonly recognized titles for career progression include but are not limited to:

- lead athletic trainer/head athletic trainer
- athletic training manager/athletic training supervisor
- director of sports medicine/director of AT services
- district/regional coordinator of AT services

These roles represent typical advanced titles or pathways for advancement yet do not always reflect the full range of responsibilities ATs may undertake. For example, while an AT may perform a variety of administrative tasks such as scheduling, inventory, budget management and purchasing, their title might still simply read "athletic trainer," which can undersell their role and achievements.

ATs in secondary school workplace settings face unique challenges in advancing their careers due to limited opportunities within their immediate employment site. ATs employed directly by a school or district, in particular, may encounter more restrictive paths to advancement than those working under outreach models sponsored by hospitals or clinics, where there are often more established career ladders with the organization.

Given these limitations, many ATs in the secondary school workplace setting may seek to expand their roles by taking on additional responsibilities or part-time positions. Some common alternative roles that secondary school ATs can pursue to further their careers include:

- **Teaching Positions:** Serving as a teacher in addition to athletic training duties can provide a dual career track, enhancing both job security, total compensation and career growth opportunities.
- **Administrative Roles:** Positions like assistant athletic director or athletic director offer pathways that incorporate administrative skills and broaden professional scope.
- **Higher Education Roles:** Some secondary school ATs work as adjunct professors, which provides opportunities to contribute to the next generation of ATs while advancing their own careers.

- **Specialized Roles:** Positions such as concussion spotters for professional sports leagues or conferences provide additional professional experience and industry recognition.

Recommendations for Career Advancement in the Secondary School Workplace Setting

To foster career advancement within the secondary school workplace setting, ATs can consider several strategic actions to overcome common limitations. First, it is essential that ATs advocate for formal titles that accurately reflect the responsibilities they carry. For instance, many ATs in secondary schools handle all aspects of the sports medicine program independently. For solo practitioners in this workplace setting, advocating for the title of "head athletic trainer" is a meaningful step. Titles that align with duties enhance resume visibility; increase professional recognition and can help open doors to more advanced roles within or beyond the school system.

Exploring opportunities in outreach models can also benefit secondary school ATs, especially those affiliated with hospitals or clinics. Unlike traditional school district roles, outreach models often offer more structured career ladders, enabling ATs to grow within a health care organization that values and supports their development. Collaborating with such organizations can provide a path to career advancement that may not be available directly through the school or district.

Additionally, obtaining specialized certifications or engaging in unique roles, such as serving as a concussion spotter for local universities or professional leagues, can diversify an AT's experience and expertise. These specialized roles not only elevate the AT's professional profile but also connect them with a broader network, facilitating career growth and providing a competitive edge.

Finally, becoming actively involved in professional networks and committees such as the NATA and similar local or regional bodies is an effective way to stay informed about emerging opportunities. Through these organizations, ATs can build connections, gain visibility and establish themselves as leaders in the field. Involvement in these professional communities can be instrumental in accessing career advancements that may not be immediately visible within the school workplace setting.

Pathways to Career Advancement in the College and University Workplace Setting *Developed in collaboration with the NATA Intercollegiate Council for Sports Medicine (ICSM)*

ATs working within the college/university setting have access to a diverse range of titles and responsibilities reflecting the broad scope of athletic training services required in collegiate athletics. Career advancement within these institutions often follows a hierarchical structure such as:

- intern or graduate assistant athletic trainer
- assistant athletic trainer
- associate athletic trainer
- head athletic trainer
- director of sports medicine

Note: While titles such as "intern," "graduate assistant," and "assistant" athletic trainer are often used to indicate entry-level roles in the college/university setting, ATs with these titles are credentialed as appropriate for their state. The NATA CAC does not endorse these titles, as these individuals are autonomous health care providers. ATs in these roles are able and should be encouraged to practice to the full scope of their state practice acts.

Hierarchical promotions may even extend to more senior roles such as:

- senior assistant athletic director
- executive associate athletic director
- vice president for intercollegiate athletics

These titles reflect various levels of responsibility, visibility, influence within the athletic department, and depend heavily on institutional structure and human resources classifications.

For many ATs in the college/university workplace setting, advancing their career does not necessarily mean a title change but rather an increase in responsibility within their existing role. For instance, an AT may take on assignments for high-profile sports or sports with greater injury risks enhancing their visibility and expertise. Additionally, many ATs in collegiate settings assume administrative oversight duties, which can include managing budgets, coordinating drug-testing protocols, acting as liaisons for nutrition and mental health or overseeing sports medicine department technology and policy review. These responsibilities allow ATs to expand their skills and influence without necessarily leaving their clinical practice roles.

Some ATs are also stepping into non-clinical roles taking on responsibilities that involve overseeing entire sports medicine departments, developing internship and student immersion experiences or guiding clinical services and policies. These roles are instrumental for those aiming to build a holistic view of sports medicine administration within collegiate athletics. For those who wish to pursue administrative tracks, advancing in these areas prepares them for more comprehensive roles potentially leading to director of athletics or other senior leadership positions within the institution.

By navigating these diverse pathways, ATs in college and university workplace settings can cultivate a fulfilling and influential career that meets their professional aspirations while contributing significantly to student-athlete health, wellness and performance.

