

WORK IN ONTARIO GYMS AND FITNESS CLUBS

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SUMMARY

When most people think about work in a gym or fitness club, they are squarely focused on the quality of their workout. This report is focused on the other kind of work that takes place in gyms – paid employment – and the gym and fitness club employees who carry out the work of leading group fitness classes, personal training, supervision, and customer service.

This report presents an analysis of key findings from a survey completed by gym and fitness club workers in Ontario over several weeks in February and March 2019. The survey data, which is both quantitative and qualitative, offers important insights into gym and fitness club work, including levels of job satisfaction, opinions about fairness and respect at work, impressions of relationships between workers, clients, and supervisors, and views about how best to improve working conditions in the industry.

The survey findings reveal that gym and fitness workers' overall level of job satisfaction is tied to a sense of accomplishment when they see others benefit from their efforts. However, gym and fitness club workers are generally dissatisfied with wages and benefit entitlements and point to these issues as a major source of turnover in the industry.

The data also revealed that while gym and fitness club workers generally feel respected by their clients and co-workers, many do not feel respected by managers. The issues of unpaid wages and perceived favouritism are seemingly driving this discontent, along with a general sense that corporate-owned gyms care far more about profit margins than the health and wellness of clients and workers. Moreover, a significant number of respondents indicated feeling they had little recourse to challenge unfairness by management.

Workers were split on how to best address workplace issues, with the largest segment indicating support for unionization. However, an almost equally large combined segment indicated opposition to unionization or uncertainty about the benefits of unionization in the context of the gym and fitness club industry.

Finally, the physical nature of gym and fitness club work makes workers more prone to workplace injuries. However, gym and fitness clubs in Ontario are considered excluded from Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) coverage, leaving workers particularly vulnerable in cases of serious accident or injury. The survey data suggests that, in many cases, this lack of coverage makes gym and fitness club workers unwilling to even disclose workplace injuries out of fear of reprisal or a sense that doing so would be pointless.

The full report goes into greater detail and provides important context about these and other issues related to work in gyms and fitness clubs in Ontario.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



COMPULSORY WSIB COVERAGE.

Gym and fitness clubs in Ontario are considered excluded from compulsory WSIB coverage and a regulatory framework change scheduled to come into effect on January 1, 2020, which will designate “personal physical fitness training services” as specifically excluded, will reinforce this interpretation. This exclusion has very negative implications for gym and fitness club workers who work in an industry where the risk of workplace injury is apparent and are therefore extremely vulnerable if they experience a workplace injury. Gym and fitness club employers in Ontario are eligible to opt in to WSIB coverage, and in other provinces they have exercised this option. Opting in to WSIB coverage or bringing gym and fitness clubs under the umbrella of compulsory coverage should therefore be considered as ways to better protect the health and wellness of gym and fitness club workers.



ADDRESS PROBLEM OF UNPAID WAGES.

Unpaid wages in the gym and fitness club industry and the broader private service sector is a pervasive and ongoing problem. While the settlement of a class action lawsuit at GoodLife Fitness in 2018 and the ratification of a collective agreement with GoodLife personal trainers in 2017 partially addressed the issue for a small group of workers, it is clear that the practice is rampant throughout the industry, resulting in a significant loss of income for workers. Tackling the issue requires strong and proactive enforcement by the Employment Standards Branch of the Ministry of Labour as well as a culture change within the industry itself that recognizes and values the importance of research, consultation, recruitment, rehearsal, and prep time as key work functions worthy of compensation.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



REINSTATE MANDATORY PAID SICK DAYS.

The Ford government's Bill 47 eliminated the mandatory two paid sick days introduced by the previous government in 2017 and has limited access to personal emergency leave. While Bill 47 did not require employers to eliminate paid sick days, it is clear from our survey results that many did. The repeal of paid sick days negatively impacts the health and well-being of workers in gyms and fitness clubs. It also exposes clients and other workers to greater risk of contracting viruses if gym and fitness club workers decide to come into work sick in order to avoid loss of pay. Some gyms and health clubs continue to offer paid sick days to workers, but for those who do not, legislative intervention is the only way to guarantee that workers have access to these protections.



FACILITATE UNIONIZATION.

Providing workers with a meaningful path to unionization, without fear of reprisal, is key to improving terms and conditions of work in the gym and fitness club industry. However, the Ford government's 2018 amendments to Ontario's Labour Relations Act reduced monetary penalties for employers who violate the law and made it more difficult for workers to exercise their right to join a union and to achieve a first contract. Reversing the anti-union reforms introduced as part of Bill 47 would go some way towards evening the playing field between labour and management.



THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF GYM AND FITNESS CLUBS

According to a March 2019 IBISWorld Industry Report, gym and fitness clubs are a multi-billion dollar industry in Canada and are projected to grow by **6.1%** between 2019 and 2024, thanks in part to the proliferation of public health campaigns and health consciousness initiatives.



**1 out of every
25 Canadians
is a member at
GoodLife
Fitness.**

GoodLife Fitness is the only dominant player in Canada's gym and fitness club industry. The company has more than **400 facilities** across Canada and had more than **1.5 million members** as of March 2019. That's one out of every 25 Canadians. In Ontario, GoodLife Fitness currently operates 155 clubs. The company also operates a discount-priced gym chain, Fit4Less, which has over three-dozen facilities in Ontario.

According to Statistics Canada, roughly half the industry is made up of self-employed individuals who offer fitness services. This report, however, is concerned with those who are directly employed by gyms and fitness clubs – a growing share of the market as a result of an industry shift towards large-scale establishments with larger workforces made up of customer service representatives, group fitness instructors, supervisors, and personal trainers.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF GYM AND FITNESS CLUBS



Working conditions in the industry came under scrutiny when a 2016 Ontario Ministry of Labour inspection blitz found that more than twenty Toronto-area gyms had employment standards violations that included unpaid wages and failure to pay overtime. Since then, unionization drives and class action lawsuits have kept the industry in the spotlight, but do not appear to have stunted its growth or profitability.

Industry revenue is derived primarily from membership fees and personal training services. Profitability is challenging to gauge given that the only dominant player in the industry is a privately-owned company and does not release financial data to the public. However, a March 2019 IBISWorld Industry Report estimates that industry-leading GoodLife Fitness took in **\$750.4 million** in revenue and made an operating profit of **\$75.2 million** in 2018. The same report projects the company's revenue will grow by 11.2 percent to **\$834.7 million** and its operating profit will jump by 12 percent to **\$84.2 million** in 2019.



THE SURVEY

This report is based on key findings from a survey about gym and fitness club work in Ontario. The anonymous online survey was open for three weeks in February and March 2019 and promoted through news media, social media, and word-of-mouth. Completion of the survey was voluntary and respondents self-selected.

