

Our Fitness Frontline Workers: Group Ex Instructors and Personal Trainers Survival and Self-Employment as a Threat to our Clubs

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The current COVID-19 pandemic has prompted many companies and individuals to become creative with business strategies to ensure survival during these difficult and challenging times. As the Greek Philosopher, Heraclitus, once said, "Change is the only constant." This now applies more than ever to the Fitness Industry and many experts are noting that the landscape has been forever changed, and this change is accelerating.

Pivot or Perish has become our new mantra, and digitization has become our fuel.

Virtual training, on-demand workouts and home-grown fitness forums have sprung-up and are expanding. These workouts come from our clubs, outside businesses and even our own unemployed or underutilized staff.

Our fitness staff are our frontline workers, our Group Ex Instructors and our Personal Trainers.



Since governmental regulations limit participation in our clubs, we have laid-off or are limiting the hours of these frontline workers, thereby reducing their salaries, and out of necessity, our frontline workers have and are pivoting by droves. Workouts are online, in parking lots, and in personal homes. It is amazing how resourceful our Frontline Workers have become.

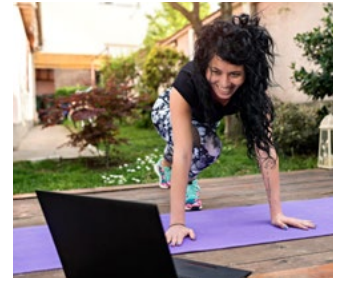
Group Ex Instructors and Personal Trainers have always been the heart and soul of our clubs, studios and centers. Our members know them, love them and listen to them.

When told to squat, our members squat. When told to plank, our members plank, and when told to follow our members follow.

Our top Group Ex Instructors and most popular Personal Trainers are smart, savvy and hold the heart and hand of our club members. They connect our members to our clubs. They are the conduit and the front-line of our facility. And if club owners and managers don't take care and pay attention to our top Group Ex Instructors and most popular Personal Trainers, they will leave ... if they haven't already.

Our clubs and studios are in possible danger of losing their best and brightest Group Ex Instructors and Personal Trainers to self-employed digital and small boutique or home-based solutions. These frontline health club workers have discovered how to stream sessions, utilize portable platforms, open

their own private studios and transform their garages into private workout centers. They have figured out social media and how to source inexpensive fitness equipment. Even if these solutions are temporary, our out-of-work Instructors and Trainers are finding ways to stay connected to our clients and are making money (and lots of it) without us.



The long-term answer to the question “will we ever regain and regrow our memberships?” remain in the hands of our clients. Will clients choose to stay with their independent Instructors and Trainers after the pandemic, forgoing such amenities as locker rooms, larger group ex offerings and sophisticated equipment, or will our members choose to migrate back to our facilities and rejoin? We are left with a plethora of questions.

Will clients even need to make a choice between our facilities and remaining loyal to their fitness guru?



Will members stay with their favorite Trainer and Instructor, or will they do both? After this pandemic lifts, will clients have the money to do both? And most importantly, will we have staff to hire back? Will our best Instructors and Trainers even come back after they have experienced the pay increases and freedom that self-employment offers?

All these questions have no clear answers. But there are steps that owners and managers can take to ensure that they will hopefully have their choice of the best instructors and trainers to hire.

1. Remain close to your past and present staff. Stay in contact through emails, zoom and messaging. Thank them for their patience and loyalty. Remind them that you are there to support them and help them through this time.
2. Start and expand your digital solutions. This pandemic is not lifting quickly and looks like it may last through the entire winter and far into next summer. Even as our fitness businesses may be deemed essential, the residual impact of governmental closings or limiting most likely will be devastating to our economy and to our member’s financial stability.
3. Support the independent Instructor and Trainer by allowing them to remain independent and economically self-sufficient while they also work for you. Do not require exclusivity.
4. Explore ways to encourage exclusivity by starting or expanding creative and attractive revenue splits with our frontline workers. Analyze ways to support Instructor and Trainer continuing education to inspire and maintain loyalty.
5. Find and hire the top Instructors or Trainers from facilities that have permanently closed or have reduced their staff. Ask around. Find out who these frontline favorites were, or are, and how to contact them.