Recommendations for Career Advancement in the College/University Workplace Setting

To enhance career advancement opportunities within the college and university workplace setting, ATs can pursue several strategic actions tailored to the unique structure and demands of collegiate athletics. First, ATs can benefit from taking on additional administrative responsibilities within the sports medicine department. By managing budgets, coordinating drug testing or overseeing student-athlete wellness programs, ATs can broaden their expertise and gain the managerial skills needed for higher administrative roles. Engaging in these tasks not only expands their professional portfolio but also demonstrates their leadership capabilities within the department. Another pathway to advancement involves specializing in high-visibility or high-risk sports. Taking on responsibilities for sports that carry a greater risk of injury or have higher visibility within collegiate athletics can enhance an AT's profile and professional impact. This specialization often leads to more direct interaction with department leadership and increases the trainer's visibility across campus, which can open doors to roles such as head athletic trainer or assistant athletic director.

In addition, developing expertise in a specific injury type or treatment modality can pave the way for ATs to establish expertise. For example, an AT who builds a deep knowledge of ACL injury rehabilitation or concussion management may become the designated provider for all cases of that nature within the department particularly if functioning in a medical model. This level of specialization not only elevates their professional profile but can also lead to the creation of a new role and/or additional compensation for advanced practice related to that population or area of practice. In such cases, the AT's specialized knowledge contributes to innovation within the department establishing a niche service that can enhance patient outcomes, streamline care or enhance organizational efficiency.

Additionally, exploring non-clinical or leadership roles in sports medicine policy and protocol development is an effective way to advance. Positions that include oversight of internship programs, student immersion experiences or clinical services management provide valuable skills in mentorship and program administration. These experiences equip ATs in the college/university workplace setting with a broader understanding of sports medicine operations preparing them for roles that extend beyond direct patient care.

Finally, remaining active within professional organizations and networks is essential for collegiate ATs seeking career advancement. Engagement with entities like the NATA, the College Athletic Trainers' Society (CATS) or institutional committees offers valuable networking opportunities, access to industry trends and the chance to display

leadership in the profession. By leveraging strategies such as administrative responsibilities, high-risk sport specialization, expertise in specific populations or injuries and professional networking, ATs in college and university workplace settings can foster a dynamic and impactful career that contributes to both their professional development and the health and wellness of student-athletes.

Pathways to Career Advancement in the Physician Practice Workplace Setting

Developed in collaboration with the NATA Council for Practice Advancement (COPA) Physician Practice Panel

A recent study reported that ATs are primarily motivated to enter and transition into the physician practice workplace setting by perceived benefits such as improved work-life balance, more consistent work schedules, and opportunities to work with a broader range of patient populations.⁴⁸ Expansion of job opportunities in physician practice workplace setting over the last decade has created many new positions, and satisfaction is largely dependent upon establishing a fulfilling role. While many athletic training skills are applicable in the physician practice workplace, ATs often remain unaware of existing knowledge gaps until they begin working in the clinic or have spent significant time observing clinical care. ATs considering employment in the physician practice workplace setting should reflect on the distinct roles and responsibilities associated with these roles.

A key benefit of working in physician practice workplace setting is the opportunity to work with patients across the lifespan, as it helps ATs develop new skills and adapt to diverse health care environments.⁴⁸ However, many ATs rather newly credentialed or with experience in traditional workplace settings, have limited prior experience with patient populations and conditions that fall outside the typical scope of athletic or young adult care.⁴⁸ Thus, ATs may want to gain experience in the physician practice workplace setting before seeking employment. Prior exposure to the physician practice workplace setting, whether through clinical experiences or residency training, has been shown to better equip ATs for success.⁴⁸

ATs in the physician practice workplace setting are commonly responsible for:

- **Clinical Patient Care:** Conducting histories of present illness, reconciling medications, and providing direct care such as casting, fitting durable medical equipment, drawing injections, removing sutures or staples, reading diagnostic images, and instructing patients in home exercise programs.⁴⁸
- **Medical Documentation and Orders:** Entering medical orders, updating patient charts, and managing electronic medical record (EMR) systems used by the clinic or hospital.⁴⁸

- Administrative Support: Preparing documentation for Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and workers' compensation cases, handling telephone and email communications, and coordinating patient follow-ups.⁴⁸
- Operational Tasks: Managing inventory, prepping patient charts ahead of clinic visits, and securing insurance authorizations to ensure smooth patient care delivery.⁴⁸

There are two common ways ATs enter the physician practice workplace setting. One is through a post-professional orthopedic residency. The other involves an alternative path with more on-the-job learning. Orthopedic residencies are designed to help fill gaps in knowledge and skills. These programs prepare ATs for the demands of working in physician practices. Completing a residency may also make applicants more competitive for job openings. Each residency includes structured learning and mentorship experiences in addition to opportunities for ATs gain hands-on experience in a specialty area while receiving compensation. Most residencies last one to two years. A few fellowships are also emerging to offer subspecialty training.

Other ATs have entered physician practice workplace setting through alternative pathways. Some made lateral moves after forming professional relationships with physicians. Others sought out job openings on their own and prepared independently. These ATs often embraced learning as they worked. Success in these roles depends on shared goals and expectations. It is important that key stakeholders understand the value of the AT. In many cases, these positions are new to everyone involved. Other clinical staff may not be familiar with the AT's role, so their comfort level may vary. Having a physician champion can help smooth this transition as the physician's support is especially important when challenges arise. This support can also help ATs grow in their clinical roles.