Participants were required to certify that they were at least 16 years of age and currently employed by a gym or fitness club in Ontario. 521 people participated in the survey – a good sample size given the overall number of people directly employed by gyms and fitness clubs in the province. The survey contained a mix of forced choice questions with predetermined answers along with opportunities to elaborate or provide additional written information within each section of the survey. The survey's quantitative findings are therefore enhanced and contextualized by the qualitative comments provided by survey respondents. Not all percentages add up to 100 due to rounding in the tables contained in the report.



DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

A range of employee groups participated in the survey. Group fitness instructors made up just under half (46%) of all respondents. Personal trainers (29%) and customer service representatives (16%) were also represented, along with 7% of participants who identified as managers or supervisors. A very small number (2%) of “others”, including human resources staff, childcare workers, and IT workers, also participated in the survey.

Job classification and union membership were the only variables that resulted in significantly different survey results. Other variables, such as age, gender, and region did not produce such wide data variances.



Which of the following best describes your job classification?	
Group fitness instructor	46%
Personal trainer	29%
Front desk/customer service representative	16%
Manager/supervisor	7%
Other	2%

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



The majority (59%) of respondents were employees at GoodLife Fitness. This was hardly surprising given the company's dominant market share. Gym and fitness workers from Crunch Fitness (7%), LA Fitness (6%), Anytime Fitness (5%), the YMCA (5%), Fit 4 Less (4%), and World Gym (4%) were also represented. Twelve percent of survey participants indicated they worked for small independent gyms, corporate-owned health clubs, or municipalities.

Where do you work?	
GoodLife Fitness	59%
Crunch Fitness	7%
LA Fitness	6%
YMCA	5%
Anytime Fitness	5%
World Gym	4%
Fit 4 Less	4%
Other	12%

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

Respondents were quite evenly split across three age ranges: 35% were under 30 years old, 34% were aged 30 to 39, and a 31% were forty or older. 58% of respondents were women.

How old are you?	
Under 30	35%
30-39	34%
40+	31%

What is your gender?	
Female	58%
Male	42%

Respondents were also geographically dispersed in a manner that is more or less consistent with Ontario's regional population distribution. 40% of survey participants reside in the 905 area surrounding the City of Toronto, including Hamilton and Niagara; 31% live in the 416 area of Toronto proper; 12% live in the 519 area of southwestern Ontario; 9% in the 613 area of eastern Ontario; 6% reside in the 705 area north of the Greater Toronto Area and into northern Ontario; and 2% live in the 807 area of northwestern Ontario.

Where do you live?	
905	40%
416	31%
519	12%
613	9%
705	6%
807	2%

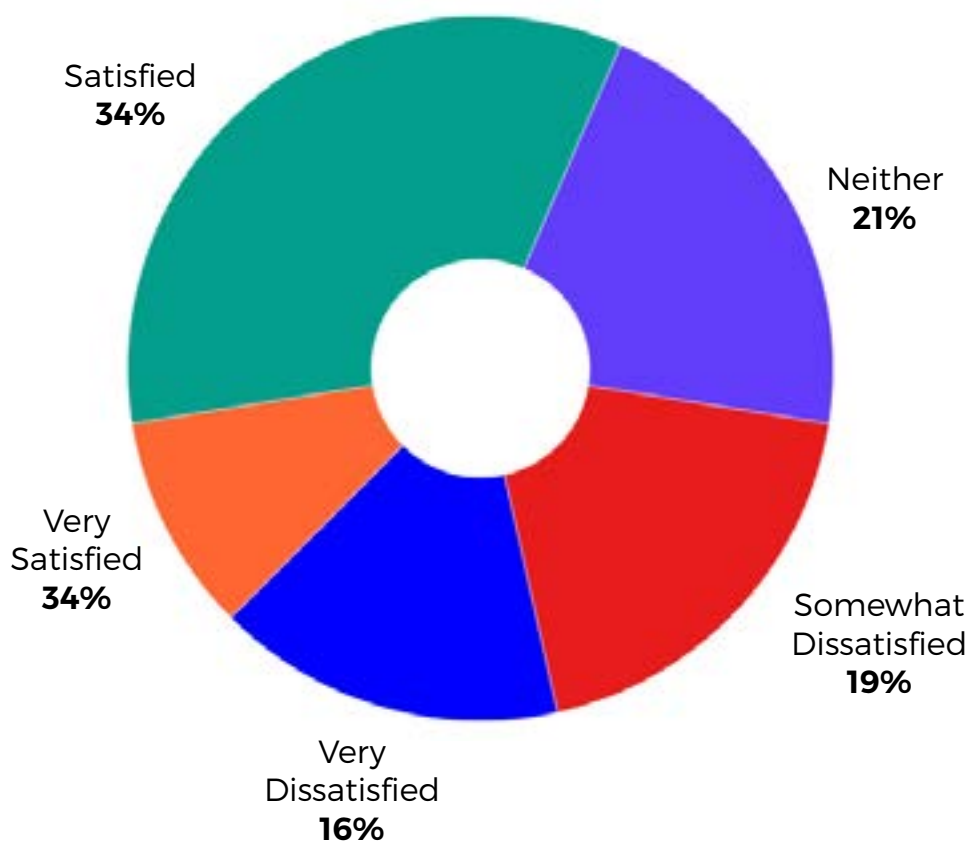
STUDY FINDINGS: JOB SATISFACTION

The survey findings reveal that gym and fitness workers' overall level of job satisfaction is tied to a sense of accomplishment when they see others benefit from their efforts.

