CHARACTERISTICS OF SPORT MANAGERS AND CHALLENGES FACING SPORT ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract
This paper aims to research into the opinions of future employees of sport organisations regarding needed knowledge and skills of sport managers. The sample consisted of fourth year students of the Faculty of Kinesiology University of Zagreb enrolled into subject Economics and Management of Sport. In total 537 questionnaires were collected in the last five academic years (from 2013/2014 until 2017/2018). The research revealed that majority of students (82%) find that sport managers in their work dominantly need people skills (communication and teamwork). In addition, a list of 12 various specific individual competencies was provided and students were asked to choose five they find most important for sport managers’ work. Willingness to take risks was chosen most often (by 62,7% of students), followed by the ability to organise work (60%), sport managers’ expertise (58,6%), entrepreneurial abilities and knowledge (56,6%), etc. However, sport managers’ expertise (knowledge) needed for his/her position was most commonly awarded first rank (by 18,6% of all interviewees).

Keywords: sport managers, challenges, knowledge, skills, abilities

JEL codes: J24, L83, M12

Introduction

According to Mason et al. (1981, quoted in Pedersen and Thibault, 2014, Kindle location: 687-692) as early as in 1957 a need to educate sport managers was expressed when the president and a chief stockholder of the Dodgers, Walter O’Malley, wrote a letter to James Mason, a faculty member at Ohio University asking where he might find a person who:

by virtue of education had been trained to administer a marina, race track, ski resort, auditorium, stadium, theater, convention or exhibition hall, a public camp complex, or a person to fill an executive position at a team or league level in junior athletics such as Little League baseball, football, scouting, CYO (Catholic Youth Organization), and youth activities, etc.? Since then, a number of researchers (Parkhouse and Ulrich, 1979; Jamieson, 1987; Brassie, 1989; DeSensi et al., 1990) have confirmed the need for a “new type of specialist, the sport manager” (DeSensi et al., 1990:32) with always present curricula adaptations (Braunstein-Minkove, DeLuca, 2015).

Although sport management is considered a relatively young scientific discipline, in the words of Stier (1993:3) it is a “big business today and will remain so in the future.” Almost 15 years later, researchers still report that the world of sport is growing rapidly (Pitts and Stotlar, 2007, quoted in Pedersen and Thibault, 2014, Kindle location: 1114). This created significant opportunities for employment in the sport sector1. The growth in employment in the sports sector in European Union countries “in the last ten years has been significant, almost 60% on average, which is a much higher growth rate than that observed in other comparable sectors.” (VOCASPORT, 2004:87)

From a management point of view, it is of great importance to emphasize that sport is a complex social activity that encompasses several different segments. Each of these segments (see Bartoluci, Škorić, 2009:16-19) encompasses activities aimed at different users (sportsmen/women, recreational users, people with disabilities, etc.) and conducted with different motives and goals (sport results, looking better, socializing, etc.). In addition, organisations of both profit and non-profit sector appear on this market, meaning that large differences exist as regards the size and consequently organisational structure and business processes. However, some common characteristics can be found. Mostly the fact that the “vast majority of sporting activity takes place in amateur structures” and is based on volunteer-driven structures (European Commission, 2007:3). This means that the dominant organisation of labour is characterised either by the cohabitation of a reduced number of permanent professional staff with unpaid managers and supervisors (voluntary sports), or by the

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1 Some difficulties in defining the term “sport sector” exist, but go beyond the scope of this paper. For more details, see Breedveld et al, 2013; SpEA et al, 2012; European Commission, 2007a; VOCASPORT, 2004.
exclusive presence of a small number of professionals (very small businesses). (VOCASPORT, 2004:87)

Therefore, the management of these organisations is mostly in the hands of non-professionals (volunteers). Nevertheless, as in any other (profit) organisation, managers are expected to achieve the set goals of an organisation, regardless the problems and challenges imposed at them (Kreitner, 2009 in Alfierević, et al, 2013:75).

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, to identify challenges sport organisations are faced with, and secondly to research into the opinions of future employees of sport organisations regarding needed knowledge and skills of sport managers for facing those challenges. If not otherwise mentioned, the paper deals mostly with sport associations (non-profit organisations).

