



Lifting the lid on performance staff salaries

Rob Pacey provides a look into the salaries and working conditions of 300+ practitioners across three different sports.

If you visit any of the major social media channels, you're almost guaranteed to find a conversation about salaries in sports science. Those conversations will often be bemoaning the low pay, lack of detailed salary information on job descriptions, need for increasing levels of education and accreditation or frustration that a candidate got a job that has a prior relationship with a senior member of staff at the hiring club.

The ironic thing is, those conversations are likely going on in many industries across the world and you could replace 'sports science' with 'teaching', 'graphic design', 'construction' etc. However, that doesn't mean that the points aren't valid and we accept these frustrations.

As an industry we pride ourselves on being objective. We collect data on our athletes to give us confidence in the decisions that we make. But, up until recently, the only information that helped practitioners with the points brought up above (lack of detailed salary information on job descriptions etc.) was a number of published articles, most notably from Vernau *et al.* (2021). Vernau and colleagues gave an overview of the basic minimum standards that employers generally require. Although extremely useful when constructing a CV and choosing how to spend CPD budget, it doesn't get to the root of the common gripes practitioners seem to have.

Therefore, in 2019 we (Sportsmith) launched the first performance staff salary survey, which aimed to shed some light on the salaries and working conditions of those currently working in strength and conditioning and sports science positions across various sports. Performance sport is not known for its transparency. However, a pilot study which investigated English academy football received responses from 96 practitioners clearly showing that there was an immediate desire for this kind of information to be made public.

The anonymous survey highlighted insights which may not appease those ranting on social media (including my former self!), but it provided some much-needed objectivity. Although simple, the data below (age and years' experience) gives us an interesting look at who currently holds strength and conditioning and sports science positions. 71% of respondents were 30 years of age or younger and 62% had five or less years' experience. Is it then a surprise that two thirds of respondents earned under £30,000 per annum?



Figure 1. Distribution of performance staff annual salaries in professional sport: UK Senior Football (n = 138 [respondents]), UK, Australia & New Zealand Rugby Union (n = 87) and Rugby League (n = 44), and USA Football (n = 70). Data are shown as the percentage of total respondents from within each survey.

This applied feature aims to address issues and areas that are often common in the real world, but are seldom covered by the usual learning mediums (university courses, journals, books, etc.). Please contact the editor if you have any ideas for future issues: editor@bases.org.uk

Due to the interest shown in the pilot study, four subsequent surveys have been undertaken which can all be downloaded for free at sportsmith.co/reports. Rugby league and rugby union included data from practitioners in Australia and New Zealand as well as Britain and Ireland. Reports from British senior football and Major League Soccer (MLS) soon followed. The distribution of salaries reported from each of these surveys, along with the average salary, is shown in Figure 1.

Overview of Key Survey Insights

One common frustration among practitioners is the perceived cronyism and nepotism that exists within performance sport. But let's once again be clear, this exists in all walks of life whether you're a sports scientist, an artist or a politician (as often features in the tabloids). In fact, research from LinkedIn in 2016 showed that over 70% of people from a wide variety of industries were hired at companies where they had a connection in place. But this doesn't make it less frustrating.

Unfortunately, the conclusion we can draw from the data is that is does exist and practitioners need to find ways to navigate this unfortunate reality. In the MLS survey for example, only 7% of respondents gained their current role from applying via a publicly available job advert. Others got their job from recommendation - no publicly available job advert, 'promotion', 'recruiter' or 'hired after an internship. Although not as extreme, the British senior football survey shows a similar trend. Only 17% of respondents got their current role from a publicly available job advert. Interestingly, 6% gained their job through a recruiter or head-hunter. As the number of performance staff specific recruiters continues to rise into 2022, this could be a more viable route for practitioners wanting to get into the industry or wanting to move up the career ladder.

