

Cross-Training Staff In Climbing Gyms

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Posted By: **Ashley Routson** in [CWA Blog](#)



The ability to cross-train staff is dependent on gym size, classes, programming, and the number of roles available to cross-train into. Bouldering gyms may have fewer positions than gyms that offer ropes and auto belays. Facilities that offer youth programming and competitive teams have more opportunities for cross-training.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** [Ashley Routson of Planet Rock](#). She has a specialty in technical writing and management-related topics.
- **Who Should Read / What You Will Learn:** Senior managers and folks tasked with setting schedules.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** Ashley's [article on middle management success](#) complements this article nicely.

Another thing to consider is the knowledge, experience, and skill level required for cross-training. The more technical and specialized a role is, the more knowledge, experience, and skills are required to perform the job. Then, there are the resources required for cross-training. Cross-training requires both time and money, factors that gym owners and managers need to consider.

Cross-training can be an intentional process, but more often than not, it comes out of necessity. Employees don't always leave during the most convenient times, and hiring can be a lengthy process. Gym managers can always evaluate the resources they have available and try to fill

open positions with existing employees who possess the required skill set, or at least show potential for the role.

In almost every scenario, cross-training can also be considered a form of professional development. The very definition of professional development is gaining new skills and knowledge for the purpose of career advancement.

Professional development is one tool for improving retention. **High rates of employee turnover can be expensive, which is why most managers can justify putting company resources toward cross-training** and professional development.

Cross-training is also an excellent method for reducing burnout. Some people thrive on routine and consistency, while others crave new challenges and experiences. Providing employees with opportunities to try new things and shake things up can be exciting and inspire a renewed sense of passion and determination for the position.

Cross-training doesn't come without some sort of downside. The quote, "jack of all trades, master of none," comes to mind. The more roles an employee takes on, the more divided the focus. Even the most disciplined and organized multitaskers still drop balls.

In some circumstances, managers might notice that cross-trained employees tend to prioritize one role over another, over-performing in one position and under-performing in the other. It is important for managers to acknowledge poor performance with the employees and evaluate whether the situation still works for both parties. Often, managers need to act in the best interest of the company and its customers and ask employees to step back from one role to focus on the primary role.

Front Desk + Everyone Else

Every position should be cross-trained, in some capacity, with the front desk. All employees should know how to use the gym's software(s). It is helpful if everyone in the company understands how to check a customer into the gym, how to use the POS to sell products and services, etc. In a pinch, most employees should (hopefully) be able to assist a customer in need—even if that isn't their main position in the company.

Front Desk + Youth Programs

Customer-facing positions are often the easiest to cross-train. Customer service, instructing, and coaching all require similar personality traits. Empathy, patience, strong communication skills, active listening, positive attitude, etc. Great instructors often make excellent coaches. In turn, great coaches are capable of excellent customer service. It can be a huge win-win for gyms.

Working with children all the time can be exhausting, and some youth coaches may be relieved to take on front desk duties that aren't 100% focused on working with children. From an

employment standpoint, most youth coaches cannot gain full-time employment on coaching shifts alone. Supplementing coaching shifts with front desk shifts is a way gym managers can get employees closer to a full-time job.

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A major upside for cross-training youth coaches with the front desk (and vice versa) can be coverage and schedule-writing. The more employees available to work both positions allows scheduling managers the ability to fill in gaps to accommodate vacation requests, and gives employees more options to choose from when looking for coverage for sick days and other last-minute call-offs.

The caveat? In the case of youth programming, the main customer is children. Kids aren't everyone's cup of tea. Working with children requires an extra level of patience, professionalism, and enthusiasm. Some employees may excel with adults but struggle communicating with children.

Youth Programs + Team Coaches

All coaches are important, and no program should take priority over the other, even though sometimes this may not feel like the case. From a business perspective, recreational youth programming and competitive teams provide equal value to an indoor climbing gym.

As much as I want to refrain from language that suggests that there is a "pecking order" for youth climbing coaches, many view competitive coaching as a promotional opportunity for youth program coaches.