Challenges

As previously mentioned, sport offers numerous job opportunities, including those for sport managers, since depending on the country in question, around 10% of employment in the sports sector is occupied by managerial functions (VOCASPORT, 2004:79). Therefore, the question of what are managerial functions, i.e. who are managers in sport organisations is imposed. Sport manager is “organizer, a person who manages a sport organization whose goal is to achieve certain sport-related and business results.” (Bartoluci, 2003:155) Regardless of their position, everyday activities of sport managers can be clustered into “general management tasks, organization management, information management, and exercise and sport science” (quoted in Parks, Zanger, Quaterman, 1998:4). They conduct all managerial functions (Lussier and Kimball, 2014:12-13), making all knowledge areas and skills identified by Katz (in Weirich and Koontz, 1998:6) more than 30 years ago needed for their job. Nevertheless, research has shown that the relative importance of different knowledge areas and skills is different for each management level (Jamieson, 1987, Parks, Zanger, Quaterman, 1998; Lussier and Kimball, 2014). According to Jamieson research (1987:53), as one climbs the levels basic management functions gain in importance, while knowledge such as science, programming techniques and safety/accident prevention become less important. According to Horch and Schütte research whose results may be typical for clubs and federations having paid managers, sport managers must dispose of a basic knowledge about the sports of his/her organisation, and communicational skills in the area of public relations have a central importance (2003:75-76).

Somewhat different results were obtained when opinions of Faculty of Economics students into needed competencies of sport managers in Croatia were researched (see Škorić, 2009) suggesting “the perception of sport managers in Croatia still matches that of trainer-manager.” For the students, among the most important knowledge areas are three concerning specific sport knowledge (basic knowledge of sport(s) of the organisation, club and federation law, and sport science, coaching). In addition, research suggests that sport management competencies are universal, and have remained relatively stable over time (Danylchuk and Boucher, 2003; Horch and Schütte, 2003 in Pedersen and Thibault, 2014, Kindle location:917). Besides emphasizing competencies required for performing traditional tasks such as personnel management and planning, today’s sport management organizations and settings place increased importance on communication skills, technological aptitude, and the ability to interact in a global and multicultural society. (Pedersen and Thibault, 2014, Kindle location:917)

However, “the future will also present sport managers with many challenges and opportunities, some that have already emerged and others that we cannot even imagine” (Pedersen and Thibault, 2014, Kindle location:1119) which will affect their characteristics, knowledge and skills. Depending on the point of view, different challenges are identified. According to European Commission’s White Paper on Sport (2007:2), sport is faced with “new threats and challenges which have emerged in European society, such as commercial pressure, exploitation of young players, doping, racism, violence, corruption and money laundering.” In addition, “the emergence of new stakeholders (participants outside the organised disciplines, professional sports clubs, etc.) is posing new questions as regards governance, democracy and representation of interests within the sport movement.” (European Commission, 2007:12) Building on the previous, the document Principles of good governance (European Commission, 2013) discusses several challenges and their possible consequences, such as commercialisation of sport at the elite level; increased interest in sport from different stakeholders (public and private); increased grassroots participation in sports; globalisation and increased cross border activity; shifting demographics and societal changes; growth of sports betting; etc.

Pedersen and Thibault (2014, Kindle location:1124) state that challenges and opportunities associated with technology, ethics and social responsibility, and the globalization of sport, will affect all sport managers. The influence of technology, i.e. innovations development on sport is significant especially considering the increased competition from the profit sector, i.e. growing number of commercial sports providers (Staškevičiūtė-Butienė, Valantinė and Eimontas, 2016; Winand et al, 2016). It affects the process of production
(training/exercise), distribution of goods and services as well as creation of new products and sports. Nevertheless, technology is not “an end unto itself. It is a means to an end—an innovation that facilitates progress and helps us realize other accomplishments.” (Pedersen and Thibault, 2014, Kindle location:1135)

Despite the constant need to innovate, “mobilise resources, personal knowledge and skills to implement new ideas” (Winand et al, 2016:289) authors have reported a lack of research concerning this topic (Nová, 2015; Ratten, 2016; Wemmer and Koenigstorfer, 2016; Winand et al, 2016). It should be stressed that it is the “notion of product and service innovation adoption” (Boyne et al, 2005, quoted in Wemmer and Koenigstorfer, 2016:1927) and not necessarily new product development that plays a crucial role in non-profit organisations. Winand et al study (2016) report that 55% of sport federations in Belgium are innovative implementing on average 4.53 service innovations. Interviewees reported an implementation of a significantly higher number of non-sport innovations compared to sport innovations, mostly training programmes for coaches, officials and referees, and new online services. Similarly, Lithuanian study indicates 56% of sport federations implemented innovations or planned to do so in the last 12 months (Staškevičiūtė-Butienė, Valentinė and Eimontas, 2016:60).