When the pandemic began, Group Ex Instructors offered classes for free by connecting with participants on Social Media sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. These Teachers missed their students and their students were equally craving sessions and social contact. This authentic connection and honest sharing of health and wellness spirited the value of the Group Ex Instructor. The Group Ex Instructor figured out this technology on their own, quickly and efficiently.

And for the first time in fitness history, the Group Ex instructor was the hero.

The best instructors got online quickly capturing the attention and hearts of our members. Personal Trainers already had their clients cell phone numbers and emails. They too connected rapidly and with compassion to our members. The top Trainers were not willing to lose the connection with (or the income from) their clients. Trainers figured out their technology, provided portable, inexpensive equipment to their clients, found fitness alternatives and continued to train.



Our Group Ex Instructors, Personal Trainers, Yoga Instructors, Active Aging Specialists, Pilates Teachers have all adapted to the times. These Fitness Professionals who are the industry's Frontline Workers have pivoted and determined how to survive financially during this pandemic. They have embraced technology platforms such as Zoom, FaceTime, YouTube and other digital resources to offer programming to their clients while their gyms have been closed.



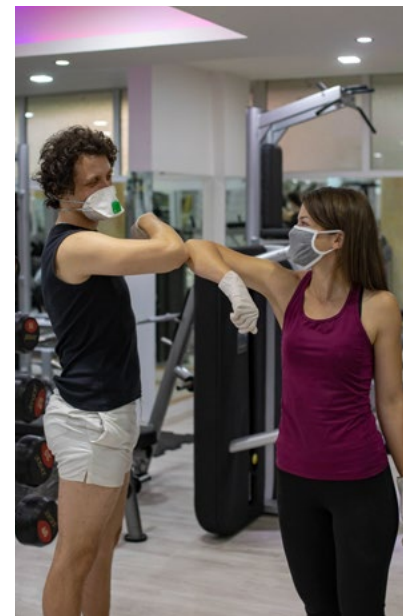
While our clubs are slowly opening, many of our “workers” remain unemployed by our facilities. It is predicted that 30% of clubs will never open, and those that do open will employ fewer staff due to decreased membership. Yet, we remain optimistic about opening and embracing our members. Therefore, we must plan.

How and where members come back remains to be determined. Will they come back to a gym, a studio, their favorite instructor's garage, or stay at home and have their Personal Trainer come to them?

We are humans; we are social beings and crave social interaction, camaraderie, and companionship.

Some individuals will come back to the gyms sooner than others depending upon their comfort levels, age and the perception of the gym's safety and cleanliness while others will wait until scientists create a vaccine. And still others may never come back as they have invested heavily on virtual group classes and in-home fitness equipment.

Our citizens were told, and initially thought that the social distancing mandates would last for only a few weeks. This was all supposed to be over by Easter. However, when the month of May rolled around, Group Ex Instructors and Personal Trainers knew that they needed a solution for their lost income. They learned to utilize technology and ask for donations from their many followers via Venmo, PayPal and other avenues. Club members were forced to search for workout alternatives and Fitness Professionals were forced to find innovative ways to deliver their services. One Instructor figured out how to go online. One Trainer helped another Trainer, and the knowledge and skill spread ... afterall, we are all in this together.



The pandemic is directly related to the surge we see in digital fitness and the accelerated awareness and usage of technology. **Necessity is the mother of invention and online exercise!** Group Exercise Professionals rely on the income (however small) that they make from teaching a few classes per week. They use it for groceries, clothes, and often rent. They crave the social interactions and love what they do.



Group Ex Instructors and Personal Trainers may be part-time employees and contractors, but they consider this a part-time “career.” This “work” is a “profession” and not a mere “job.” It is a calling.