ATs in the physician practice setting have the ability to work within a wide range of physician specialties and patient populations, demonstrating the flexibility and adaptability ATs can offer by improving patient throughput and satisfaction. While career advancement within the physician practice often reflects an increase in responsibilities and pay rather than titles, the following are some examples of hierarchical structure titles:

- Clinical Athletic Trainer I, II, or III
- Lead Athletic Trainer
- Surgery Coordinator
- Clinical Lead or Supervisor
- Clinic or Practice Manager (administrative)
- Director of Clinical Services/Operations

These titles demonstrate the level of responsibility and cross training that ATs in the physician practice have, but also depend on the clinical structure and human resources classification. To help develop a pathway for advancement, ideas may be borrowed from the nursing profession's example of a clinical ladder, which is a structured program that recognizes and rewards nurses for their professional achievements, clinical expertise and leadership skills.

Recommendations for Career Advancement in the Physician Practice Workplace Setting

Career advancement in the physician practice typically correlates with increased autonomy in their role or implementing innovative ways to be utilized. After gaining the physician's trust, the AT's tasks may incorporate more advanced (mid-level provider) type responsibilities in patient care. In some situations, a challenge for personal development could be creating a role in the OR to scrub into surgery and assist a surgeon. ATs in physician practices are also establishing new immersion and preceptor sites for athletic training students to experience non-traditional settings while still maintaining a clinical schedule. An AT who enjoys assuming more administrative clinic responsibilities might create a path to promote to practice management.

Career advancement strategies may include tools such as additional certifications or credentials to enhance specialized skills and leverage credibility. Valuable credentials are available from a variety of entities, but cannot guarantee additional compensation. Some employers may designate the need for one in the job description such as OTC (Orthopedic Technologist Certification), which is not specific to an AT. Other credentials, such as the BOC BCS-O (Board Certified Specialist in Orthopedics) or the National Board for Certification in the Orthopedic Specialties (NBCOS) [OPE-C \(Orthopedic Physician Extender Certification\)](#) has higher levels of experience requirements and testing to obtain. Keep in mind additional certifications do not supersede state practice acts. It is most important to review the state practice act and the current BOC practice analysis. In addition, counsel from the state licensure board, district or state organization leaders, and the NATA COPA Physician Practice Panel should be sought if there are any questions or concerns.

Pathways to Career Advancement in the Public Safety Workplace Setting

Developed in collaboration with the NATA Council for Practice Advancement (COPA) Public Safety Panel

ATs have increasingly transitioned to non-traditional and emerging sectors including public safety. Within public safety, ATs provide tailored injury prevention, treatment, and recovery programs that ensure the health and readiness of first responders such as law enforcement officers, firefighters, and emergency medical personnel. ATs in public safety support the physical and mental health of tactical athletes, a term that describes first responders who face unique physical demands in their line of work. ATs in this practice setting are commonly responsible for:

- Injury Prevention Programs: Developing tailored exercise routines and ergonomics training to minimize the risk of injuries.
- Emergency Care: Offering rapid response and triage for on-the-job injuries, including acute trauma management.
- Rehabilitation and Return-to-Duty Planning: Designing evidence-based rehabilitation programs that ensure tactical athletes recover fully before returning to duty.
- Wellness Initiatives: Supporting long-term physical and mental health through fitness, nutrition, and stress management programs tailored to the first responder population.

ATs in public safety workplace settings have a variety of career advancement opportunities that allow them to expand their roles, refine their expertise and increase their impact on the health and wellness of tactical athletes. These pathways include hierarchical promotions, lateral career movement and entrepreneurial ventures, each offering unique opportunities for growth and professional fulfillment.

For ATs seeking hierarchical career advancement, leadership positions provide opportunities to oversee and shape health care strategies for public safety professionals. One such role is a *lead athletic trainer for public safety*, where an AT is responsible for injury prevention, rehabilitation and wellness programming within a department or region. Those looking to further elevate their influence may pursue positions such as *director of tactical medicine and rehabilitation*, a role that involves designing and managing comprehensive health care strategies tailored to the physical demands of law enforcement, firefighters and other first responders. Another leadership track includes becoming a *public safety health and wellness coordinator*, a role that extends beyond a single agency to implement broad health initiatives across multiple public safety organizations. These positions allow ATs to drive systemic change and improve long-term health outcomes for tactical personnel.

Beyond traditional promotions, lateral movement and career latticing provide opportunities for ATs to diversify their skill set and expand their professional reach. Instead of climbing a single career ladder, ATs may transition between organizations such as moving from a police department to a fire department to broaden their experience and refine their ability to work with different tactical populations. For example, an AT working with a police department's SWAT unit may transition into a role focused on firefighter wellness programs, thereby developing expertise in managing occupational injuries and optimizing performance in different public safety workplace settings. This flexibility not only enhances clinical versatility but also positions ATs as well-rounded experts capable of serving multiple facets of the public safety sector.

For those with more of an entrepreneurial mindset, creating new roles and independent consulting serve as alternative pathways to career advancement. Many public safety organizations have yet to fully integrate athletic training services into their operational structures, presenting an opportunity for ATs to pioneer new roles tailored to first

responders' needs. By advocating for the inclusion of ATs in law enforcement academies, fire departments and emergency medical services, professionals can establish themselves as key health care providers in tactical settings. Additionally, ATs may explore independent consulting, offering wellness programs, ergonomic assessments and injury prevention services to smaller public safety agencies that lack dedicated in-house providers. These entrepreneurial ventures not only help expand the reach of athletic training within public safety but also provide ATs with greater autonomy and career flexibility.

With multiple pathways available, ATs in public safety can tailor their career trajectory based on their interests, whether through leadership roles, lateral movement or independent initiatives. By strategically leveraging their expertise, advocating for their profession and seeking opportunities to innovate within tactical settings, ATs can significantly enhance their impact on the health, performance and longevity of first responders.