Various social issues have influenced the integrity of sport both in positive and negative manner (European Commission, 2013, 2007), and “many people are calling for greater accountability on the part of sport managers.” (Pedersen and Thibault, 2014, Kindle location:1149). According to the White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007), the societal role of sport can be viewed through its enhancement of public health; help with fight against doping; reinforcement of human capital; promotion of volunteering and active citizenship; contribution to economic and social cohesion and more integrated societies; strengthening the prevention of and fight against racism and violence; promotion of education, health, inter-cultural dialogue, development and peace; and support to sustainable development. However, “the vulnerability of sport to match fixing and other corrupt practices” have highlighted the need for assistance of regulators, national governments and law enforcement agencies since “sporting bodies are no longer able to deal with the threat and challenges to sporting integrity alone.” (European Commission, 2013:3)

Sport has a “global appeal that transcends language and geographical boundaries, unlike other businesses and industries” (Ratten, 2016:239). It is a “genuine international endeavour; at the same time the motor and the result of globalization.” (Gems and Pfister, 2014:51) This emphasizes “the need to understand and appreciate other countries and cultures” (quoted in Pedersen and Thibault, 2014, Kindle location:1224). Despite numerous benefits of globalization of sport, such as more countries and athletes participating in international events, overcoming of barriers (gender, geographical and religion) (Pedersen and Thibault, 2014, Kindle location:1264), some negative influences have to be mentioned. For example, a division of labour (use of developing countries’ work force to manufacture sportswear and sport equipment); the increasing flow of athletes where country of birth and origin are no longer a limitation on where an athlete plays and competes (talent-drain); the increased involvement of global media in sport; and the impact of sport on the environment. (Thibault, 2009)

Although “only a few attempts have been made to analyse the responses of sporting organisations to environmental disturbances” (Skinner, Stewart and Edwards, 1999:175), the fact remains that organisations must conduct environmental analysis and adopt to changes to ensure success and longevity. In order to adequately adopt to complex and dynamically changing environment, a number of studies emphasizes the need for professionalization (Skinner, Stewart and Edwards, 1999; De Knop, Van Hoecke and De Bosscher, 2004; Siegfried et al, 2015), that is to say “moving from a volunteer-driven logic to a more formalised and business-like one” (Siegfried et al, 2015:408). Despite the fact that organisational change is rather complicated process and a differentiation between various types of organisational change can be made (see Skinner, Stewart and Edwards, 1999), professionalization can lead to “fundamental organisational changes characterised by a strengthening of institutional management and the implementation of (efficiency-based) management instruments (e.g. strategic planning, human resource management, reporting tools).” (Siegfried et al, 2015:408)

Consequently, it would include orientation towards meeting the needs of various stakeholders, perhaps by introducing “new (quality) strategies in the sports sector” focusing on customers (satisfaction), continuous improvement (innovation) and total involvement (commitment) as “essential skill packages to move towards an effective, market-oriented (service) organisation.” (De Knop, Van Hoecke and De Bosscher, 2004:58-60) In addition, although “it is still difficult to use this model [EFQM Excellence model] for the assessment of traditional sport clubs” (De Knop, Van Hoecke and De Bosscher, 2004:63), there is also a significant demand for (professional) advice expressed by the non-profit organisations.

As a consequence, efforts have to be made to provide these volunteer managers with relevant information as well as relevant tools in order to challenge the growing requirements and complexity of the (task) environment.” (Drucker, 1993; Jeneob abd Juosm 1988; Unterman and Davis, 1984; Verhoeven et al., 1999 quoted in De Knop, Van Hoecke and De Bosscher, 2004:63)

Without going into detailed analysis of different forms of professionalization (see Siegfried et al, 2015), let us just mention that professionalization of individuals’ means an increase in the number of paid employees and in the competencies of volunteers at all levels (political, managerial and operational). Competency here is
understood as “a knowledge, skill or attitude needed to carry out properly an activity to succeed in one’s professional life” (Lambrecht, 1991:34 quoted in Horch and Schütte, 2003:71).

