



# Levelling the Field:

## Ensuring *Fair* and *Flexible* Work Conditions for Athletic Trainers



### **Athletic trainers (ATs) are essential to the health, safety, and performance of student-athletes across Canada West universities.**

However, their working conditions – marked by excessive hours, irregular schedules and frequent travel – are unsustainable. Burnout and turnover are rising, threatening athlete care and department stability. This brief is designed for Canada West decision-makers, athletic directors, and university administrators seeking sustainable staffing solutions. It outlines the scope of the problem, synthesizes evidence from comparable sectors, and recommends flexible work arrangements (FWAs). These recommendations are tailored to the athletic context and aim to enhance AT well-being while improving retention and program stability.

### **WHAT'S AT STAKE?**

ATs play a critical role in post-secondary athletics. They manage injuries, oversee rehabilitation, and ensure athletes are physically prepared to compete. Despite their importance, ATs often work under extreme pressure, with long hours, heavy travel schedules, and little time for recovery. These conditions contribute to high rates of burnout and turnover. In turn, this can disrupt athlete care and increase staffing instability.

In Canada West, this issue is particularly urgent. Universities can struggle to retain qualified ATs, and the conference risks damaging their reputation if these concerns go unaddressed. Supporting ATs is not only a matter of employee wellness; it's an important investment in the overall success and stability of athletic programs. By adopting FWAs, Canada West can strengthen its workforce, give athletes the best care possible.

### **WHY NOW?**

- The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated conversations around workplace flexibility across sectors.
- In athletics, where burnout is high and retention is low, now is the time to act.
- Canada West has the opportunity to align with broader workforce trends and position itself as a leader in sustainable staffing.



### **Key Questions:**

*Questions for Canada West policy makers to consider:*

- **How can athletic departments support ATs without compromising program performance?**
- **What flexible work models are *feasible* in high-demand sport settings?**



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### ***Burnout & work-life conflict are widespread.***

Recent studies show that **burnout among post-secondary ATs is both prevalent and severe.**

In a 2023 cross-sectional study of over 1000 ATs, researchers found that those working over 50 hours per week and sleeping under 7 hours per night experienced significantly higher levels of personal and work-related burnout (Signe et al., 2023).

The average AT reported working 56 hours per week and sleeping just over 6.5 hours per night conditions (Signe et al., 2023). These conditions leave very little room for recovery or personal time.

Another study found that 86% of ATs were dissatisfied with their work-life balance, and only 14% regularly had time for self-care (Cairns et al., 2024). These findings show systemic barriers to wellness and highlight the urgent need for change.

## **BUILDING THE CASE FOR CHANGE**

**86% of collegiate athletic trainers report being dissatisfied with their work-life balance. Only 14% regularly have time for self-care.**

*(Cairns et al., 2024)*

### ***Psychosocial Toll of the Role:***

Qualitative research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic showed the emotional strain ATs experienced while managing evolving safety protocols and institutional pressures. ATs described their feelings/experiences as:

- “running on a treadmill, trying to figure out which way to go.”
- “burned out in a regular year... then you add COVID, and then a crazy coach breathing down your neck – it makes the situation worse.”

*(DiSanti et al., 2023, p.905-906)*

Despite their resilience, many ATs expressed a need for better support systems. As one participant put it:

- “I told my coworker... I need a break. I haven’t had a break since last winter.”

*(DiSanti et al., 2023, p.906)*

It’s clear that many ATs are struggling with the demands of their job. These testimonies make a powerful case for the implementation of FWAs.



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### LESSONS FROM COMPARABLE FIELDS

FWAs have been successfully implemented in healthcare and education. These fields share similar stressors with athletics, such as irregular hours, high emotional demands, and staffing shortages. Strategies like job sharing and flexible scheduling have improved retention and reduced burnout in these sectors. Canada West can use these examples to design athletic-specific solutions, while still balancing operational needs with employee wellness.



#### Healthcare:

- A 2025 study of 208 nurses across four general hospitals in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria found that flexible work arrangements (job sharing/flexible scheduling) significantly improved *affective commitment* (employees' attachment and loyalty to their workplace).
- Job sharing showed a positive impact on emotional attachment to the workplace, while flexible scheduling had an even stronger effect.
- Nurses with access to FWAs reported greater dedication, punctuality, and quality care delivery (Nwoko et al., 2025).
- This reinforces FWAs as a viable strategy for retention and staff engagement.



#### Education:

- A 2024 study of 245 university educators in Indonesia examined the impact of FWAs on job satisfaction, work-family conflict, and performance.
- They found that FWAs (especially remote work and flexible scheduling) reduced work-family conflict and improved educator performance, although they did not directly increase job satisfaction.
- Job satisfaction was the strongest predictor of educator performance.
- This suggests that FWAs may support performance indirectly by easing stress and enabling better work-life balance (Jimad et al., 2024).

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

This evidence confirms that flexible work arrangements have been successfully implemented across diverse, demanding environments like healthcare and education. This provides a blueprint for future FWAs in athletic departments aimed at improving employee experiences and the organization themselves.



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### RECOMMENDATIONS

To address burnout and improve retention among ATs, Canada West should **implement the following flexible work strategies:**

#### Flexible Scheduling Models:

- Allow ATs to adjust their hours around peak competition periods and recovery windows.
- This could include staggered shifts, compressed workweeks, or seasonal flexibility.

#### Impact:

- Reduces burnout
- Improves work-life balance
- Supports long-term career sustainability.

#### Remote Administrative Work:

- Allow ATs to complete documentation, planning, and communication tasks off-site when appropriate and possible.

#### Impact:

- Increases autonomy
- Reduces unnecessary on-site hours
- Supports mental recovery.

#### Job Sharing Programs:

- Pair ATs to share responsibilities and coverage, especially during high-demand periods.

#### Impact:

- Maintains service levels
- Reduces individual workload/stress.
- Result in more well-rounded athlete care.

#### Institutional Support for FWAs:

- Provide training, resources, and policy frameworks to help athletic departments implement FWAs consistently.

#### Impact:

- Ensures buy-in across institutions.
- Promotes a culture of wellness.

These recommendations are grounded in both quantitative data and lived experiences. For example, only 26% of ATs currently use teamwork (e.g. job sharing) to promote work-life balance, and just 21% report using work-life separation strategies (Cairns et al., 2024). There are clear ways for working conditions to improve.

#### Implementation Strategy

- Launch pilot programs.
- Form a working group of athletic directors and ATs to co-develop policy frameworks.
- Provide training and resources to support implementation.
- Gather feedback/scaling successful models across the conference.

#### Investing in People, Strengthening Programs

*To summarize,* ATs are vital to the success of university sport programs, yet they are often undervalued and overworked. The data is clear: burnout is widespread, and current working conditions are unsustainable. Canada West can lead by example through implementing flexible work arrangements. This supports ATs while maintaining high standards of athlete care. With these changes, we can improve individual well-being **and build stronger, more resilient athletic departments.**

**This is an opportunity to lead — not just in sport, but in workforce innovation. The time to act is now.**



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