Recommendations for Career Advancement in the Public Safety Setting

ATs working in public safety workplace settings may encounter structural challenges that hinder career advancement, including limited recognition of their role within some organizations and the absence of formal career ladders. To navigate these obstacles and establish themselves as essential contributors to tactical health care, ATs can take proactive steps to advocate for their profession, enhance their expertise, and build strong professional networks.

One of the most effective strategies for career growth in public safety is advocating for professional recognition. Many agencies may not fully understand the scope of an AT's capabilities, so establishing formal titles such as "tactical athletic trainer" or "public safety wellness specialist" can help highlight their unique contributions. Clear, well-defined titles not only improve professional visibility but also align with the expanded responsibilities ATs often assume in these settings. By ensuring that their role is accurately represented within the agency, ATs can reinforce their value and position themselves for leadership opportunities.

Pursuing specialized certifications is another key step in career advancement. Earning credentials in [Tactical Strength and Conditioning \(TSAC\)](#), Occupational Health, or Human Performance Optimization can expand an AT's skill set and demonstrate their commitment to specialized care for tactical personnel. These certifications can help ATs refine their expertise in injury prevention, rehabilitation, and performance enhancement—critical elements for serving public safety professionals. Advanced training not only enhances clinical effectiveness but also increases eligibility for higher-level positions within law enforcement, fire rescue and military settings.

Engaging in professional networks is crucial for staying informed about emerging opportunities and best practices. By actively participating in organizations such as the NATA, National Strength and Conditioning Association, and other public safety or

tactical athlete-focused groups, ATs can connect with peers, learn from experienced professionals, and gain access to career development resources. Networking within these groups also helps ATs remain at the forefront of evolving industry standards and emerging trends in public safety wellness.

Collaboration with leadership is another essential component of career progression. By collaborating with public safety officials and department leadership to integrate data-driven injury prevention and wellness programs, ATs can demonstrate their value as strategic contributors to operational readiness. Developing and presenting measurable outcomes such as reductions in injury rates, improvements in fitness testing results, or enhanced recovery times reinforces the AT's role as an essential asset within the organization. This proactive approach not only strengthens an AT's credibility but also paves the way for expanded roles and increased institutional support. By advocating for recognition, pursuing specialized training, engaging in professional networks, and collaborating with leadership, ATs in public safety can overcome structural barriers and position themselves for meaningful career advancement.

Pathways to Career Advancement in the Armed Forces Workplace Setting

Generated in collaboration with the NATA COPA Armed Forces Panel

ATs in the military and armed forces are tasked with a diverse array of roles and responsibilities. They provide rehabilitation and clinical care, engage in research initiatives and serve as university Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) ATs. Their duties also include data tracking and metrics analysis, project management and safety observation and compliance. ATs collaborate within interdisciplinary teams that may include physical therapists, occupational therapists, registered dietitians, certified strength and conditioning specialists, psychological health professionals, data specialists and others. Additionally, they are responsible for educational duties for both military members and medical staff, concussion management and play a role in administration and policy development within various branches of the military and the Defense Health Agency.

ATs in the military workplace setting can hold a variety of important positions that utilize their skills and expertise. Some potential positions include:

- **Rehab and Clinical Care Athletic Trainer:** These professionals focus on providing rehabilitation services and clinical care to service members recovering from injuries.
- **Research Coordinator:** In this role, ATs coordinate and conduct research to improve treatment methods and injury prevention strategies within the military.
- **Educator:** They serve as educators, sharing their knowledge with other military personnel and helping to train new ATs.
- **Administrator:** As administrators, they manage health care programs and oversee the implementation of policies and procedures.

- **Lead Athletic Trainer:** This position involves overseeing a team of ATs, ensuring effective teamwork and optimized care for service members.
- **Program Management:** ATs may also direct wellness programs for a command or unit, focusing on overall health and fitness initiatives.

Each of these roles allows ATs to contribute significantly to the well-being and readiness of military personnel through their specialized training and experience.

ATs play crucial roles across numerous military programs aimed at maintaining and enhancing the health, fitness and performance of service members. They are integral to Special Operations commands where they provide specialized care and training to elite units, ensuring these personnel can perform at their highest capacity.

- In the Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation Team (SMART clinic) for the US Marine Corps (USMC) and the US Navy (USN), ATs work alongside specialists to offer comprehensive rehabilitation services, helping injured service members return to full duty.
- Similarly, the Sports Medicine and Injury Prevention (SMIP) clinic for the USMC focuses on preventing injuries and promoting overall physical wellness among marines.
- The [Holistic Health and Fitness \(H2F\) program](#) for the US Army integrates ATs to address not just physical but also mental and nutritional health, fostering a well-rounded approach to soldier fitness.
- Various Air Force programs also benefit from the expertise of ATs in enhancing pilots' physical readiness and managing injuries.
- Moreover, [the Preservation of the Force and Family \(POTFF\) initiative](#) utilizes ATs to support both service members and their families, emphasizing holistic health and resilience.
- Lastly, ATs serve in administrative roles within various branches, contributing to the development and implementation of health policies and programs, ensuring that military personnel receive the best possible care and support.

To obtain a job as an AT in the military, you typically need a master's degree in athletic training or a related field, certification from the BOC and relevant hands-on experience. Additionally, having knowledge of military protocols and previous experience working with military personnel can be advantageous.

Job postings for AR positions in the military can be found on government job boards like [USAJobs.gov](#), professional networking sites such as [LinkedIn.com](#) and contractor

websites that provide services to the military. Networking within military and athletic communities, attending relevant conferences and career fairs and leveraging internships or immersion experiences can also help in securing such positions.