Group Ex Instructors may work two hours a week or twenty, but physically, they could never handle much more. Yet, Group Ex instructors are invested in our industry, imbedded in our community, and consider teaching a “career” and definitely not a “hobby.” They invest in themselves and this translates into investing in our patrons. They see our members as their members, and because of this, they reached out immediately to their members during the pandemic.

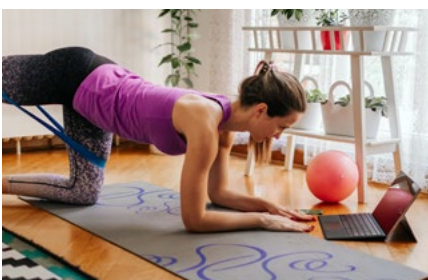
Personal Trainers are equally as committed. The one-on-one environment creates an even closer connection to our members, who they consider their clients. Personal Trainers typically make more money per hour than Group Ex Instructors and are therefore more likely to go full-time. They rely on this sole income to survive. When clubs are closed and have not adapted to streaming workouts, Personal Trainers had to figure out how to literally stay in business and how to train their clients. Without club-revenue split, Personal Trainers were and are making more than ever.

Personal Trainers could connect with their clients quickly because they had emails and cell numbers. Then the biggest adjustment came with how to actually train the client. How to get them equipment and get a client to use different forms of media. Personal Trainers had their clients purchase their own equipment or simply dropped off pre-sterilized equipment at their home. One of the biggest hurdles was training their clients how to adjust their camera so that the trainer could see the client and actually train them. Often directing a squat or sit-up has more to do with camera angles and visuals than proper posture and execution.



Group Ex pros pivoted with passion, and Personal Trainers adapted with ingenuity.

As the pandemic progressed, Group Ex instructors needed to learn more business techniques and strategies. The best instructors were inspired to figure out how to get paid for their online programs.

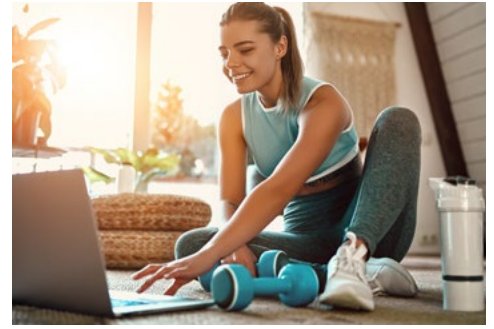


The resourcefulness of these workers was and is impressive. They figured out how to connect with their clients and be paid an average of \$10 of per class per student. This enabled even the least-favorite Instructor to earn twice or three-times (and sometimes even 10-times) the amount they used to be paid for an in-club class.

SCW Fitness constituents have shared this same experience over

and over again on webinars, chat boxes and through social media. Group Ex instructors who pivoted were making and continue to make more money than ever.

Personal Trainers have been even more prolific and ingenious. Some are charging clients 100% of their previous fees while others have discounted virtual training prices by 10% - 30%. All of these funds are going directly into the Trainers pocket because the facility no longer receives a share. Personal Trainers have increased their income and have become even more personal and private. They have become and remain more confident in their abilities to survive and thrive outside of the club environments.



With the utilization of home equipment and inexpensive items such as mats, tubing, and small dumbbells at-home workouts are thriving. The convenience of in-home training has attracted more and more clients, as well. While members cannot go to the gym, or are too scared to go to the gym, home workouts have become the only alternative. The saved time of reduced travel (just walking down-stairs) or no membership dues combined with the intimacy and focus on “me” in this type of training has made Personal Training a more viable alternative for clients.

More and more Group Ex Instructors have seen the expansion of Personal Training and possibility of increased revenue available. More Instructors are now becoming Trainers. The SCW Personal Training Certification has continued to grow during this pandemic, along with booming participation in Virtual Training Certifications. Instructors and Trainers both want to learn how to or expand their skills to train more online clients.

