

## Keeping Employees In The Line-Up

Employers are hiring athletic trainers to keep the "occupational athletes" on their staffs free from injury. Occupational athletes range from landscapers, construction workers and delivery personnel to sedentary office workers who need to stay in shape.

**By Nancy Giguere**, Star Tribune Sales and Marketing

When pro football or baseball players pull a hamstring or separate a shoulder, the team's athletic trainer helps them get back in shape and avoid re-injury. But not all athletes play for the Vikings or the Twins. Many are on the payrolls of companies like UPS and FedEx. Others work on construction sites and factory floors, in offices and hospitals.

### Occupational Athletes

According to Webster's, an athlete is a person trained or skilled in activities that "require physical strength, agility or stamina."

"That definition covers just about everyone who has a job," says Chris Gebeck, a certified athletic trainer in the Employee Health and Rehabilitation Services department at St. Mary's/Duluth Clinic Health System (SMDC). "Athletes aren't just the people we watch on TV. We're all physically active in our own way."

As a result, many employers are hiring athletic trainers to keep the "occupational athletes" on their staffs free from injury.

### Office Workers, Too

The need for training and injury-prevention programs for occupational athletes like landscapers, construction workers and delivery personnel is obvious. But even sedentary office workers need to stay in shape. "People who work on a computer all day can develop back pain or suffer repetitive motion disorders in their wrists and hands," Gebeck explains. "An athletic trainer can help them regain lost function or avoid injury in the first place."

### A Growing Niche

Athletic training has been recognized as an allied healthcare profession since 1990. Certified athletic trainers (ATCs) must complete a bachelor's degree and pass a national exam. According to the National Athletic Trainers Association, about 70 percent have a master's degree. ATCs specialize in the prevention, evaluation, treatment and rehabilitation of injuries. In Minnesota, ATCs work under the medical supervision of a physician.

About one-third of all ATCs work in clinics or hospitals. But an increasing number are finding jobs in industrial settings.

"It's a growing niche," Gebeck says. "Companies like Cargill, John Deere, Ford and FedEx use athletic trainers. NASA also uses athletic trainers — not for the astronauts but for the employees who work on the ground."

### Healthy Healthcare Workers

At SMDC, Gebeck works with the occupational athletes on the staff. These include employees who do direct patient care, as well as office staff like medical transcriptionists, coders and secretaries.

He evaluates employees with work-related injuries, checks on those who are recovering, teaches safety and injury-prevention techniques and answers questions.

Every month he analyzes the ergonomics of five to eight workstations. "We look at things like footrests and monitor height," he says. "We also work on correct posture and teach employees exercises to help relieve tension."

Gebeck and his colleagues teach front-line staff like nurses and nurses aides safety techniques, such as how to transfer a patient from a wheelchair to the exam table.

"Companies with athletic trainers report fewer injuries and decreased healthcare cost," Gebeck says. "But they're also giving something back to their employees."

[Learn More](#)

National Athletic Trainers Association, [www.nata.com](http://www.nata.com).

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