Recommendations for Career Advancement in the Armed Forces Workplace Setting

Pathways to advance in your position include earning additional certifications within the rehabilitation and strength training fields such as [McKenzie certification](#), [Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist \(CSCS\)](#), Graston and Myofascial Release. For example, obtaining a CSCS certification can open opportunities for specialized roles requiring dual credentials. Applying various aspects of your degree including administration, management and health care administration is another pathway. An individual with a background in health care administration can leverage their skills to move into higher administrative roles within health care facilities.

Pursuing a role as program manager is another option; additional education in program management can prepare you for complex leadership tasks such as overseeing multiple projects and teams. Obtaining a [Project Management Professional \(PMP\)® certification](#) is also highly valued and can lead to advanced positions in project management across various commands. Expanding programs and hiring additional staff can potentially secure a leadership position. By gaining more knowledge in business management, you can effectively expand your department's capabilities and staff, positioning yourself for leadership roles.

Personal skills such as adaptability and quick thinking are crucial for addressing the unique challenges that arise in a military environment. An AT must be able to assess situations rapidly and modify training regimens to meet the diverse needs of service members. Confidence and persistence play key roles in overcoming obstacles and instilling a sense of resilience in others. Dynamic soft skills including teamwork and problem solving are vital for fostering a collaborative atmosphere where athletes feel supported and motivated. The ability to work seamlessly with other professionals from medics to commanding officers ensures that the holistic needs of service members are met. Additionally, understanding military terminology and command structure allows athletic trainers to navigate the organizational landscape effectively.

Furthermore, recognizing the importance of data metrics and reporting helps in tracking progress and making informed decisions about training adjustments.

Pathways to Career Advancement in the Performing Arts Workplace Setting

Produced in collaboration with the NATA COPA Performing Arts Panel

ATs play a vital role across a wide range of performing arts workplace settings. ATs in the performing arts work with diverse populations that include, but are not limited to,

dance, drum corps, circus arts, cruise ships, musicians, professional wrestling, sports entertainment, theme parks and theater. Additionally, ATs in performing arts work with performers across various levels of expertise, ranging from pre-professional and collegiate to professional and post-professional artists. This broad scope of engagement presents unique challenges and opportunities for ATs in the performing arts field.

ATs in performing arts are employed by a variety of organizations, including private practices, hospitals, universities, corporations and independent entrepreneurial ventures. In performing arts institutions with established medical staff, ATs can collaborate with or integrate into existing health care structures. In the absence of an established medical team, ATs may choose to approach administrative or management personnel to propose a new job position to deliver health care to their artists. Providing educational workshops on injury prevention strategies can be a way to introduce the value of an AT. In instances where financial resources are limited, performing arts organizations may contract AT services, providing a flexible staffing solution where the AT works with an external entity who is able to fulfill the contractual obligations.

Within performing arts, ATs assume a variety of job titles, with some examples being *athletic trainer, clinical specialist, director of dance medicine, performing arts medicine team lead, performing arts athletic trainer, dance sports medicine coordinator* and *owner*. These roles can extend beyond clinical care into non-clinical responsibilities, thus broadening career possibilities. Non-clinical responsibilities for ATs may include:

- **Administrative Roles:** To advance their careers, ATs can take on administrative duties such as coordinating payroll, accounting, medical and office record keeping, process coordination and scheduling logistics.
- **Adjunct Health Care Services:** Many performing arts organizations hire adjunct health care specialists to provide preventive care. ATs may choose to expand their expertise by pursuing additional certifications in areas such as active release technique, acupuncture, dry needling, elastic taping technique, instrument assisted soft tissue mobilization, massage therapy, Pilates, strength and conditioning or yoga.
- **Research:** Given the intersection between performing arts and sports science, there is a continual need for clinical research in performing arts. ATs may choose to engage in research to further the understanding of performing arts medicine and the demands of performing arts on the body.
- **Teaching and Health Educator Positions:** Many performing arts organizations seek educational content on topics such as anatomy and physiology, wellness and injury prevention. ATs can fill this need by assuming teaching roles, thereby contributing to the healthy development of current and future generations of performing artists.

Recommendations for Career Advancement in the Performing Arts Workplace Setting

To advance within the performing arts workplace setting, AT should evaluate how their skills and interests align with the unique health care needs of performing artists. Dance, with its structured educational and training systems, is one of the most established fields for ATs, and many professionals in the performing arts athletic training community primarily work with dancers. While opportunities in dance continue to grow, ATs can further expand their impact by advocating for positions in university dance programs that do not yet employ an AT and by extending their services to other performing arts disciplines in need of specialized health care. By broadening their scope, ATs can help fill critical gaps in injury prevention, rehabilitation, and performance optimization across the performing arts industry.

Building expertise in specific performing arts genres or injuries is an avenue to distinguish an AT's skill set. For ATs without a performing arts background, further education in performing arts medicine is an ideal way to gain the skills necessary to provide the specialized care artists want and deserve. This type of education, coupled with carefully selected experiences can increase an AT's credibility and visibility, leading to increased referrals driven by word of mouth. These referrals can be valuable for demonstrating expertise and bolstering career advancement opportunities.

Finally, involvement in professional networks and committees is essential for long-term career growth. Organizations such as the NATA and other national and international performing arts medicine associations offer a wealth of resources for professional development. Through active participation in these networks, ATs can stay informed about emerging opportunities, build professional connections, and solidify their standing as leaders in the field.