These front-line fitness workers no longer need a club to survive and thrive. They have and are figuring it out.



Therefore, if clubs have not done so already, owners and managers much connect with their best Instructors and Trainers now, ASAP and without hesitation. Even if they have ignored their frontline workers for the past six months, it is not too late. We need these talented people to continue to connect with our members and bring them home.

There remains hope for our facilities. For the same reason our members first joined them gym, our clients will come back to the gym.

Members joined originally because of the need for a variety of equipment and creative movement, but most of all the socialization and reinforcement that a gym provides. This socialization sometimes means community and connections or quiet and solitude. Maybe the members need to be around like-minded people, or simply have a way to engage old friends or meet new people. Often, our members travel to a facility to be inspired to work-out. They find that being in a fitness facility inspires them to start exercising, stay exercising and increase their exercising. Either way you look at it, it is a place to go. It is a get-away from the boredom of the ordinary and the pressure and reminders of responsibilities.



Working from home day-in-and-day-out, the constant contact with spouses, the demands of home-schooling, and the long pet-walks along the same paths all seem to emphasize the need for change and often escape. A simple change of environment represents a freedom and a time for “me”. Simply put, our clients need and crave to “get out of the house!”

The public prefers to go out to restaurants, even though they love the convenience of DoorDash and Grubhub. They want to go out even if it means cold outdoor cafes. We crave stimulation and connections. And when we do have the opportunity, we chatter away with our neighbors when picking up the mail or walking the dog. We need interaction on every and any level and the same is true for fitness.

Now that the weather is cooler in the south, more Instructors and Trainers are performing outdoor workouts. Both Group Ex instructors and Personal Trainers are going to parks, parking lots, beaches and backyards. They are also conducting hybrid workouts that include outdoor live companionship with indoor Zoom or FaceTime technologies.

Fearful of the extreme cold, Instructors and Trainers in the North are clearing out their garages and keeping the windows open or the garage door cracked and teaching from home to a few loyal clients. They are also Zooming these indoor/garage workouts. Basically, many of the best instructors and most ingenious Trainers are opening make-shift Boutique Studios out of their homes. Their income is still more than the gym paid (most times ... a LOT more), and while attendance may be decreased because of the limited space, their earning potential is even greater than before the pandemic.



As clubs continue to open, an important issue will arise regarding our frontline workers. Should we allow our Group Ex Instructors and Personal Trainers to continue to train their clients (which may have originally been our members) or will we, as owners and directors, require Instructors and Trainers to be exclusive to our facility? Many Group Ex Instructors and Personal Trainers may have a difficult decision to make. Should I go back to work at the fitness facility or make more money and continue to work on my own? Being very social creatures, this will remain a difficult choice for our fitness leaders. Most Instructors and Trainers are just that Instructors and Trainers. They are not businesspeople at heart. They do not love finance and marketing and would prefer this work to be done by others. But, some, if not many are enjoying the freedom and embracing the opportunity of entrepreneurship.



With permanent closures of clubs and reduced staffing requirements, maybe facilities really don't need as many Instructors and Trainers, and never will, so should we even worry? This has been a time of financial reorganization and restructuring. Maybe we should just “trim the fat” and remove the underqualified Instructor and Trainer and embrace more whole-heartedly the top talent. Yet, where is this top talent? Are they now, or will they soon be, our competitor?

The closures of many clubs and studios may entice our top talent to further their entrepreneurial spirit and open a facility of their own. Lower rents, no build-out expenses and convenient locations make for an attractive alternative to digital solutions, garages or public parks. What we don't need in our industry are more clubs, and greater competition (however short-term it may appear.)



Hopefully, the time will come when we need more Instructors and Trainers because our clubs will be fully operational and our memberships will grow, necessitating the hiring of more staff. With all these considerations, it is very important to connect with your Group Ex Staff and Personal Trainers.

