

Gym Owners & Indoor Climbing's Boom: Part 3

December 4, 2023

in [CWA Blog](#)



Editors Note: This is Part 3 in a three-part series on the profitability of the indoor climbing industry. If you haven't read [part one](#) or [part two](#), start there!

The continued growth of the climbing industry presents many new challenges, but it especially exacerbates challenges that were already present. Finding quality staff and retaining employees was already a trending topic in the indoor climbing industry as it grew, but now coupled with the increased difficulty of finding and maintaining effective staff every industry has seen since the pandemic, it has taken on even greater priority. At the heart of every employee retention strategy is the provision of better pay. While this figure may vary from state to state, the size, and scale of the operation, it behooves us to assess where we stand and to advocate for our employees.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Christopher Oshinski, [Sportrock Climbing Centers, VA.](#), and writer with the CWA for two years. Chris focuses on social justice issues, coaching and training, and management.
- **Who Should Read:** This article is for gym owners, and senior management. It's informative for everyone in the industry.
- **What Will You Learn:** How employee retention is tied to the growing professionalization of our industry. Also some helpful tips on how to pay and understand the needs of your employees.

• **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** Before reading this article, definitely read the other two in the series [here](#).

We must allow and encourage our industry's growth. Understanding both the tangible and intangible costs of employee turnover informs us that as our industry continues to mature, our staff will expect more of us as employers. As our staff and industry become entirely professionalized, the compensatory demands on us from staff will also track upward.

We can respond **reactively**, eating the cost of losing qualified staff as we attempt to patch holes in our organization, or we can be **proactive** in our endeavors to both maintain existing personnel and to attract new talent.

An enterprising approach would reflect:

- An understanding of existing industry standards (and how to raise them)
- The cost of living within our communities of operation
- The robustness of our gym's culture

(Sub-) Standards

With the dearth of data concerning average wages in our industry, it can be hard to ascertain what a "competitive" wage looks like.

In alignment with indoor climbing industry growth, more and more employees with years of climbing gym experience will have increased access and mobility to professional work elsewhere, meaning they may leave one company in pursuit of opportunities at another, bringing with them ideas and norms of what competitive or appropriate compensation entails.

To affect the pay narrative, we need to adopt open and transparent dialogue with our existing employees —indicating to them what capability we may (or may not) have at our disposal to increase compensation — and to be aware of what other gyms are paying their staff.

Understandably, impressions of what is "fair" or "standard" will increase in conjunction with inflation as well as the real and perceived increase to revenue.

While matching existing standards may keep our candidate pool "competitive," **by raising the bar of what compensation looks like, we can solidify our stance as industry leaders**, further enhancing our social capital and goodwill.

"Minimum" Wage is Still Minimal

A vital element in determining our pay structure should be the cost of living within the communities we serve. Often used as a metric to determine day rates and membership costs, this data can easily be redirected to influence our first and foremost stakeholders—the people

representing our gym daily.

A tremendous tool for this undertaking is the [Living Wage Calculator](#) from MIT. Remarkably transparent with their [data-gathering methods](#), the researchers differentiate between federal poverty levels and a living wage, as the former does not account for any living expenses aside from food. According to their [technical document](#), the living wage calculator “is an alternative measure of basic needs. It is a market-based approach that draws upon geographically specific expenditure data related to a family’s likely minimum food, childcare, health insurance, housing, transportation, and other basic necessities...costs [sic].”

While it may be a lofty goal for many small gym owners and operators to meet even the minimum living wage standard, **having a clear sense of the expenses faced by our staff** (and potentially how far we are currently off from meeting their needs) **is a significant perspective to have** when it comes to reviewing, redressing, and implementing our compensatory and benefits packages.

Intangibles

While a higher baseline wage or salary may be sufficient to entice a candidate to join our organization, it may prove to be inadequate to maintain their employment if unaccompanied by growth opportunities and an all-important company culture. Not to belabor the point, but ensuring [employee recognition](#) and implementing effective [retention strategies](#), as referenced in the previous installment, can serve us in many respects.

While aspects such as quality leadership and a non-toxic work environment go a long way to sustaining employee engagement, these characteristics can be leveraged as additional boons when we are unable to match higher wages. Sure, some candidates may single-mindedly pursue the highest salary, while others may eschew higher rates in exchange for less tangible benefits, but the vast majority of our working people likely fall somewhere in the middle.

Thus, it is paramount to provide the most well-rounded package possible to stay competitive, as failure to do so will have immediate and negative impacts.

The expected growth and development of our industry is truly an exciting prospect, despite—or in part because of—the changes and challenges that lie imminently ahead.

We can anticipate the increased revenues our companies will see, the opportunities for new markets, and the professionalization of our industry; we understand how to calculate our ROI and how costly employee turnover often is, especially as our employees become more skilled and experienced; and we have seen so many qualified and valuable people depart for “real jobs” and greener pastures.

Let us not wait passively for change to come, nor to be dragged kicking and screaming into a

new future for indoor climbing. Let us reflect the same value for our staff as our clientele demonstrates for us.

After all, we need both to thrive.

Help Us Professionalize the Industry

In an attempt to make the premier indoor climbing industry event even more impactful, we've brought back pre-conferences, and we know the perfect one for someone like you who'd read this article to the end.

Sign up for the Crafting a Comprehensive Onboarding Program workshop at the 2024 CWA Summit!

About the Author



Chris Oshinski is the assistant director for [Sportrock Climbing Centers](#) Sterling, VA location, passionate for teaching youth and addressing inequalities. Having obtained an MA in Public Sociology in 2018, Chris loves to explore the myriad forms of agency vis-a-vis individual and collective efforts at fostering social justice and human rights.



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