Pathways to Career Advancement in the Occupational Workplace Setting

Developed in collaboration with the NATA COPA Occupational Panel and the Industrial Athletic Trainers' Society (IATS)

The industrial and occupational health settings are among the NATA's designated "emerging" workplace settings and continue to grow as a viable and diverse career option in the profession. While both "industrial" and "occupational" are commonly used terms to describe athletic training services delivered in workplace environments, this section will use the term "occupational" to align with the language adopted by the NATA and to better reflect the diverse range of workplace settings where ATs currently practice.

ATs serve patient populations that may span varying levels of physical activity both in and out of their working roles. Strictly, in these workplace settings, patients often sustain large volumes of physical labor, repetitive tasks and/or high-demand functions. ATs providing care for these patients often fulfill the role and expectations based on the

employer's view or contract for wellness. This may take form as leading overall wellness initiatives, targeted injury prevention programs, and return-to-work programs. The physical locations of these jobs include but are not limited to manufacturing plants, warehouses, transportation hubs, construction/job sites and corporate wellness program offices. These settings often carry unique roles, as many tend to emphasize utilization of specific areas of the AT's scope of practice such as injury prevention and ergonomic assessments. The presence of ATs in these workplace settings not only improves the quality of life and well-being for the employees, but they also minimize operational and financial disruptions due to lost work time.

Over time, the role of ATs in these settings has evolved from a reactive care model to a preventive one. As a result, ATs play an integral role in promoting overall wellness, identifying occupational or patient-centric risk factors for injury and implementing preventative interventions to maintain safety, promote health and retain productivity levels. They also provide early and rapid interventions through evidence-informed evaluation and diagnosis as well as safe, timely, and efficient return to work strategies. These require a situational awareness of injury incidence, time-loss, employee well-being and organizational efficiency.

The core operational responsibilities of ATs in occupational workplace settings are deeply woven into the domains of AT practice. A great emphasis is placed on proactive risk reduction and performance support to prevent injuries, reduce risk, and empower patients and their settings for optimized job performance. All of which improve the wellness and skill for the patient while diminishing the impact of injuries on factors influencing occupational outcomes such as time away from work due to medical appointments and restriction from activity due to healing time. Each of these directly influences the output for an employer's work. ATs in the occupational setting must often utilize their skills to recognize and respond to emerging health concerns through interventions, evaluation, and hazard mitigation. By being able to provide on-site care and evaluation, ATs are uniquely able to respond to each of the contextual factors that occur at each location. Their familiarity with the site, its demands, potential hazards, and the patient allows them to deliver care that is both timely and efficient. ATs in occupational workplace settings are also able to utilize their education to mitigate the risks associated with a job's environmental and occupational demands. Examples of this include but are not limited to creation and enforcement of policies and procedures for outdoor weather hazards to identification of workplace situations that may lead to preventable injury and illness.

Beyond identifying an employer through job posts or familiarity, entry-level positions in occupational settings may carry non-traditional titles, which may unintentionally deter an athletic trainer from applying. As such, it is critical that interested job seekers look at the entire posting to determine if they are qualified. Job titles such as *industrial or occupational athletic trainer* may easily and clearly indicate that a credentialed AT is inherently qualified for the role. In other scenarios, titled, as *early intervention specialist*

and *program manager* may not explicitly indicate that an AT is qualified for the role or that it requires advanced experiences, but closer inspection of the qualifications and duties would indicate that they are. For ATs looking to advance their careers or entering the mid-career phase, positions can be categorized several ways.

These may be indicated by a title including *site lead*, with title prefixes such as “lead ____,” or “head ____.” A detailed list of these job title examples can be found in the table below.

Occupational Career Titles Indicating Career Advancement Stage

Entry Level/Early Career	Advancing/Mid-Career	Varies: Entry or Mid-Career
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Occupational Athletic Trainer · Athletic Training Specialist · Early Intervention Specialist · Injury Prevention Specialist · Health & Wellness Specialist · Operations Specialist · Occupational Sports Medicine Professional · Program Manager for ____ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Regional Manager or Coordinator of ____ · EHS (Environmental Health & Safety) Specialist or Coordinator · Wellness Program Consultant · Ergonomics Specialist / Analyst 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Site Lead for ____ · Lead ____ · Head ____ · Senior ____

Within the occupational workplace setting, there are also varying tracts, trajectories, or pathways that ATs can enter, establishing a clear trajectory for career and skill advancement. Those in these pathways often are in roles as personnel or program managers, coordinators and sometimes client relations managers. The context of these administrative pathways depends heavily on the orientation of the role. For example, an “inward-facing” manager may be primarily tasked with leading/managing a team of ATs whereas an “outward-facing” position may be tasked with managing client accounts and services.

There are several non-clinical career pathways within occupational workplace settings. Each of these pathways tend to reflect more refined skillsets that may benefit from additional training and certifications.

The first pathway is ergonomics. Roles in this pathway are commonly titled *ergonomics specialist*, *ergonomist*, and *human factors engineer* or have similar variation of terms. ATs in these roles focus their work on assessing and optimizing how workers interact with their work environment to reduce injuries. ATs practicing in these roles may also spend time analyzing physical tasks and demands to identify movements or postures that could lead to injury. ATs also may participate in creation or modification of processes and policies at work to promote safer activity (i.e., altering a workstation or implementing a pre-shift warm-up activity for workers). ATs in these roles may also collaborate with other individuals to create solutions and educate their patient

population. ATs looking to advance their skills may benefit from optional additional learning and credentialing. The [Board of Certification in Professional Ergonomics](#) is one of many groups offering coursework to augment and standardize the skills for ergonomists. If an AT is interested in this pathway, it is strongly recommended to investigate if these credentials are commonly required/preferred, their utility, cost, etc. prior to committing to them. These roles are ideal for ATs who enjoy injury prevention and performance optimization. Direct care might be limited compared to other pathways or settings but the potential for long-term impact may be higher. Depending on the scope of the job, ATs in this pathway may find themselves doing many independent assessments, traveling to worksites, or frequently collaborating with other departments. Advancement and promotion opportunities may depend on development of expertise within the pathway or setting but can provide long-term career stability and growth opportunities.