Additionally, the societal emphasis on cleanliness and safety has added pressure on Group Ex Instructors and Personal Trainers to obtain and maintain certifications. Safety is at the forefront of our clients' minds and is the greatest concern to be our greatest concern. Although this has been a horrible time in our world history, this pandemic has provided a few benefits. The greatest benefit of all has been time. Time for our families, time for reflection and time for self-improvement.

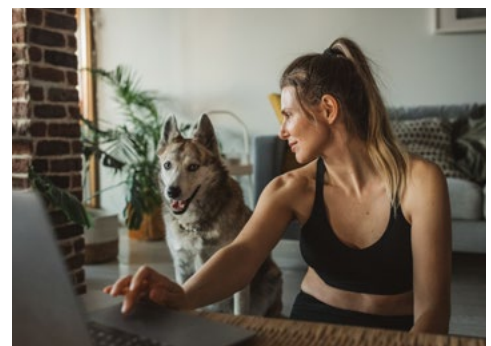


Fitness Professionals had time, and have made time, to invest in their careers and education. During this pandemic, SCW has certified approximately 5,000 instructors during this pandemic alone via our Live Stream and Online options, and has re-certified thousands more.

For the past 35 years SCW has offered conferences in cities across the USA – Washington D.C., San Diego, Orlando, Atlanta, Dallas, Chicago and Boston www.scwfit.com. SCW Fitness has also continued to provide Continuing Education Credits (CECs) to Fitness Professionals by utilizing the Zoom platform to conduct Live Stream MANIA® Conferences. SCW was the first to offer a fully Live Stream Convention with over 170 sessions in May of this year. To do so, SCW had to build their own technology, which was frictionless to the consumer because, frankly, nothing else was available. To date, SCW has offered five conventions, with a sixth planned for May 21-23. Touted as “the best in the business”, these fitness conventions attract approximately 1,000-900 attendees each. During this pandemic SCW has had face-to-face (or should we say zoom-to-zoom) contact with over 10,000 professionals.

Every SCW MANIA® Convention has offered continuing education credit/units (CECs) from ACE, NASM, AFAA, AEA, ACSM plus several other certification organizations. SCW has also been offering certifications in over 37 topics for the past 25 years. Again, with all the certification organizations approving 34 of the 37 SCW Certifications for CECs.

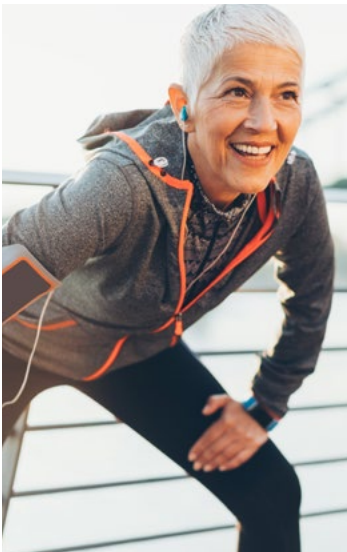
SCW has found that our core certifications such as Group Exercise, Personal Training, and Aquatic Exercise have expanded greatly. We have trained tens of thousands of fitness professionals in these areas. Additionally, our specialty certifications such as Meditation, Yoga, Active Aging, Barre, Foam Rolling, and Nutrition



Coaching have expanded. Our most recent Virtual Training Certification has also sky-rocketed in attendance. Both Club Fit Pros and independent Fit Pros have flooded to this live streaming and online program.