For many gyms, recreational youth programming provides a pipeline for both athletes and coaches directly to the competitive climbing team. Students and coaches that show the most potential and growth are often recruited to join the team. But this relationship also works the other way around. Team coaches can bring new and fresh perspectives to the recreational youth program as well. Team coaches can provide insightful and informed feedback on lesson plans and help structure curriculum for youth programming.

The caveat? Coaching competitive climbing requires a more in-depth knowledge of climbing technique and the types of movement required in competitive climbing. Competitive climbing is very specialized, and many recreational coaches lack the knowledge and skill to coach a team athlete through a specific sequence of moves. With the right mentorship and exposure to competitive climbing, many recreational coaches can get there.

In a situation where a gym might need coverage for either department, cross-training coaches can be invaluable.

Team Coaches + Routesetters

Cross-training any department with routesetting is extremely resource-dependent. Routesetting is one of the most difficult positions to train and requires a lot of mentorship and tools. There is a false assumption that the strongest climbers make the best routesetters. Whereas it might be true that routesetters can be strong climbers, there is so much more to routesetting than being able to climb a V10 or 5.13.

Routesetting requires extensive knowledge, experience, and a skillset that often exceeds the requirements of any other position in an indoor climbing gym. Knowledge of climbing technique, climbing moves, climbing holds, and climbing grades is the minimum requirement. Extensive experience climbing outdoors and using power tools and professional gear (like ascenders and pulleys) is paramount to the job. Creative thinking skills, rope management skills, rigging skills—routesetting is physically and mentally demanding. It can take months, if not years, to develop a routesetter.

Having said this, gyms can benefit from some sort of crossover and collaboration between team coaches and routesetters. Team coaches, especially traveling team coaches, have a high-level of exposure and understanding of the moves required in competitive climbing. They can offer tremendous insight and guidance to routesetters, even if they lack the tools and skills to put the rock on the walls themselves. And if time and resources are allowed, some team coaches might be able to routeset for training purposes.

And there is the flipside—routesetters can also make excellent team coaches. After all, these are the masters of technique and movement. Competitions do not exist without them. **Who better to coach the athletes on how to move than the person who designed the moves that they are intending to make?**

It is not uncommon for routesetters to moonlight as team coaches—or uncommon for the Head Routsetter to also be the Head Team Coach at smaller gyms.

The caveat? Routesetting is not a customer-facing position. Not all routesetters make great coaches. Some lack the time, others like the personality, and many lack the interest. As with any cross-training decisions, gym managers need to do a full cost-benefit analysis. The more responsibilities a routesetter takes on, the less available they are to routeset. This can impact route turnover, which is why all gym managers should be aware of the downside of cross-training routesetters into other positions.

Routesetters + Advanced Classes

Routesetting is already a full-time job for most. It can be difficult, if not impossible, for gyms to

ask routesetters to do anything else. However, routesetters are subject to burnout, like everyone else. They are also subject to injury, because of the physical demands of the job. Having other skills can be valuable.

Routesetters are the prime candidates for instructing a lot of advanced climbing classes. We have already covered the reasons why, but time and personal interest will always be the greatest inhibitors.

Conclusion

Time and resources will always be the greatest obstacles to cross-training. Cross-training can be a beneficial tool for professional development and is extremely helpful for scheduling purposes, but it does not come without costs. Regular performance evaluations will help gym managers decide whether cross-training is working or not.

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About the Author



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Ashley Routson is the General Manager of Planet Rock Climbing Gyms in Madison Heights, MI. She is a proud graduate of THE Ohio State University, where she was a member of both the varsity swimming team and varsity rowing team. Ashley came to the indoor climbing industry after nearly two decades of working in the restaurant and craft beer industries. She is also the author of *The Beer Wench's Guide to Beer*--a comprehensive book detailing all things craft beer. When she isn't pulling on plastic rocks in the gym, Ashley loves moderate trad and sport climbing in the great