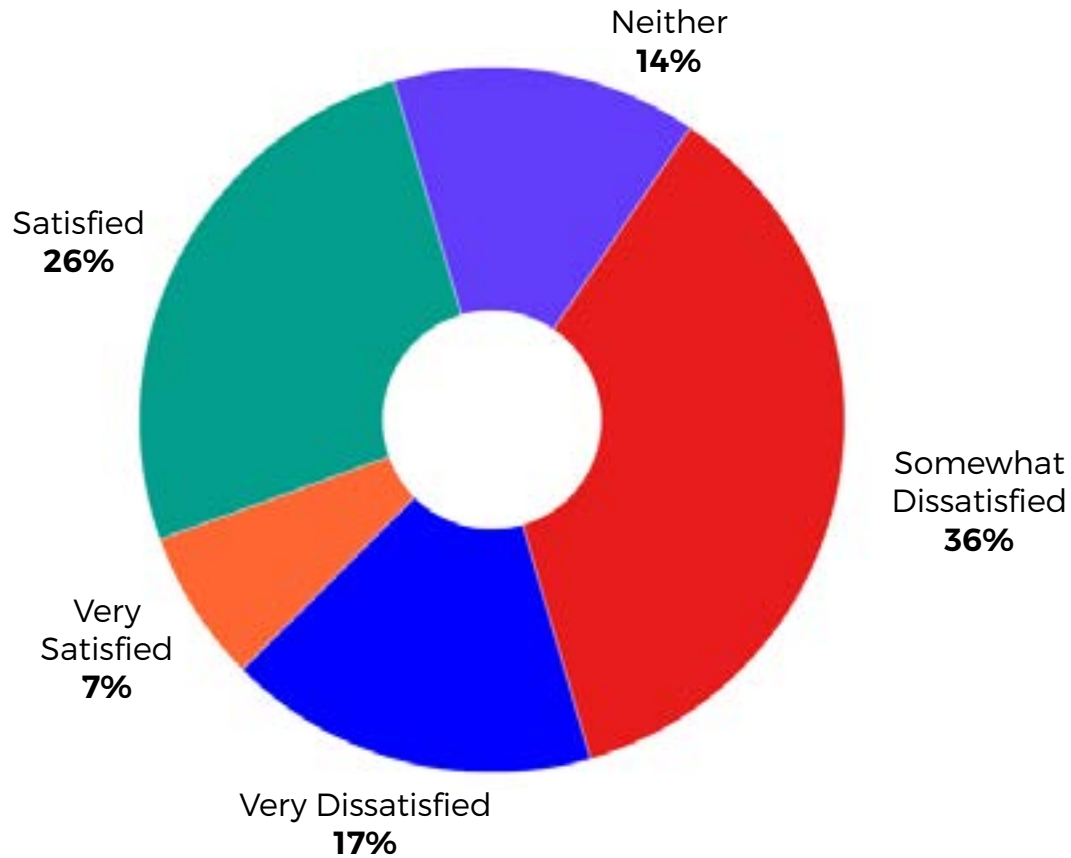
Overall, 39% of survey participants indicated they were “satisfied” (28%) or “very satisfied” (11%) when asked about their general level of job satisfaction, compared to 46% who were “somewhat dissatisfied” (28%) or “very dissatisfied” (18%). Overall satisfaction levels were highest among personal trainers (45%), and lowest among customer service representatives (28%). Managers and supervisors represented an outlier on the question of job satisfaction, with 61% indicating they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their jobs.

How would you describe your overall level of job satisfaction?

