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Fitness For Public Safety

Are Personnel Really Fit For Duty?

By Richard Kay

Fitness for public safety officers is a key aspect for ensuring optimum performance in the workplace. Fitness provides many benefits, including reduction of fatigue, a higher degree of alertness, reduction in workplace injuries from accidents and incidents involving use of force, a more professional image, and the deterrent of a well-presented, fit-looking officer on duty.

What organisations were doing in the past may have been acceptable at the time of implementation, but new studies have provided new direction. This article addresses some of the significant legal, scientific, program and policy changes over the past thirty years, provides guidance based upon the current information, and includes recommendations that will assist organisations to move toward implementing fitness tests, standards and programs which help ensure a fit workforce and which are valid if challenged in court.

Fitness Standards And Programs

Why be concerned with fitness? It relates to:

- the ability of officers to perform essential functions of the job
- minimising the risk of excessive force situations
- minimising the known health risks associated with the public safety job
- meeting legal requirements to have a defensible position if challenged in court

For fitness tests, standards and programs to be valid and defensible they must be job related and scientifically valid.

Requirements for job relatedness:

- A fitness component/area must be an underlying factor for performing essential and/or critical physical functions of the job (construct validity)
- A fitness component/area must predict who can and who cannot perform the essential and/or critical physical functions of the job (criterion validity)

Requirements for scientific validity:

- Fitness tests, standards and programs must have evidence that they are accepted within the field of exercise science as being valid and as meeting the 'standard of ordinary care':
- The fitness tests are accepted as valid measures of the fitness areas (construct validity)
- The fitness tests must be accurate and reliable measures of the fitness area tested
- The fitness standards predict who can and cannot perform the essential physical functions of the job (criterion validity)
- The fitness programs are defined and implemented according to guidelines for safe exercise training

A key question is, 'Is physical fitness job related and can it be scientifically valid?'. The answer is yes. Results of studies consistently show twenty to thirty critical physical tasks that are job related and necessary to perform essential functions of the job.

There is ample data to document that physical fitness components are the underlying and predictive factors for performing tasks such as:

- sustained pursuit – aerobic power
- sprints – anaerobic power
- dodging – aerobic/anaerobic power/flexibility
- lifting and carrying – muscular strength/muscular endurance/anaerobic power
- dragging and pulling – muscular strength/muscular endurance/anaerobic power
- pushing – muscular strength/muscular endurance/anaerobic power
- jumping and vaulting – anaerobic power/leg power and strength
- crawling – flexibility/muscular endurance/body fat composition
- use of force (<two minutes) – anaerobic power/muscular strength/muscular endurance
- use of force (>two minutes) – aerobic power/muscular strength/muscular endurance

Legal Issues

Tests, standards and programs cannot discriminate against 'protected' classes defined by law (that is, gender, race, disability and so on), except if job relatedness is established and documented. It is important to implement tests, standards and programs that do discriminate between those who can and cannot do the job regardless of age, gender, race, or disability.

There are two levels of legal concern:

The first concern revolves around potential negligence by organisations in the delivery of the fitness tests, standards and programs. The concern here is safety. The organisation must document in writing the policies and procedures that meet the 'standard of ordinary care' as demonstrated by following appropriate guidelines.

The second concern revolves around the liability of an organisation for not having tests, standards and programs. An organisation that does not address the fitness requirements and needs of officers may be susceptible to litigation for the following:

- Negligent hiring: failure to hire applicants who are fit to do the job
- Negligent training: failure to train recruits so they are physically capable of doing the job
- Negligent supervision: failure to supervise officers so they can meet the physical demands of the job
- Negligent retention: failure to reassign officers who cannot meet the physical demands of the job

Fitness Programming

A good starting place is to prepare personnel to be fitness coordinators who can set up a testing and training program in the organisation, by attending a physical fitness certification course.

Organisations have to make a decision to use age and gender standards, single standards or absolute standards. Absolute standards that are valid and defensible are recommended because they are job related and scientifically valid.



