

# PREDICTING RETENTION OF EARLY CAREER SPORTS OFFICIALS

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## INTRODUCTION

All levels of government and sport National Governing Bodies (NGBs) are well aware of the significant benefits that flow from active participation in sport and have designed sport policies accordingly. Increased participation is not possible however, without the presence of officials (eg., referees and judges). A report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) (ABS) revealed a 26% decline in the number of sports officials in Australia, from 456,800 to 340,000 between 1997 and 2001. Research found retention is particularly problematic amongst less experienced early career officials (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2004). The focus of this research was to study the stressors of officiating, (Taylor et al., 1990; Anshell & Weinberg, 1996, Rainey & Hardy, 1999) and sport commitment (Scanlan, et al., 1993; Van Yperen, 1998) to determine to what degree (if at all) they were moderated by perceived organisational support (Eisenburger, et al., 1986) in predicting the intention of officials to continue. A longer term the goal is to develop strategies to increase the retention of early career sports officials.

## METHODS

For this study early career officials were defined as those who had less than five seasons officiating experience. A total of 290 early career officials from the sports of rugby union and touch football were invited to anonymously complete an on-line survey which included measurement scales for: officiating stress (adapted from (Taylor, et al., 1999); sport commitment (adapted from Scanlan, et al., 1993); organisational support (adapted from Eisenburger, et al. (1986); and, behavioural intention (adapted from Ajzen, 1991). The survey also included items seeking demographic and officiating experience data. The survey was conducted between July and August 2006. After an initial invitation to participate in the survey and two follow-up contacts were sent to the sample of officials. A total of 136 officials completed and submitted surveys and 121 surveys (42%) provided useable data. Data analysis procedures included factor analysis (exploratory and confirmatory) and reliability analysis. Multiple regression was used to predict variance in intention to continue.

## RESULTS

There was a strong positive correlation between attitudinal and behavioural intention to continue officiating ( $r=0.71$ ). Because the TPB argues that behavioural intentions are predicted by attitudes towards the behaviour, regression analysis used attitudinal intention as the dependent variable. A multiple regression analysis was used to test the extent to which commitment (with four sub-scales), stress (with five subscales) and perceived organisational support (unidimensional) influenced the attitudinal intention to continue. All variables were entered together and the regression equation was significant ( $F(10,109)=8.8, p<.001$ ). However, the only significant predictor of intention to continue was the enjoyment sub-scale of commitment ( $\beta=0.57, t=6.4, p<.001$ ). Because the initial regression equation was significant separate regression analyses were conducted for the touch and rugby officials. For the rugby officials ( $F(10,45)=3.3, p<.01$ ) commitment (involvement alternatives) ( $\beta=-0.32, t=-2.3, p<.05$ ) and stress (lack of recognition) ( $\beta=-.37, t=-2.2, p<.05$ ) were significant predictors. In contrast, for the touch football officials ( $F(10,53)=14.4, p<.001$ ) the significant predictors were commitment (enjoyment) ( $\beta=0.85, t=9.7, p<.001$ ) and organisational support ( $\beta=0.22, t=2.6, p<.05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The levels of stress reported by respondents were generally at the low end of the scale. Officials were most concerned with potentially having a “bad game” and competition between officiating and family or social commitments. Commitment to officiating was predominantly a function of enjoyment and to a lesser extent personal time and money invested. Overall, early career officials perceived a reasonable level of organisational support. Most of the respondents indicated that they intended to continue officiating. The positive correlation coefficient ( $r=0.71$ ) between attitudinal and behavioural intention supported the TPB insofar as the attitudes of officials towards intending to continue officiating were associated with their behavioural intentions. The results suggest attitudes about continuing were influenced both positively and negatively by commitment, stress and perceived organisational support. Further, the intentions of early career sports officials and the relative influence of commitment, stress and organisational support vary across different settings. The results of this study have several limitations. They are based on a small and geographically concentrated sample from two field-based sports and officials who were less likely to continue may have been disinclined to respond to the survey. The research design was cross-sectional and it is likely that there was some common-method variance in the results. Retaining officials not only reduces recruitment and training costs it increases the depth of officiating talent available to sport. If managed appropriately, lower levels of turnover results in a more experienced pool of officials who, through more time on the field officiating, develop and refine their skills.

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