PERSONAL TRAINER

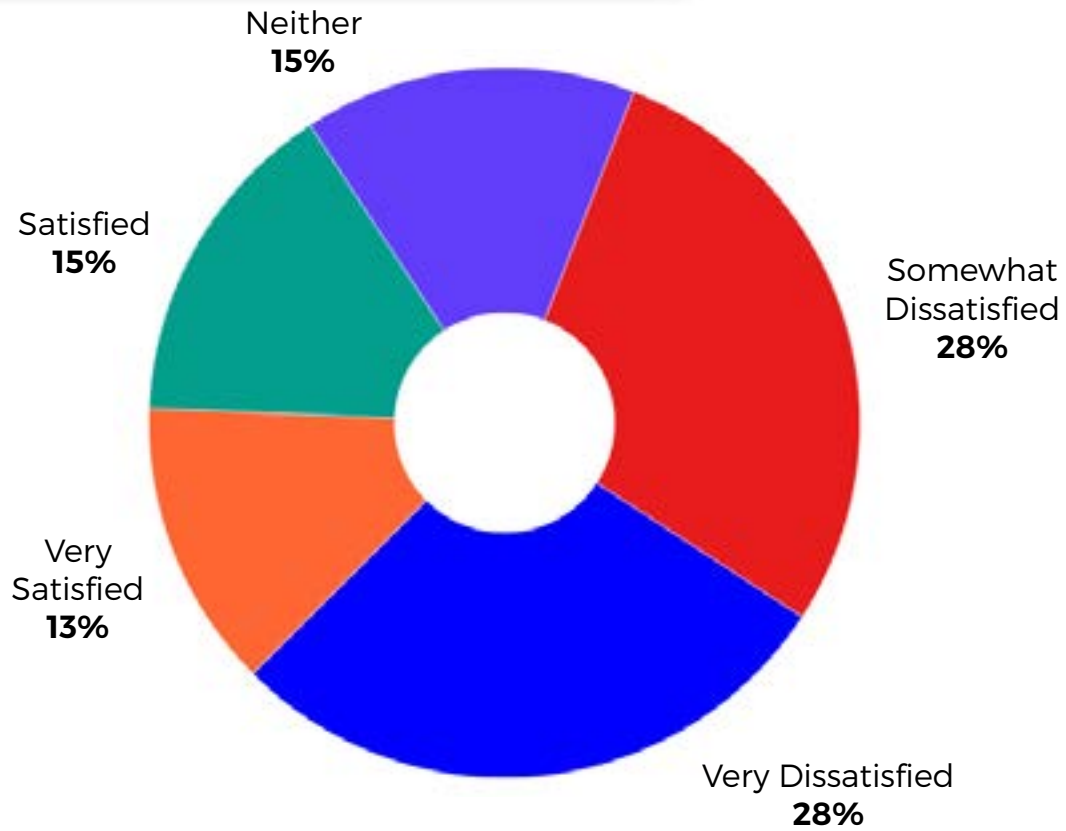


GROUP FITNESS INSTRUCTOR

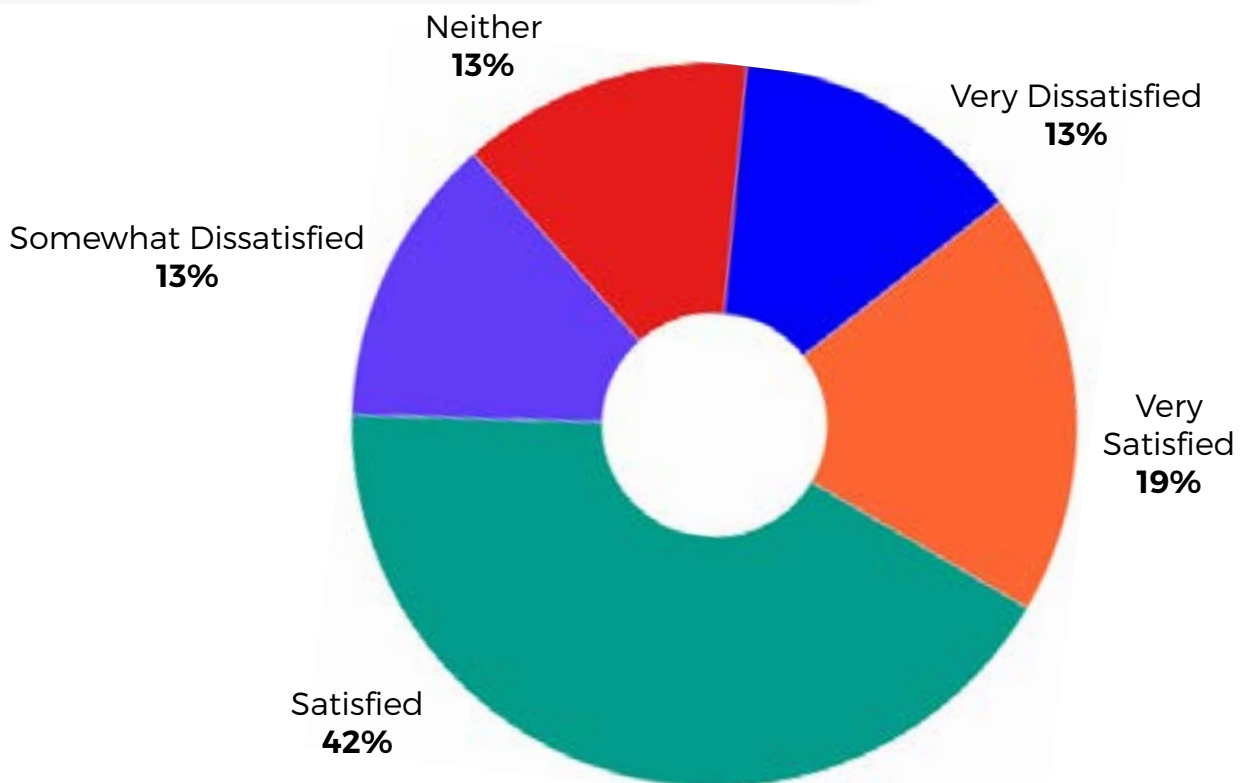


“My job is rewarding because I get to help people improve their health and reach their fitness goals. But **it could be so much better** for clients and for us fitness professionals if our employer was as committed to us as they are to the bottom line.”