Salaries are one of the most contentious topics in our industry today. The reason for what are often considered low salaries is beyond the scope of this article. Supply and demand and lack of understanding of job role from administrators are two of the most commonly held reasons for the perceived problem. Since many job descriptions don't have full transparency over salaries and often state that they are 'competitive', up until now it's only anecdotal evidence that suggests that wages are so poor.

In the survey conducted into British senior football of which 138 practitioners responded, we found that salaries ranged from £16,000 to £208,000. It should be noted here that 'head of' was the most senior job title, perhaps therefore not giving us the full picture of the real higher-earners. Over half of all respondents had a salary between £21,000 and £40,000, with the mean salary being £35,000 pre-bonus. This is in comparison to a mean salary of £44,000, £44,000 and £57,700 in rugby league, rugby union and MLS respectively.

Just looking at averages here, as always, doesn't tell us the full story. Comparing salaries of a practitioner working in a Super League (rugby league) club with a League Two (football) club or an MLS club with a Gallagher Premiership (rugby union) club may be a little bit simplistic. However, one interesting comparison is that of English Premier League (EPL) wages and MLS wages. It would be an assumption based on the value of assets (players), increased revenue, and greater global appeal that the average wage in the EPL would be significantly higher than the MLS. However, that isn't the case. The average EPL wage was £50,000 compared to £57,700 in the MLS.

Back in the late 1990's when sports scientists—or 'fitness coaches' as they were commonly known—were becoming more of a regular fixture in the back-room team of a sporting organisation, an undergraduate degree was sometimes but not all the time the required level of education. Fast forward to 2022 and it seems as

though everyone is doing a PhD and soon it could be the route undertaken by the majority of performance staff. But does improved education of staff lead to improved wages? Data from all but rugby league suggests that it does. For example, the British football survey shows that those with a Bachelors degree as their highest level of education averaged £34,000 while those with a Masters averaged £42,000. However, those with a Doctoral qualification averaged £52,000 showing that increased education is associated with increased salary. One outlier to this was rugby league, where those with a Bachelors degree were paid more than those with a Masters or a Doctorate with an average of £66,500 (compared to £49,400 and £65,300, respectively).

As well as an increased demand for higher levels of qualification, there is also a perceived pressure on practitioners to gain industry recognised accreditations. This has also become a way for practitioners to differentiate themselves from their peers when going head-to-head for job vacancies. But with that said, do employers fully understand what each accreditation is and what extra that would give a prospective candidate? And are practitioners fully bought into the process?

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Those working in the US seem to have bought into the process of accreditation as 87% of respondents said that they had at least one. However, the majority of those stated that they were accredited by the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) which is a multiple-choice exam; not the competency-based assessments of other organisations. This trend does not continue across the board, however. Fifty-four percent of those working in rugby union and only 43% of those working in British senior football held any sort of accreditation. This data contradicts the findings of Vernau and colleagues, as they found that only 12 of the 51 job descriptions analysed did not state an accreditation was 'essential'.

Summary

I don't think that we will ever stop practitioners from heading to social media to voice their displeasure of low wages, lack of detailed salary information on job descriptions, need for increasing levels of education and accreditation or suspected nepotism and cronyism. However, what we can do is provide better resources and information to practitioners of all levels so they can decide to enter or indeed stay in the industry with their eyes wide open. Practitioners need to be aware what qualifications and accreditations those in post currently have. A job description may say one thing but what happens in reality is another. More transparency when it comes to wages is also needed so if offered a particular role, practitioners can negotiate based on up-to-date benchmarks and industry norms. With that in mind, we at Sportsmith will be releasing additional free to access salary surveys over the coming months. ■



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Rob is an accredited strength and conditioning coach, host of the Pacey Performance Podcast and the founder and director of Sportsmith.

References:

Vernau, J.W. et al. (2021). An analysis of job descriptions and person specifications to define the requirements for obtaining employment within strength & conditioning. *Professional Strength & Conditioning*, 60, 7-16.