The next and most common career advancement pathway is within the safety field. Jobs in this field manage safety programs for companies and work sites. These jobs are typically focused on managing the safety programs and initiatives at their respective organizations. Jobs in this pathway tend to have variations that indicate their roles, scope and responsibility. For example, *safety specialist* vs. *coordinator* may indicate the breadth of work one can anticipate. Designations like EHS and HSE can indicate roles in *environmental health and safety* or *health safety and environment*, respectively. Given the depth in these roles and responsibilities, there is objectively more upward mobility and opportunities for advancement compared to other roles and settings ATs typically practice in. There are several credentials available via [the Board of Certified Safety Professionals](#) and [Occupational Safety & Health Administration \(OSHA\) Training Institute Education Centers](#). Overall, these roles best fit ATs who enjoy program and policy development and implementation. Like the ergonomics pathway, these roles may involve less direct patient care but still require regular interaction with the patient population to develop risk and injury prevention strategies. Career advancement in this pathway is structured and well established, especially for those willing to further their knowledge via post-professional certifications. However, promotion to regional or national leadership positions may require more travel. ATs looking to enter this space should have a strong understanding of regulatory requirements and be comfortable with documentation as well as managing direct reports.

A third pathway for career advancement is in the general theme of wellness and benefits. These are also popular positions but may have limited upward mobility so transitioning into managerial, analytical or leadership roles may be necessary for meaningful advancement. ATs in this pathway are often integral to development and implementation of wellness programs, providing health education and conducting health screenings among other roles. Common titles for these positions may include *wellness coordinator*, *health & wellness director* or some variant of those phrases. Advancement in this pathway may depend on organization-specific opportunities. For example, larger companies may have several levels of responsibilities and oversight

whereas smaller companies may have fewer, more comprehensive roles. Several different post-professional certifications may benefit ATs in this pathway. [The Chapman Institute](#), [National Commission for Health Education Credentialing](#) and other providers host several different levels of education and types of certifications in program coordination, corporate wellness and health education. ATs enthusiastic about health promotion, prevention and well-being are likely to thrive in these roles as they focus more on education and engagement with their patient population. Like the safety pathway, advancement and promotion may depend on organizational factors.

The next pathway is in sales. These positions allow ATs to utilize their clinical expertise, communication and network to promote and support innovative solutions for health and safety. Roles in the sales pathway are ideal for ATs who have interest in using their knowledge as it applies to technology and business. In this pathway, these ATs can serve as subject matter experts who translate knowledge about the body, ergonomics and risk factors to products and how they can benefit clients. For example, there are numerous companies with wearable technology, ergonomic devices, and motion capture software and injury prevention screening programs that can benefit from AT input in their creation and design as well as position the products as solutions for client needs. As with many sales positions, these roles may have great earning potential for sales representatives due to factors like commissions and performance-based bonuses. However, a downside may be that there is limited upward mobility in these roles. Formal post-professional credentialing does not exist currently. However, familiarity and experience in sales strategies, marketing and communication would benefit ATs in these positions.

The last pathway in the occupational workplace setting is education and research. Possession of post-professional degrees (i.e., a post-professional masters or doctorate) or advanced professional credentials may provide an opportunity to teach in education programs of varying health care professions. These roles allow ATs to share their clinical expertise while training future health care and safety professionals. Some ATs also contribute to continuing education for occupational staff or develop internal training programs for companies focused on injury prevention and wellness. Additional post-professional degree programs may exist to further position ATs for these roles. Several graduate degree programs exist in the fields of occupational health and safety and safety sciences. Additionally, ATs in these roles may also be able to contribute to research via clinical reasoning, data collection and evaluation skills to investigate workplace injury patterns, ergonomics interventions and human performance. Advanced, post-professional or terminal degrees may be required to obtain these positions. However, many ATs can meaningfully collaborate with other professionals and contribute to research efforts. ATs have made meaningful research contributions within high-impact organizations, including federal agencies, prominent safety, and occupational health bodies as well as presenting research in relevant conferences.

Recommendations for Career Advancement in the Occupational Workplace Setting

Several key considerations should be made by ATs desiring to advance their career and/or position. First, it may be beneficial to seek additional post-professional education, training and/or certifications that align with their goals. If a particular pathway or position is desired, ATs should gather information, reflect and evaluate opportunities regarding the skills and certifications that may be required or preferred for these positions. Additional work towards these may require extensive time and financial investments and each have unique features in their design (e.g., individual, self-paced learning vs. cohort style). This information can be gleaned from utilizing professional networks to connect with ATs in these positions or monitoring job postings.

Next, ATs seeking career advancement in the occupational setting should consider what their professional goals are and the strengths and weaknesses of their respective pathways along with their existing skills and abilities. For example, considering the “inward” vs. “outward” facing roles, upward mobility, earning potential and their entrepreneurial and sales skills. Similarly, it may be worthwhile to consider the risks and benefits of lateral moves within the settings and across pathways to build a diverse professional profile that better positions them for leadership and administrative roles. It may also be important to align and collaborate with intra- and inter-disciplinary teams to broaden the impact and visibility of their role and profession.