FRONT DESK/CSR



MANAGER/SUPERVISOR

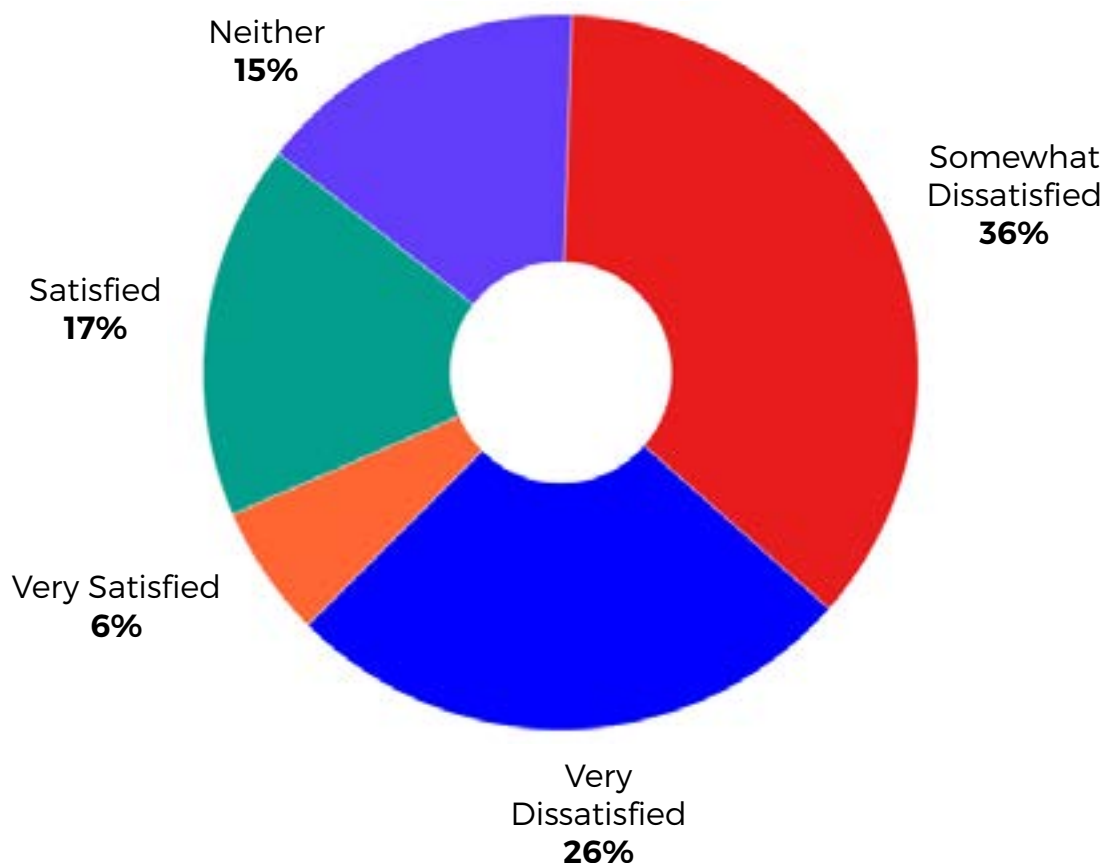


STUDY FINDINGS: JOB SATISFACTION

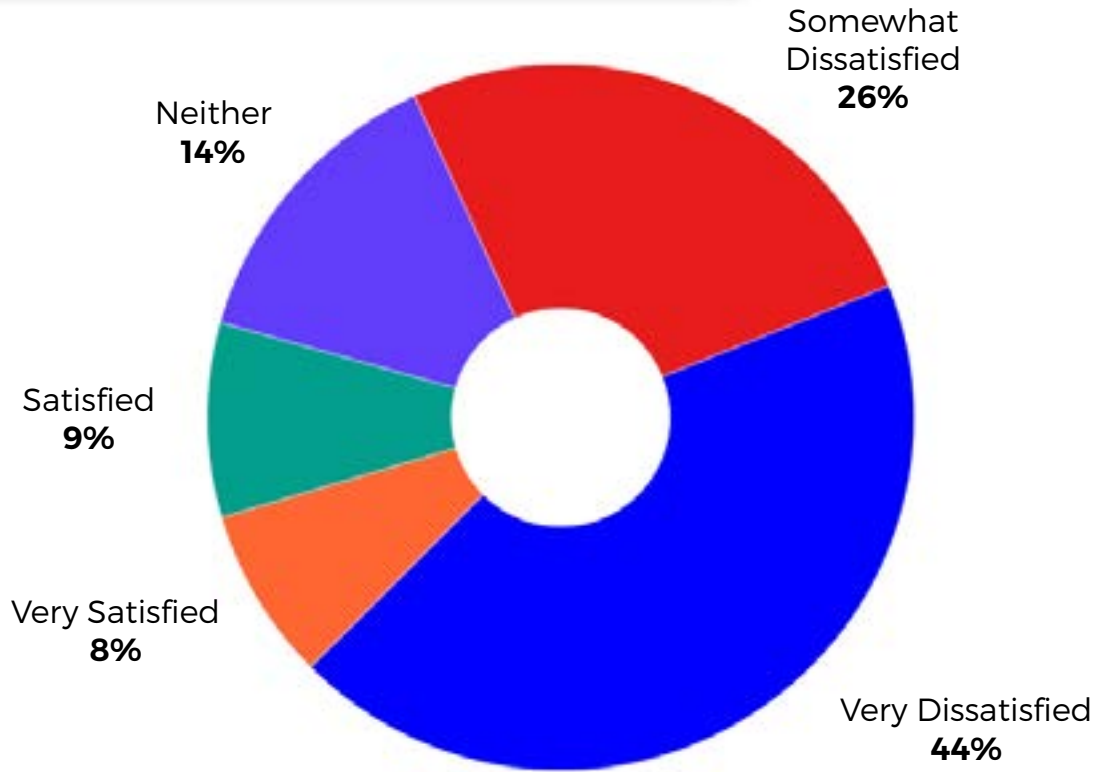
While workers expressed a range of views when asked about their overall level of job satisfaction, their responses were more uniform with regard to wages and benefit entitlements. Overall, 30% of survey respondents reported being “very dissatisfied” with their wages and benefits, while 34% indicated they were “dissatisfied”. On the flip side, just 6% of workers indicated being “very satisfied” while 16% reported they were “satisfied” with their wages and benefit entitlements.

How would you describe your level of satisfaction with your wages and benefit entitlements?

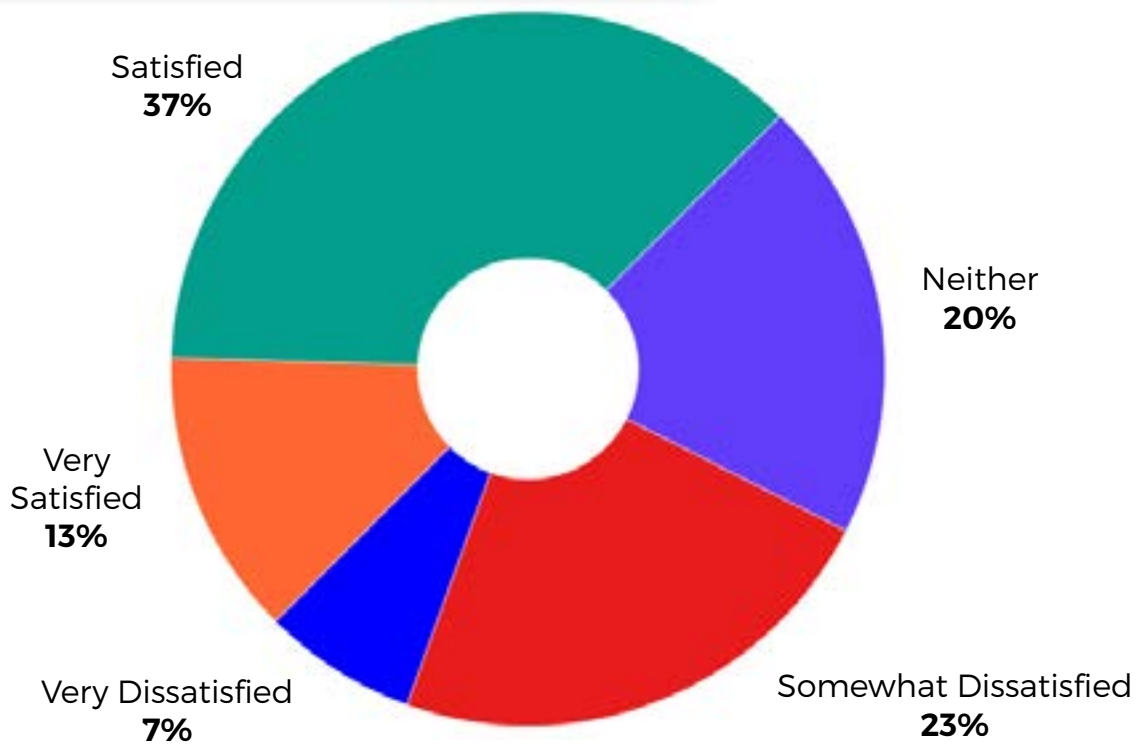
PERSONAL TRAINER



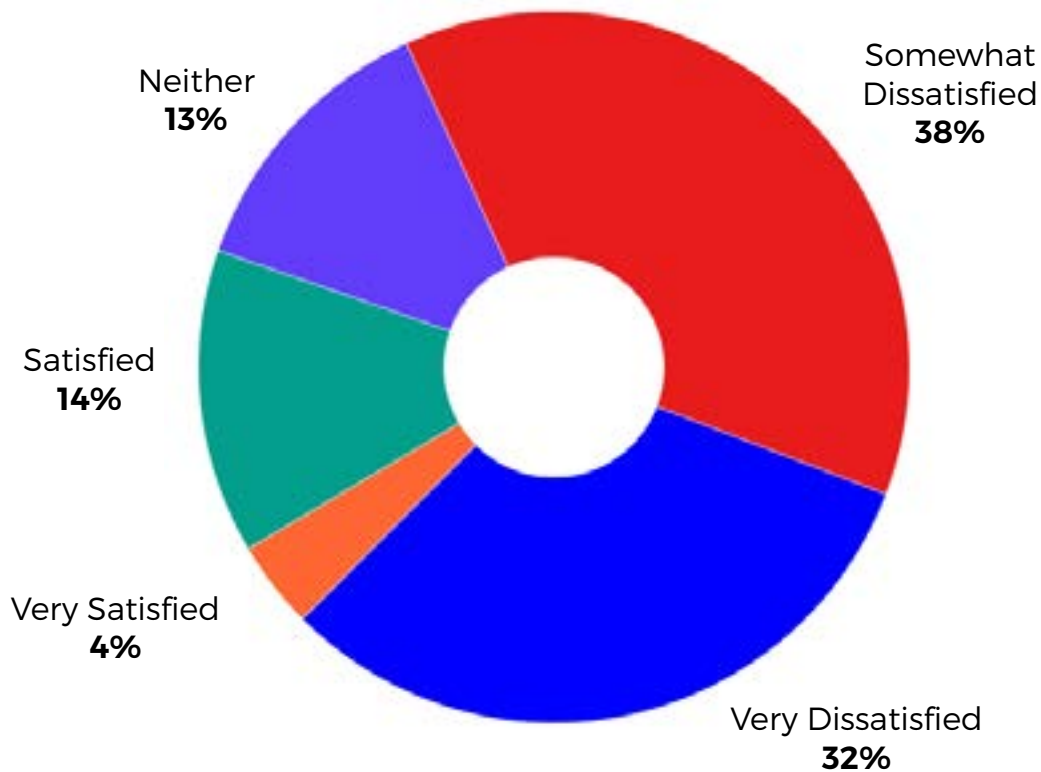
FRONT DESK/CSR



MANAGER/SUPERVISOR



GROUP FITNESS INSTRUCTOR



“As fitness instructors **we do NOT get benefits** because we are part time. BUT we are the ones who work our bodies to the point of injury, repetitive strains/sprains etc. It would be nice if GoodLife could give us access to group benefits so that we are not paying out of pocket and can prolong our healthy bodies.”