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Next, determine if the program will be voluntary or mandatory compliance or a combination of both. For example, some agencies have mandatory compliance for academy exit and voluntary programs for incumbents, or mandatory testing but voluntary compliance.

Looking toward the future, some organisations will implement mandatory compliance to fitness standards throughout an officer's career because it is the right thing to do to ensure that officers are fit for duty. Organisations must give their officers a fair chance to prepare for the implementation of mandatory fitness standards. Applicant and recruit fitness standards may be implemented at any time. Incumbent fitness standards should be phased in over time. Leniency towards incumbents is not recommended because it undermines the basic premise that physical fitness is job related.

An organisation has the latitude to implement physical fitness testing, standards and programs. No one can legitimately argue that physical fitness is not job related. The key issue and the one necessitating considerable planning, thought, research and effort is what level of physical fitness is required to do the job? In other words, which fitness standards will be chosen and implemented? The standard an organisation selects for applicants, recruits and incumbents has legal, scientific and practical issues.

Physical Fitness Policy Checklist

- Are the purposes and goals clearly defined? (What do we want to do?)
- Is the rationale behind the purposes and goals clearly defined? (Why do we need to do it?)
- Has the job-related validity for the tests, standards and programs been demonstrated and documented? (Why is it valid and job related?)
- Are the personnel subject to the policies and programs identified from the top down? (Who needs to do it?)
- Are the personnel responsible for implementing and supervising the program identified? (Who delivers the program and how are they trained, certified and supervised?)
- Are the primary fitness components of the

program clearly identified and explained? (What is the program?)

- Are the operational components of the program clearly defined and explained? (What occurs in the program and which agency operations are affected?)
- Is the implementation process with timelines defined? (How will the program be phased in?)
- Are the organisation's responsibilities specified? (What is the expectation of the organisation?)
- Are the individual officer's responsibilities defined? (What is the expectation of the officer?)

Options For Fitness Testing And Standards

Organisations often require their applicants, trainees and incumbents to maintain a certain level of physical fitness to be fit for duty.

Job-related duties require an individual to be prepared to perform optimally in certain situations with strength, stamina, speed and power.

There is no clear standard that dictates to organisations how they are to implement fitness tests, choose their fitness standards, or implement their fitness programs. Some organisations have voluntary fitness testing with recommended standards that are not enforced (voluntary compliance). Other organisations have mandatory compliance for fitness tests and standards, meaning that the individual will not be hired or will be fired if fitness standards are not met or maintained. Still others have mandatory testing but voluntary compliance to fitness standards.

Furthermore, organisations often differ in fitness requirements for applicants, trainees and incumbents. For example, some agencies require their new graduates to meet a fitness standard, but the incumbent officer is never tested for fitness again.

The issue of fitness standards for security is straightforward in terms of being fit for duty, but is made complex by bureaucratic concerns (who coordinates, implements and finances the process) and the general apathetic nature of the industry as a whole (not 'mandatory' = not 'necessary').

There is allowance for this aspect within the Private Security Act 2004, Part 3, Section 25:

- The Chief Commissioner must not grant a private security individual operator licence if he or she is not satisfied that the applicant meets (b) the probity requirements or (c) the competency requirement.
- The probity requirements are that the person is (a) fit and proper, [etcetera].
- The competency requirement is that the person has successfully completed any approved training requirements or has the experience or training approved by the Chief Commissioner as relevant to each activity or any aspect of each such activity that the person is authorised to carry on under the licence.

The requirement to be fit and proper relates to a person's character, but could also reasonably relate to their health and physical suitability for the job. Additionally, there is potential to include fitness standards within the competency requirements as relevant to each activity under the licence. For security activities such as security guard (unarmed or armed), crowd control, cash in transit and bodyguard, there is surely a reasonable requirement for job-related fitness.

Fitness should be maintained throughout an individual's career, if his or her job requires a readiness to respond physically. The industry as a whole needs to embrace fitness as an essential job criterion if it wants to move forward professionally and be taken seriously. Currently, there are many approaches available to successfully accomplish this purpose. There is no foolproof solution, only pros and cons to each approach. ■

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