Common Job Titles in Occupational Pathways

Ergonomics	Safety	Wellness/Benefits	Insurance	Sales	Research
<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Ergonomist· Occupational Ergonomics Expert· Ergonomic Specialist/Analyst· Ergonomic & Wellness Specialist· Ergonomics Coordinator· Human Factors & Ergonomics Engineer· Injury Prevention & Ergonomics Analyst· Sr. Ergonomist· Ergonomics Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Safety Specialist· Safety Technician· Safety Coordinator· Safety Advisor· Safety Engineer· EHS/HSE/HWS Professional· EHS/HSE/HWS Manager· Regional Health & Safety Manager· EHS/HSE/ HWS Director· VP of Safety/Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Wellness Coordinator· Wellness Associate· Health & Wellness Associate· Wellness Program Consultant· Health & Wellness Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Consultant· Claims Adjuster· Senior Workers Compensation Claims Adjuster· Client Service Associate/Manager· Senior Claims Executive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Sales Associate· Sales Rep.· Client Success Manager· Customer Relations Coordinator· Director of Sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Research Analysts· Research Assistants

Chapter 7: Career Advancement through Service and Leadership

ATs who engage in leadership roles, whether within their organization, local community

or state, district or national professional associations enhance their visibility, expand their professional networks and develop essential skills that position them for career advancement. By actively contributing to the profession, ATs can influence policies, advocate for advancements in patient care and shape the future of athletic training. One of the most effective ways for ATs to advance their careers through leadership is by seeking opportunities within their own organization. Leadership, whether formal or informal, may be displayed by the AT taking on administrative responsibilities, overseeing program development, mentoring junior staff or advocating for necessary resources.

In hospital and clinical settings, ATs may engage in committee work focused on health care policy, quality improvement or patient safety initiatives, which demonstrates leadership beyond direct patient care.

Beyond internal leadership roles, ATs can engage with local, state, district and national organizations to expand their professional influence.

At the local level, for example, an AT might serve on a school district health and safety task force to help shape return-to-play protocols or contribute to a community wellness coalition focused on youth sports safety.

Others may participate in conference-level sports medicine advisory committees that establish emergency action plans or policies for school athletic events.

Furthermore, at the state level, athletic training associations often offer opportunities to get involved in a range of professional activities. For instance, an AT may join a legislative committee to advocate for improved state licensure laws or increased access to AT services in underserved areas.

Others might help coordinate continuing education workshops and educational sessions for the annual conference, contribute to a public relations campaign during National Athletic Training Month or serve on a diversity, equity and inclusion committee to help shape inclusive professional standards.

ATs may also serve as a liaison between ATs and state policymakers through activities such as testifying before legislative bodies or participating in Capital Hill days that offer advocacy at the state capitol and gives ATs a direct voice in health care policy. These roles not only support the profession but also help ATs develop valuable leadership, communication and advocacy skills while increasing their visibility among peers and decision-makers.

On a broader scale, district and national professional organizations such as the NATA, BOC or CAATE offer numerous leadership and service opportunities. ATs can get involved by joining committees, task forces or work groups focused on a variety of

professional interests including professional development, ethnic diversity, inclusion, research, specific practice settings or emerging clinical and education trends. Serving in these capacities not only enhances an AT's resume but also connects them with influential leaders in the field, fostering mentorship and networking opportunities that can lead to career advancement. Leveraging volunteer opportunities to assist with career advancement can be easy to begin the journey into leadership. NATA, your districts and states are always looking for volunteers within the committees. You can search available volunteer opportunities and sign up through [NATA Gather](#).

In addition to committee work, ATs can take on elected leadership roles within NATA or its regional districts and states such as serving as a state representative, district director or executive board member. These positions provide a platform to influence policy decisions, education initiatives and advocacy efforts that shape the future of athletic training. Leadership at this level demonstrates a commitment to professional service and often leads to significant recognition and valuable opportunities for career advancement.

Service and leadership in athletic training also extend to mentorship and professional outreach. ATs can contribute to the growth of the profession by mentoring students, speaking at conferences, developing educational materials or participating in research collaborations. Those who actively engage in leadership roles within their workplace or professional organizations gain valuable experience in strategic planning, decision-making and advocacy, all of which are essential skills for career progression.

By stepping into leadership and service roles, ATs not only strengthen the profession but also position themselves for greater career opportunities, professional recognition and personal fulfillment. Whether through internal leadership, involvement in state or national organizations or participation in mentorship and advocacy efforts, ATs who embrace leadership and service play a vital role in advancing both their own careers and the profession as a whole.

Conclusions

Career advancement in athletic training is essential for both individual professional growth and the sustained development of the profession. ATs seeking to elevate their careers can do so through knowledge and skill development, specialized education, expanded roles and responsibilities, leadership opportunities and service to professional organizations. By strategically pursuing these avenues, ATs can enhance job satisfaction, strengthen their commitment to the profession and improve overall retention rates. To do so, employers of ATs should recognize the importance of clear career pathways, mentorship, professional networks and structured opportunities for advancement in fostering long-term career fulfillment and professional success.

As the profession continues to evolve, ATs must remain adaptable, seeking new challenges, advocating for their value in various settings and investing in their continued education and leadership development. Organizations, institutions and professional

associations must also prioritize structured career advancement models that promote equitable opportunities, recognition and retention. By fostering a culture that values and supports career progression, the athletic training profession can continue to thrive by ensuring ATs remain influential leaders in health care practice, research and education. Moving forward, collaboration between ATs, employers and professional organizations will be crucial in building sustainable career pathways that empower ATs and advance the profession.

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