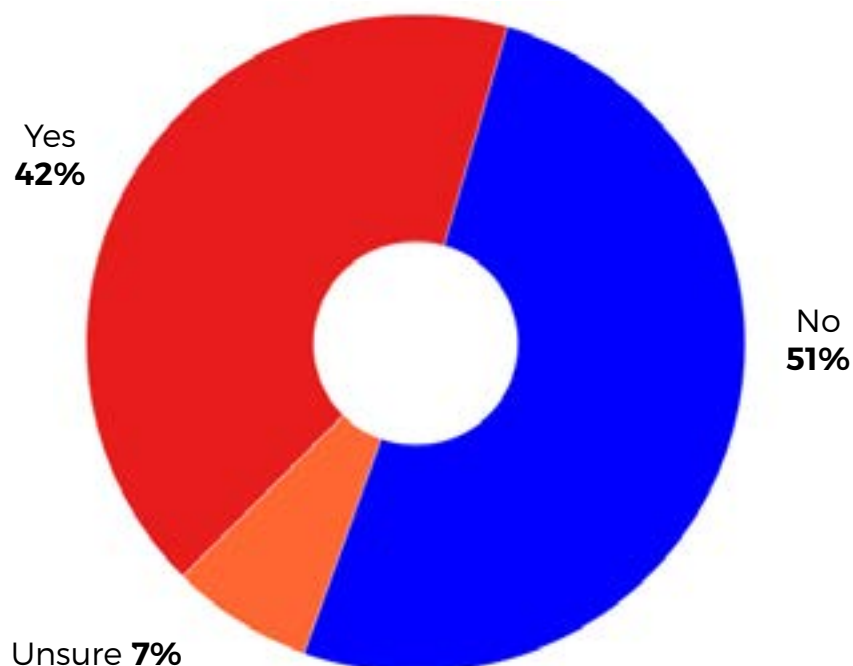
STUDY FINDINGS: JOB SATISFACTION

Removing salaried managerial employees from the mix increased the level of dissatisfaction with wages and benefit entitlements, with 67% of non-managerial gym and fitness club workers reporting dissatisfaction with their wages and benefits, including nearly a third (32%) who said they were “very dissatisfied”.

Even among survey participants who indicated they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their jobs in general, 36% of that group also indicated they were dissatisfied with their wages and benefit entitlements. This dynamic was captured in several of the comments provided by survey participants, highlighted in this section of the report.

Paid sick days was identified as a major issue by participants concerned about benefit entitlements. Only 42% of respondents indicated they had access to paid sick days as part of their employment contract, while 51% indicated they did not (7% were unsure). Among respondents with access to paid sick days, 40% reported having two or fewer paid sick days in a calendar year, compared to 24% who reported having access to five or more.

Do you have paid sick days as part of your employment contract?



More than one survey respondent pointed out the irony of their situation as health and fitness workers with no access to health benefits.



“I really enjoy helping people achieve their fitness goals, but working in this industry makes it very difficult to make ends meet and **my boss is more interested in the bottom line** than seeing clients or employees succeed”

“If we don’t hit targets, **management sees us as disposable**. They care more about retaining clients than making sure they are leading healthy lives”

“We definitely **need more benefits**, like paid sick days. Lots of us come into work sick because **we can’t afford to miss a shift.**”

STUDY FINDINGS: FAIRNESS & RESPECT AT WORK

Gym and fitness workers generally feel respected by their clients and co-workers, but their relationships with managers and supervisors are more complex, with most workers surveyed indicating they feel disrespected by management. Unpaid work and favouritism are major culprits in explaining workers' negative attitudes towards management. These issues seemingly lead to feelings of resentment, but many workers express the view that they have no meaningful recourse to contest mistreatment or unfairness in the workplace.

In terms of specific numbers, gym and fitness club workers surveyed overwhelmingly indicated feeling respected at work by their co-workers (76%) and clients (87%). In contrast, a majority of non-managerial employees (54%) responded they did not feel respected or valued by their supervisors or managers. This perceived lack of respect from management held relatively steady across several occupational categories: customer service representatives (56%), group fitness instructors (53%), and personal trainers (54%).

Generally, do you feel valued and respected by your boss/supervisor/manager?

	Yes	No	Unsure
Personal Trainers	34%	54%	12%
Group Fitness Instructors	32%	53%	14%
Front Desk/Customer Service Representatives	32%	56%	12%

“Although I’ve had no personal conflicts with co-workers or managers, and have been lucky to have good working relationships with them, it’s hard to feel valued when you are **constantly being asked to do more with less**, when your ideas/requests are not taken seriously and when the company does not compensate you appropriately for the work that you do.”

STUDY FINDINGS: FAIRNESS & RESPECT AT WORK

The proliferation of unpaid work in gyms and fitness clubs is seemingly driving these numbers. Many survey respondents linked lack of respect with unpaid work as part of their qualitative comments. 68% of all respondents reported performing unpaid work, with 74% of that group indicating that, on average, they are not compensated for two or more hours per week. 8% of those surveyed indicated working 10 or more unpaid hours per week.

The problem of unpaid work is worse for personal trainers and group fitness instructors specifically, with 84% of the former group and 80% of the latter indicating they put in unpaid hours. Class preparation, music and choreography selection, manual logging of work hours, set up and take down, scheduling clients, communication with members, prospecting (client recruitment), and putting together fitness programs, were most commonly referred to in survey comments as examples of unpaid work tasks.

Favouritism has also seemingly strained relationships between workers and management. 56% of all respondents reported being unfairly treated by a supervisor, manager, or boss at work. 29% indicated that favouritism was not a problem and 15% were unsure.

Is favouritism a problem in your workplace?