Results

All previously mentioned challenges increase the need for the development of different knowledge and skill areas, i.e. competencies for sport managers. Most commonly mentioned competencies refer to (1) innovation; (2) issues of multilingualism, multiculturalism, and multidisciplinarity in the delivery of sport in a global context (Thibault, 2009:2); (3) general, transferable competencies as well as those specific to organization management and information management and the ability to think critically (Pedersen and Thibault, 2014, Kindle Locations 1283-1284). According to interviewees in research of Horch and Schütte (2003:73) in the future, experts who have “first, an academic training (62%) and who, second, understand something of general business administration as well as the specifics of the sport industry (84%)” will be needed. The importance of managers’ education was discussed and confirmed by Jovanova-Simeva whose researched revealed that the “education and knowledge of foreign languages contribute considerably to the modern sport management” (2015:13).

As can be seen various knowledge areas and skills are emphasized, mostly referring to so called technical skills, i.e. managers expertise, “ability to use methods and techniques to perform a task”, and they “vary widely from job to job”. (Lussier and Kimball, 2014:9) Being the head of an accounting department would require knowledge on the use of different accounting principles, software, etc. Similarly, working in sport organisation, depending on a management level and position they hold, managers are expected to possess various (levels of) knowledge and skills about methods and techniques used in sport, or as mentioned by Horch and Schütte (2003) understanding the specifics of the sport industry. The results of Swanson and Kent research reveal that “sport domain factors [such as sport domain experience and knowledge] play an important role in assessing the credibility and prototypicality of leaders in the context of sport.” (2014:90) In addition, Mašala et al (2013) found that the business success in basketball, volleyball and handball sport clubs was influenced by managers’ education in sport, implying the importance of these technical skill in achieving positive business results as well. Nevertheless, it is the people skills, i.e. “ability to work well with people” (Lussier and Kimball, 2014:9) that seem to have a “decisive role at each management level, because even the most competent managers possessing excellent technical and conceptual abilities will not be successful if they do not know how to ‘work with others’.” (Sikavica, Bahtijarević-Šiber, Pološki Vokić, 2008:35). They include “successful communication, leadership and motivation skills, as well as teamwork competencies and creating positive working environment.” (Sikavica, Bahtijarević-Šiber, Pološki Vokić, 2008:35) Additionally, according to Katz (quoted in Lussier and Kimball, 2014, Sikavica, Bahtijarević-Šiber, Pološki Vokić, 2008) so called conceptual skills are needed by managers in every organisation and at every management level. These are referred to as ability to see “the big picture”, to “understand an organization or department as a whole and the relationships among its part” (Lussier and Kimball, 2014:9) or internal environment, as well as external environment and its possible impacts on the organisation. Managers possessing these types of knowledge and skills “anticipate future events and prepare various scenarios for unpredictable and uncertain future” (Sikavica, Bahtijarević-Šiber, Pološki Vokić, 2008:35) Finally, the fact that (sport) organisations need to constantly innovate in order to successfully adopt to changing environment has been discussed in almost all mentioned literature. By innovation it is not meant exclusively new product development, but rather monitoring new developments and their implementation if possible.

In that sense, two basic hypothesis were tested:
H1: the majority (more than 50%) of interviewees find people skills as the most important for the work of sport managers;
H2: innovative abilities are most important (chosen by more than 50% of interviewees) for future sport managers.

The sample consisted of fourth year students of the Faculty of Kinesiology University of Zagreb enrolled into subject Economics and Management of Sport. In total 537 questionnaires were collected in the last five academic years (from 2013/2014 until 2017/2018). Questions analysed in this paper are a part of a broader research in which questionnaire developed by Sikavica and Bahtijarević-Šiber (2004) was adopted and used. The sample consisted of 64.1% male and 35.9% female students, which were on average 22.5 years of age. Students were asked about their opinions concerning sport managers in sport clubs, which are founded in the form of non-profit associations, limiting the results to only this type of sport organisations.

Table 1: The importance of knowledge areas and skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Slightly needed (%)</th>
<th>Medium level importance (%)</th>
<th>Dominantly needed (%)</th>
<th>95% CI (confidence interval)</th>
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500
The research revealed that majority of students (82%) find that sport managers in their work dominantly need people skills (communication and teamwork) (Table 1). Additionally, the analyses based on confidence intervals was conducted and the results lead to a conclusion that the first hypothesis cannot be rejected. We are 95% confident that the number of students who find these skills as dominantly needed for sport managers will account to almost 80%. It should be noted that no statistically significant differences were noticed between different generations.