The following list contains the **Top 10 Certifications** that Fitness Professionals have registered for with SCW Fitness and the Top 10 represents 60% of all Certification enrollments:

1. Group Exercise
2. Personal Training
3. Aquatic Exercise
4. Meditation
5. Yoga
6. Active Aging
7. Virtual Training
8. Barre
9. Rolling and Recovery
10. Nutrition Coaching

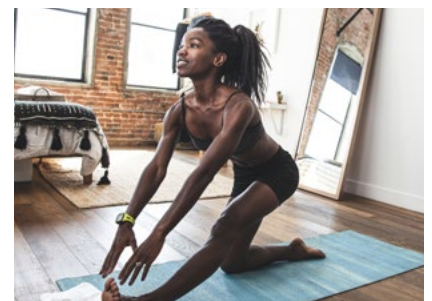


This list really should not be surprising in the light of the pandemic. Fitness Professionals will always engage in the top three core certifications (Group, PT and Aqua) whether teaching at a facility or building their own business. During these times of stress that have been caused by the uncertainty of the pandemic, it makes sense that Meditation, Yoga, Rolling and Recovery, and even Barre share a place in the Top 10. Active Aging continues to gain traction as our population ages and lives longer with an emphasis on quality of life. More individuals have been forced to eat at home during the pandemic and are looking to Fitness Professionals for advice on how to eat healthy and cook meals that are comforting without all of the calories. Lastly, the Virtual Training Certification teaches Fitness Professionals how to run their own business from a technological perspective, which has become a necessity with gyms closed and reduced class sizes in the ones that have opened.

After each MANIA® conference, SCW conducts a survey that includes approximately 50% of the conference attendees providing valuable feedback on a range of topics. During the past four Live Stream MANIA® Conferences, over 2,000 attendees have indicated, which topics were and are their favorites. More than one selection is allowed. These are topics that they need covered now, so that they can deliver them to their current clients. Plus, these are topics that they are interested in soon presenting to their customers. 74% of these respondents are Group Ex Instructors, 60% are Personal Trainers and 25% are Owners, Managers and Directors.

A list of these topics is noted below with the percentage of attendee interest:

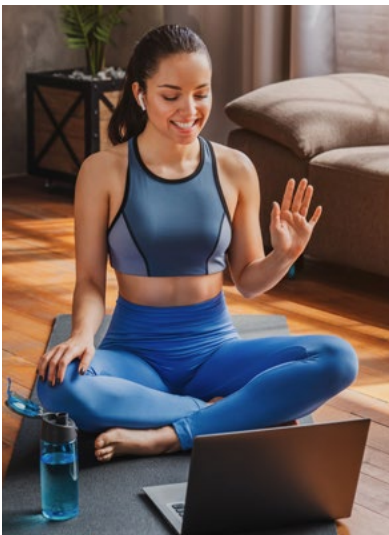
1. Active Aging (61.1%)
2. Functional Training (54.0%)
3. Nutrition (53.6%)
4. Strength Training (48.5%)



5. Core Training (45.9%)
6. High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) (38.6%)
7. Personal Training (34.0%)
8. Exercise Science (33.6%)
9. Yoga (30.4%)
10. Group Cardio (29.9%)



SCW has seen an increase in Active Aging with a decrease in HIIT. For all of 2019, we have seen this trend and this gap has expanded during the pandemic. Functional Training was in SCW's #1 spot for many, many years and now is #2, followed closely by Nutrition which has always been a leader. All Nutrition programming has been strongly regarded throughout the past five years, but seems to have recently elevated even more in status. Core Training has always been beloved and remains a favorite. Although not hitting the top 10, Aqua Exercise has increased in awareness and appreciation. According to the CDC (Center for Disease Control) pool chemicals have 6 times the strength to kill the coronavirus. Aquatic exercise participation has increased and will continue to do so as our population ages and we search for safe environments in which to exercise.



The attendances in sessions is also quite eye-opening as a predictor of club and studio trends. Classes that focus on body parts such as abs, glutes, legs, and arms receive a great amount of attention. Specialty training for women is also a winner.

Consequently, not only will the way that Fitness Professionals deliver their services change, but many of the programming options will change as well. Interestingly, we have also seen many Fitness Professionals advertising specialty classes that are very popular with their clients and at the Live Stream MANIA® Conferences.