Yes	56%
No	29%
Unsure	15%

“Favouritism is rampant at my gym.
It’s all who you know, not what you know.”

STUDY FINDINGS: FAIRNESS & RESPECT AT WORK

While a significant number of survey participants indicated that unpaid work and favouritism were significant problems in the gym and fitness club industry, roughly half (49%) of respondents reported feeling they had no recourse to challenge unfair treatment at work (36% of respondents indicated feeling they did have recourse, while 13% were unsure).

Perceptions of access to recourse differed substantially across occupational groups. Group fitness instructors (20%) and customer service representatives (33%) reported lower levels of access to recourse, while personal trainers (50%) and supervisors (66%) reported much higher levels.

Do you feel like you have any recourse or access to help if you are treated unfairly at work?

Yes	36%
No	51%
Unsure	13%


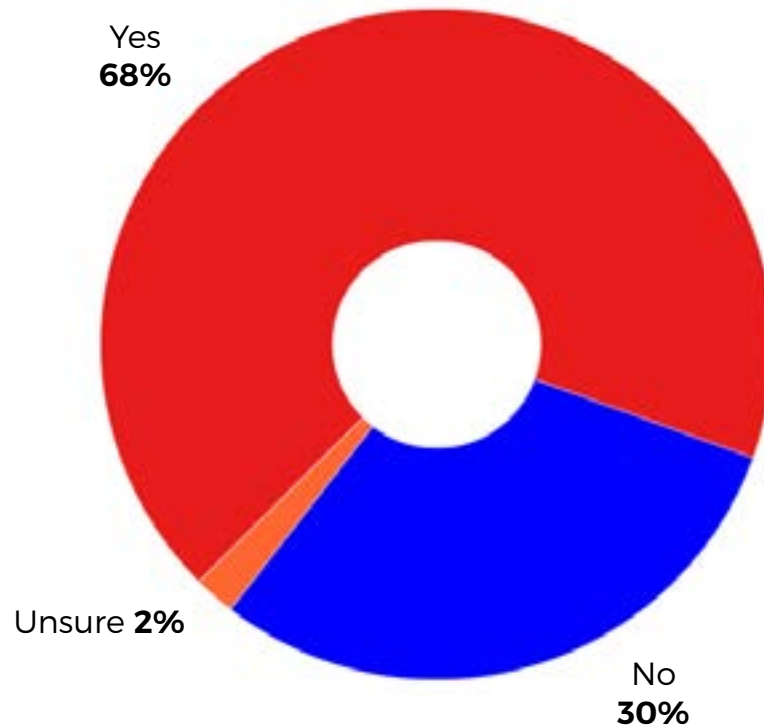
The fact that roughly 25% of personal trainers at industry-leading GoodLife are unionized may help explain the elevated numbers for personal trainers given that workers covered by union contracts have access to legally-binding grievance and arbitration provisions in collective agreements.

While just 30% of non-union respondents indicated having some form of recourse or access to help to rectify unfair treatment at work, this number more than doubled to 64% for unionized respondents. The union advantage is taken up in more detail in the next section of this report.

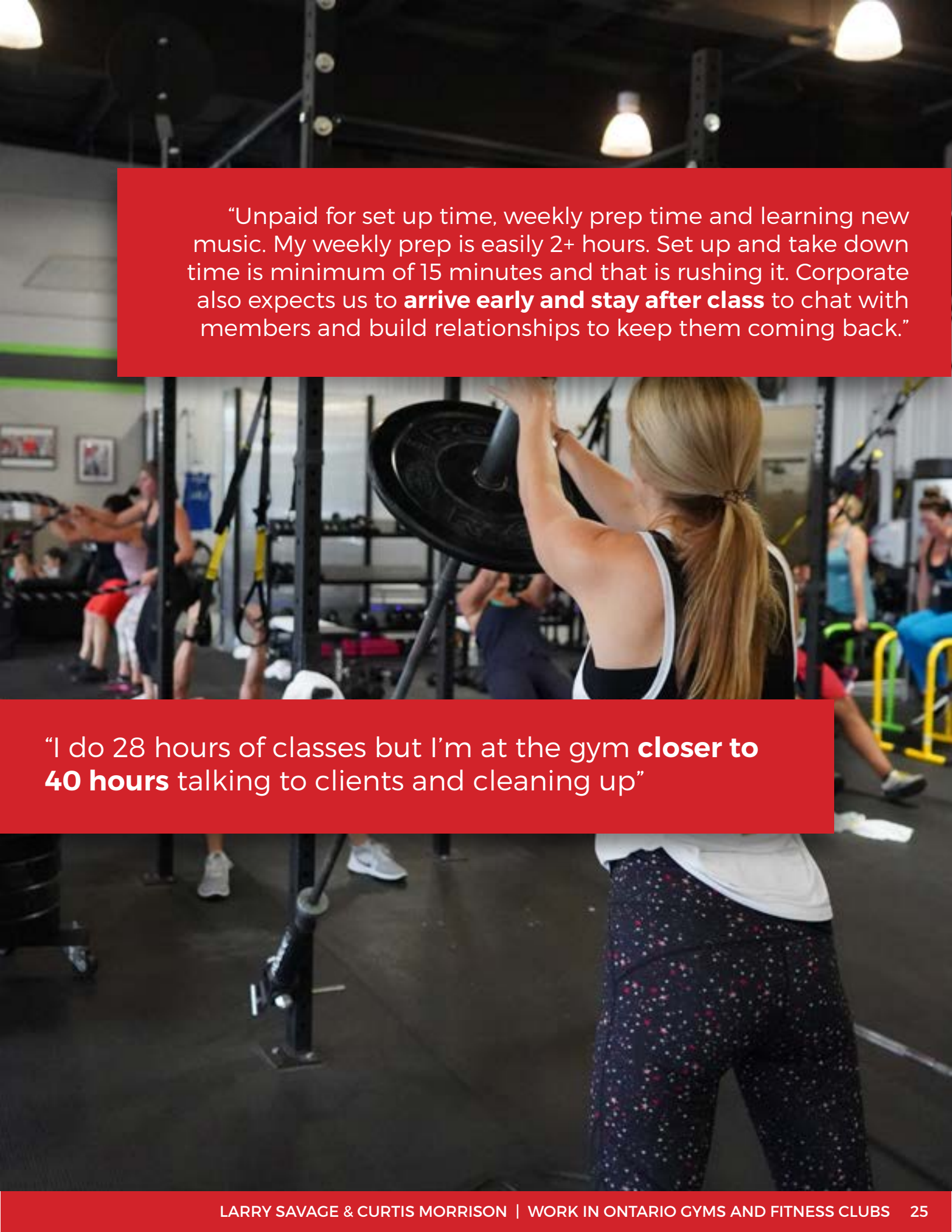
“We have three managers. I only get leads from one. In my five years at GoodLife I **never got a single lead** from the other two, but their leads and clients go to other trainers.”

