

The recruitment of professional football managers and players: the role of personal contact networks

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Introduction

Given that uncertainty and insecurity are permanent features of the working lives of professional football managers and players, an obvious question concerns how they cope with such issues. One way in which all employees alleviate the problem of uncertainty in workplaces is by drawing on a network of personal contacts in order to take advantage of employment opportunities (Blair, 2001). In professional football, managers and players are members of interdependent networks of personal contacts with agents and current and/or former managers, coaches and players. This paper examines the central role that personal contact networks play in the recruitment of professional football players and managers. Moreover, this paper examines a central characteristic of these networks of personal contacts; that of trust.

Research Methods

Located within the interpretive paradigm, this research was based on semi-structured tape recorded interviews with twenty-five players, five agents and twenty managers. The interviews were conducted between 2004 and 2006. All five agents had represented both players and managers in the UK and Ireland. Of the twenty five managers who were interviewed, ten had managed clubs in England and three had managed at full international level. Of the twenty-five players who were interviewed, eighteen had experience as full-time professionals with clubs in the English Premier League. Three players had played at full international and eight at Under-21 level. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then subjected to a process of inductive content analysis which organised the data into a number of interpretable and meaningful units of meaning or themes. These data were triangulated in 2011 with informal interviews with a number of football agents and English Premier League and Championship managers, players and physiotherapists.

Literature Review

Social resources such as informal networks and personal contacts are not unusual in determining how and where professional football players secure employment (Roderick, 2006). In professional football, 'friendship networks generally fulfil the functions of directly offering a job opportunity, informing a person of a potential job opportunity, or recommending a potential employee via a third party' (Roderick, 2006: 256). Magee (1998: 107) highlights the 'grapevine' as a central point of recruitment and, in this regard, suggests that professional 'football is

often described as a who-you-know sport'. Elsewhere, Perry (2000: 7-8) provides 'evidence of huge on-the-job research, sophisticated networking and intelligence gathering'. In professional football, the practice of informal 'testing of the water' is widely practiced and usually involves contacting prospective players or managers as a means of gauging interest in, or facilitating a potential employment opportunity (Roderick, 2006: 182). Moreover, in professional football, informal or illegal practices such as 'tapping up' are common features of player (Magee, 1998; Roderick, 2006) and manager (Perry, 2000) recruitment. However, relatively little is known about the type and function of these personal contact networks and, more importantly the role they play in the recruitment of players in general and managers in particular. This paper attempts to fill this gap by examining their role more fully which provides an understanding of the mechanisms that facilitate the recruitment of professional football players and managers. Moreover, this paper utilises the concept of interpersonal trust (Nooteboom & Six, 2003) in examining how personal contact networks influence player and manager recruitment in professional football.

Discussion

A recurring theme identified the significant role that trust plays in the sharing of information about potential job opportunities within both managers' and players' personal contact networks. Arguably, these personal contacts may be viewed as an exclusion mechanism where the flow of information concerning possible employment opportunities is limited to those who are members of particular contact networks. This could detract from what many would consider as good employment practice. An additional theme that emerged from the data collected concerned the practice of tapping up in professional football. More specifically, this practice tapping up of prospective players and managers involved informally contacting them via their trustworthy personal contacts.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the central role that trust plays within networks of interdependent relationships in the recruitment of professional football managers and players. More worryingly however is the prevalence of 'tapping up' in the recruitment of managers and players which, raises serious questions about the commitment of the football authorities to govern player and manager recruitment.

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