Club Owners and Managers will also need to pivot now, and into the near future, to ensure the sustainability and success of their facilities. Success will be strongly correlated to those Frontline Fitness Professionals

who will become more important than ever in the hierarchy of the gym. The following are some recommendations for Club Owners and Managers, which they will need to consider as organizational leaders:

1. Connect immediately with your Front-Line Fitness Professionals if you have not done so already. You need to engage them and welcome them "home" as part of the family.
2. Do not ignore the value of your Front-Line Fitness Professionals. They are the individuals who service your members and create satisfied customers. The main point of differentiation in any club or facility is customer service. Many owners build clubs with the latest and greatest equipment and fail with poor customer service when another gym with the same latest and greatest equipment opens across the street.
3. Pivot now and determine how you can best provide programming and specials to retain your members and maintain your staff. While SCW has provided valuable national recommendation, create your own surveys and get your own answers regarding their preferences of programming.

4. Do not require your Group Ex Instructors and Personal Trainers to sign or follow exclusivity ultimatums. You should allow them to work at your facility and continue their own teaching and training. Fitness professionals have determined how to survive during the pandemic without clubs being open. Often, your club members will have loyalty to those Frontline Fitness Professionals, and with reduced incomes, they may look for more affordable options such as working with Personal Trainers at home to avoid paying membership dues. With many clubs permanently closing, including YMCAs and boutique studios, a Personal Trainer or Group Ex Instructor may be able to determine a way to take over the studio and take your members with them.

It is exciting to see how fitness has survived and even thrived during these times and will continue to get the message to the masses “Fitness is the Greatest Medicine of All”. However, it is only through our Frontline Workers that we can continue to make a difference to advance and protect the health of all Americans.

Learn more about SCW Fitness Education at scwfit.com

About the Author, Sara Kooperman, JD



Sara, CEO of SCW Fitness Education and WATERinMOTION®, is a visionary leader that has transformed the fitness education community. A successful business owner and advisor, she is a keynote speaker, published author, webinar host, podcast presenter and sought-after industry trail-blazer. Sara has a unique ability to share her passion and devotion towards fitness education through her humor, enthusiasm and her effervescent no-nonsense personality. Sara serves on the Gold’s Gym Think Tank, is on the canfitpro Advisory Panel, was a founding board member for the Women In Fitness Association (WIFA), and is a proud inductee into the National Fitness Hall of Fame. Sara currently serves on IHRSA’s Headlight Committees for Facility Standards and is also a Co-Host of IHRSA’s Talks & Takes Monthly Talk Show. Sara has left an indelible mark on the fitness industry as a whole.

About SCW



SCW Fitness Education has been in business for 38 years and is the largest provider continuing education conferences in the world focusing on Group Fitness and Personal Training with an emphasis on execution, leadership and management. With seven (7) regional live shows spanning 36 years, MANIA® Conferences are held in Washington D.C., California (San Francisco), Florida (Orlando), Atlanta, Dallas, Midwest (Chicago), and Boston annually. SCW reaches over 8,000 fitness professionals in face-to-face contacts, 70K on our email list, and another 300,000+ in virtual connections. MANIA Conventions offer 10-12 sessions running every hour on all different aspects of the fitness/wellness industry (HIIT, Functional Training, Cycling, Mind/Body, Barre, Dance, Aqua, Nutrition, Recovery, Business & Leadership.) MANIA® SCW is unparalleled in its provision of certifications, continuing education courses and conventions to fitness professionals in multiple disciplines both live and online.

About MANIA®



MANIA® is more than just a Fitness Pro Convention; it’s the place where the fitness community goes to be educated, inspired and recharged! As the largest global provider of Fitness Conferences in the world, earn up to 20 CECs in a single weekend, running up to 12 sessions every hour, featuring 70+ presenters. Our 7 MANIA® Conventions in CA, FL, GA, TX, IL, MA, DC & Live Stream attract world-renowned fitness educators leading over 35 Certifications and 250 sessions.