

RETENTION OF SPORT VOLUNTEERS: PERSPECTIVES FROM AUSTRALIAN RULES FOOTBALL COACHES

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INTRODUCTION

The availability of coaches is crucial for the continued viability of both elite and community level sport systems. However, the number of coaches is declining in Australia. For example, the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) (2003) noted that Australia recorded a 7.2% fall in the number of accredited coaches in 2002-2003 and this was followed by a 9.6% reduction in 2003-04 (ASC, 2004). The trends in coach numbers mirror broader volunteering trends (Lyons & Fabiansson, 1998; Nichols, Gratton, Shibli, & Taylor, 1998; Gaskin, 1998; Davies, 1998). Furthermore, the hours contributed by volunteers have decreased by 20%, and volunteers now tend to stay with sport clubs for shorter time periods (Cuskelly, 2001). Many organizations report problems in maintaining the involvement of volunteers on a longer term basis resulting in inefficiencies and operational challenges (Cuskelly, Hoye & Auld, 2006) both of which impede the growth of community sport. Although many sporting clubs have instituted mechanisms to facilitate growth, improvements in coach retention are required if momentum is to be sustained.

Previous studies have tended to focus on motives or initial reasons for volunteering (e.g. Clary et al, 1998; Omoto & Snyder, 1995). Little research has examined the relationships between personal dispositions and the contexts in which volunteers work. Yet organisational and sport systems, together with their personal dispositions are likely to influence whether coaches become long term volunteers. This research extends the sustained volunteerism model developed by Penner (2002) proposing that systemic (sport system level) variables be incorporated.

METHODS

There were two stages in this research. In stage one, focus groups and interviews were conducted in four football clubs in three different jurisdictions. This stage was designed to yield two complementary types of information: (1) a description of why people initially volunteered to coach and why people choose to stay involved in coaching; and, (2) contextual details influencing continued involvement in coaching. A semi-structured approach utilising open ended questions was employed following the guidelines recommended by Minichiello et al. (1995). Data were analysed by NVivo.

Stage two consisted of a national mail survey of 2999 community coaches utilising a self-administered instrument. The sample was derived from the AFL database sampling frame and the Tailored Design Method (Dillman, 2000) was used to maximize response rates. A total of 684 surveys were returned realising an effective response rate of 25.5%. Survey data were analysed using SPSS. Analysis included frequencies, correlation, ANOVA and regression.

RESULTS

Taken together the analysis of the data from both stages of the study indicates that the strongest motivations are related to assisting children in an AFL development context. A secondary set of motivators relate to being with their own children and the nature of the opportunity presented by involvement in coaching such as gaining hands on experience, learning more about AFL and learning how to deal with others. Coaches were most satisfied with the nature of the coaching experience followed by satisfaction with the club policies

and practices, and finally with the AFL policies and practices. Coach satisfaction was related to a range of internal constructs (motivation) as well as being influenced by club management practices and more systemic (AFL level) communication and recognition processes. The analysis further indicated that club commitment is somewhat complex and is predicted by a range of factors including internal dispositional constructs, a suite of satisfaction related measures, and perceived organisational justice.

DISCUSSION

The data suggested that systemic factors impact satisfaction which indirectly influences coach retention, supporting the extension of Penner's (2002) model. It is clear that the club context, both formal (e.g., the way coaches are managed) and informal (e.g., club culture) is critical to satisfaction. Clubs should be encouraged to provide opportunities for informal interactions as well as formal coaching development sessions. In terms of influencing committed behaviour, the results suggest that clubs should implement management processes that facilitate perceptions of fairness and equity and also incorporate strategies to maximise satisfaction with the AFL (e.g., quality and frequency of communication and recognition initiatives). Furthermore, early career coaches feel under significant pressure from parents and this seems to be a key factor in the decision to discontinue. The impact of parents on coach retention can be ameliorated by effective coach mentoring and appropriate club policies.

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