In addition a list of 12 various specific, individual competencies (knowledge, skills and abilities) was provided and students were asked to choose five they find most important for sport managers’ work and then to rank them according to importance (ranks 1 to 5 were used, 1 meaning the most important, and 5 least important from the chosen ones) (Table 2).

**Table 2: Specific individual competencies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Frequency of the answer</th>
<th>% of students choosing this answer</th>
<th>Mode of rank</th>
<th>Frequency of mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to take risks</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>62.76</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organising work</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>60.15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>58.06</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>56.61</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great managerial experience</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>45.06</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipation abilities</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>40.41</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign language</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>37.43</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expediency of decision making</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>35.57</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination of activities</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>32.96</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High level of general education</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>29.05</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>28.12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to transfer knowledge to others</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>10.80</td>
<td>Multiple (4 and 5)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 clearly shows a great dispersion of answers, since each of the listed possibilities was chosen by at least 10% of interviewees. Four most important ones (identified by more than 50% of interviewees) are willingness to take risks (by 62.7% of students), followed by the ability to organise work (60%), sport managers’ expertise (58.6%), and entrepreneurial abilities and knowledge (56.6%). However, sport managers’ expertise (specific knowledge about sport) needed for his/her position was most commonly awarded first rank (by 18.6% of all interviewees). This is in accordance with previously conducted research in Croatia (see Škorić, 2009) since a conclusion that the most important knowledge areas are the ones concerning specific sport knowledge is supported.

Having in mind all previously mentioned possible challenges imposed at sport sector and those managing it, a conclusion that a certain level of willingness to take risks is necessary seems logical. Nevertheless, students find that a person equipped with knowledge concerning specific management skill on how to organise the work of a sport association, is best suited for this job.

The results partly support the conclusions of Pedersen and Thibault (2014), and Horch and Schütte (2003) since competencies referring to organisation management (organising work) as well as knowing the sport industry (expertise) are among four competencies chosen most often.

Lastly, innovation was chosen by less than 30% of students, which means that the second hypothesis can be rejected. Nevertheless, a significant percentage of students identified entrepreneurship as one of the most important competencies (just over 56%). Since entrepreneurship is understood as “the process of investing various resources in a certain business activity” (see Bartoluci, 2003) and refers to the starting of a new business, creation of new products, “individual’s ability to turn ideas into action” (quoted in Nová, 2015:3916), as such it

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2 The list of specific individual competencies was based on the list provided in the previously mentioned research of Sikavica and Bahtijarević-Šiber from 2004 due to reasons of comparability.
encompasses several competencies mentioned in the Table 2. It means that a person (entrepreneur) identifies a certain opportunity at the market and finds a way to fulfil that void (by creating a new product, new way of doing something, etc.). Therefore, it is a process including a certain level of risk taking, as well as innovation, which indirectly might support the second hypothesis.

**Conclusions**

Although sport management is considered a relatively young scientific discipline, it is a “big business” and as such employs a significant number of people from various occupations. Majority of them are sport specific professions such as sportspersons, officials, coaches, instructors, etc. Nevertheless, one might claim that a need to employ more sport managers is growing, especially considering various challenges sport organisations are faced with. The claim is supported by a number of researches stating the need for professionalization of sport associations. This implies formalised and more business-like processes, as well as professionals managing those processes and people – managers. As was showed in the paper, competencies most often associated with sport managers are the ones referring to their expertise (sport specific knowledge and skills), in addition to management specific knowledge and skills (organising work). Nevertheless, willingness to take risks is found to be the most important for sport managers of the future (in Croatia). These results might suggest that interviewees’ notion of the future is that it is rather insecure one.

Innovation was not among the competencies chosen by a greater number of students, meaning that the starting hypothesis of its significance was rejected. The opposite was the case with entrepreneurship, a process that as a rule encompasses risk taking and innovation. It was found to be of great importance since it was chosen by more than 56% of interviewees.

These results are of great significance for educators in the field of sport management in Croatia indicating the need to incorporate these knowledge areas into the existing curriculum.

**References**