STUDY FINDINGS: FAIRNESS & RESPECT AT WORK

In the course of a typical work week, do you ever perform work for your employer that is unpaid?



“I am only paid for the 60 minutes I am directly presenting a class to participants. All learning/review, all communication with any other staff, all communication with members before/after classes, is all **100% unpaid.**”



“Unpaid for set up time, weekly prep time and learning new music. My weekly prep is easily 2+ hours. Set up and take down time is minimum of 15 minutes and that is rushing it. Corporate also expects us to **arrive early and stay after class** to chat with members and build relationships to keep them coming back.”

“I do 28 hours of classes but I’m at the gym **closer to 40 hours** talking to clients and cleaning up”

STUDY FINDINGS: UNIONS IN THE GYM AND FITNESS CLUB INDUSTRY

While the vast majority of gym and fitness club workers are not unionized, a high profile class action lawsuit against GoodLife Fitness for unpaid wages and overtime bolstered efforts to unionize over three dozen gyms and fitness clubs in Toronto, Ajax, and Peterborough in 2016.

This union breakthrough gave us an opportunity to compare and contrast the views of unionized survey respondents with those of their non-union, non-managerial, counterparts. Unionized gym and fitness club workers reported higher levels of job satisfaction (50% versus 36%), greater access to paid sick days (79% versus 30%), and greater access to recourse if treated unfairly at work (64% versus 27%).

How would you describe your overall level of job satisfaction? (*non-managerial employees only*)

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Unionized	11%	39%	23%	18%	9%
Non-unionized	10%	26%	14%	29%	21%

50% of unionized respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs, compared to only 36% of non-unionized, non-managerial workers. Non-unionized workers were far more likely (50%) to be dissatisfied or very dissatisfied at work than their unionized counterparts (27%).

“The union is not a magic bullet but there’s no question that **unionization has made things better** for us”

STUDY FINDINGS: UNIONS IN THE GYM AND FITNESS CLUB INDUSTRY

Part of this overall view of job satisfaction seems to relate to access to paid sick days and recourse for unfair treatment. 79% of unionized workers reported having access to paid sick days, while only 30% of non-unionized workers reported having access.

Unionized workers were also more than twice as likely to report having access to recourse in the case of unfair treatment, with 64% responding affirmatively compared to just 27% of their non-union counterparts. A good number of unionized respondents specifically credited unionization for their access to paid sick days and meaningful recourse for unfair treatment.

Do you have paid sick days as part of your employment contract? *(non-managerial employees only)*

	Yes	No	Unsure
Unionized	79%	15%	6%
Non-unionized	30%	62%	8%

Do you feel like you have any recourse or access to help if you are treated *unfairly at work? (non-managerial employees only)*

	Yes	No	Unsure
Unionized	64%	23%	14%
Non-unionized	27%	59%	14%

“We had no paid sick days prior to the union, now **everyone gets them**”.

STUDY FINDINGS: UNIONS IN THE GYM AND FITNESS CLUB INDUSTRY

Of note, only 17% of unionized respondents thought their union had not benefited the workplace, compared to 18% who were unsure and 65% who felt their union had provided a benefit. Non-unionized workers were more divided on the question of unionization. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 64% of managerial employees responded that unionization would not benefit the workplace, but 21% thought it would. Half (50%) of non-managerial non-unionized respondents thought their workplace would benefit from unionization compared to 23% who did not and 28% who were unsure.

Do you think your workplace benefits from unionization? *(non-managerial unionized employees only)*

	Yes	No	Unsure
	65%	17%	18%

Do you think your workplace would benefit from a union? *(non-unionized employees only)*

	Yes	No	Unsure
Non-managerial	50%	23%	28%
Managerial	21%	64%	14%

One interesting finding drawn from the qualitative comments was a general misconception about who could exercise a right to unionize in Ontario, with some respondents incorrectly asserting that students or part-time/casual workers in gym or fitness clubs could not be unionized. In fact, these categories of workers do indeed have a statutory right to unionize.

“Bad employers get the **unions they deserve.**”

STUDY FINDINGS: WORKPLACE INJURIES

The nature of gym and fitness club work makes workers more prone to accidents or injuries. In fact, nearly one-third (31%) of fitness workers participating in this research indicated they had been injured on the job.

Among the major occupational categories surveyed, group fitness instructors were the most likely (47%) to have been injured on the job. Personal trainers (20%), and customer service representatives (16%) were less likely to report workplace injuries. A number of respondents pointed to repetitive strains as the most common form of injury at their workplace.

Have you ever been injured on the job?

Yes	31%
No	69%

It is important to note that gyms and fitness clubs in Ontario are not included in Schedule 1 of Ontario Regulation 175/98 and therefore fall outside of compulsory WSIB coverage. Gym and fitness club employers in Ontario are eligible to opt in to WSIB coverage, but none have pursued that option. However, a regulatory framework change is scheduled to come into effect on January 1, 2020 which will designate “personal physical fitness training services” as specifically excluded from WSIB coverage.

This lack of insurance coverage leaves gym and fitness club workers particularly vulnerable to financial harm in cases of accident or injury. Of the respondents who reported having experienced a workplace injury, 61% indicated that the injury had caused them to miss work. Of this smaller group, less than 3% indicated they were paid anything for the time they missed at work. One respondent described missing six months of work without pay while having to pay out of pocket for thousands of dollars in rehabilitation fees. Interestingly, only 50% of injured workers represented in the survey reported their injuries to a manager or supervisor. When asked about why they did not report the injury, workers offered a variety of reasons, from fear of management reprisal to indifference given a lack of paid sick days or WSIB coverage.

STUDY FINDINGS: WORKPLACE INJURIES

Did your injury result in you having to miss work?

Yes	61%
No	39%

Did you report your injury to your boss, supervisor, and/or manager?

Yes	50%
No	50%

As previously stated, more than half of gym and fitness club workers who participated in the survey indicated having no access to paid sick days. As a result, working while sick or injured is not uncommon. Rather, it becomes an economic imperative for many.



“You never want to complain about injuries because you will be blacklisted, **so most people say nothing**. We can’t get compensation so lots of people work even when sick or injured.”

“If you tell management, they may **cancel your shifts** and we have no compensation coverage.”

RESOURCES

[Employment Standards Act](#)

[Guide to the Employment Standards Act](#)

[Employee versus Independent Contractor](#)

[Ontario Ministry of Labour](#)

[Workers' Action Centre](#)

[Workers Health and Safety Centre](#)

