It’s not a Job, It’s a Lifestyle: Sport Industry Employee Experience Archetypes Through a Human Capital Lens

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Management - Human Resource Management (College Sport) virtual asynchronous 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2020-113 Session: Work-Life Balance

Thousands of young professionals are drawn to the allure of the sport industry as an avenue to pursue a career aligning their fan interests with a field often depicted with celebrity, action, and excitement. However, a growing body of sport industry literature describes a field fraught with high levels of burnout, stress, turnover, and difficulty balancing work and family responsibilities (e.g. Taylor, Huml, & Dixon, 2019). Given this contradiction, there is a need to better understand the actual experiences of sport industry employees. Thus, we utilized a human capital framework (Becker, 1993) to develop employee archetypes derived through cluster analysis and presented through creative nonfiction analytic methodology (Barone, 2008).

This study builds on current human resource management studies in three important ways. First, it extends the understanding of work experiences beyond the already well-developed literature in coaching (e.g. Dixon & Bruening, 2007, 2008; Graham & Dixon, 2017). Second, it focuses on employees themselves rather than employment practices (Wright & McMahan, 2011). Third, it utilizes multiple constructs related to human capital in combination to build a comprehensive picture of employee experiences in sport.

Intercollegiate athletics was selected as a context for this study because it compromises such a large labor pool in the American sport system. We distributed an online survey to the entire population of NCAA athletic department employees whose email addresses were available on their department’s staff directory. The final study sample is comprised of 4,324 employees. To measure five of constructs fundamental to the development of the employee archetypes, we utilized well-established instruments (Taylor et al., 2019).

Employee experiences were classified into groups utilizing latent class cluster analysis (Everitt, 1993; Vermunt & Magidson, 2002). The strongest five inputs included employee age, presence and age of children, flexible work schedule, employment position, and career tenure. Other inputs included burnout, work–family interface, gender, work engagement, and workaholism. Upon completion of group classification, qualitative insights were presented in the form of composite nonfiction stories for each of the emergent archetypes. Creative nonfiction was selected as the best way to present our data because it can (a) provide a rich portrayal of complex lived experiences, (b) directly present respondent narratives, (c) protect anonymity, and (d) stimulate vicarious learning and emotional reactions for readers (Barone, 2008). This two-step archetype approach allows examination of employee experience dimensions in aggregate while incorporating additional personal and career lifespan factors.

Based on the cluster inputs, five employee archetypes emerged that illumine experiences of those working in this distinct field, and provide important theoretical advancements to the understanding of human capital in the sport industry. Archetypes follow a career arc from early career support staff to mid-career employees with different work-life situations, to late-career senior leaders. Employee experience narratives portray an industry culture wherein the human capital is largely overworked, underpaid, and undervalued, replete with personal-sacrifice, and regret. However, they also reported passion for working with college athletes. Factors mentioned in facilitating human capital retention include flex work-schedules, mandatory days off, and additional staffing.