

## **Sport Workplace Identification: Multiple Pathways to Job Engagement**

Abstract ID: EASM-2015-34 - (521)

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Date submitted: 2015-03-13

Date accepted: 2015-03-27

Type: Scientific

Keywords: Engagement, Organizational Identification

Category: 4: Leadership Issues in Sport Organisations

Synopsis:

Abstract:

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Organizational identification has been widely researched in the mainstream management literature. While identification has also been examined to a large degree in the sport management literature, this has been done almost exclusively from the perspective of consumers (i.e., fans). Drawing from the multi-foci perspective of identification proposed by Ashforth and Johnson (2001), the current research explored various targets of identification which may be especially relevant for employees working in sport. Beyond organizational identification, this study considered the presence and effects of team identification, sport identification, and brand identification within the context of professional sport organizations. The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of these sport-relevant identification targets on the engagement of employees working in this setting.

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

As organizations are generally multifaceted entities, they can provide numerous categories of membership. These specific categories are referred to as organizational foci or targets, which members can then incorporate into their own self-concept (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). The identification literature also indicates that individuals within organizational settings are capable of identifying with multiple targets at the same time (Ashforth et al., 2008). In response to a call for further examination accounting for such circumstances (Ashforth et al., 2008), we propose that the sport environment offers a rich opportunity to engage in this line of research. For example, Swanson and Kent (in press) recently found strong support for the notion that employees working for team sport organizations can simultaneously identify

with their overall employing organization as well as the organization's affiliated team. However, as the literature also suggests that individuals may identify with other aspects such as the organizational brand and the actual sport itself (e.g., Dittmore, Stoldt, & Greenwell, 2008), the current study looked to assess these constructs specifically in relation to sport employees. Beyond the presence of these perceived identification targets, this research also hypothesized that each would positively impact employee job engagement. This dependent variable was chosen on the basis that identification in the sport context might be an especially relevant predictor of cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement as conceptualized by Rich, Lepine, and Crawford (2010). In addition, previous findings (e.g., Rich et al., 2010) have indicated that this three-dimensional construct may be more predictive of performance than more traditionally researched attitudes such as satisfaction and involvement.

#### METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

The participants for this study were business operations employees (n = 1,082) from the five largest professional sports leagues in North America: Major League Baseball, Major League Soccer, the National Basketball Association, the National Football League, and the National Hockey League. The data were collected using an online survey emailed to a random sample of employees working in departments such as accounting, marketing, sales, etc. This study used survey items which have been shown previously in the literature to be valid and reliable. The construct reliability and discriminant validity of the latent constructs were assessed through a variety of methods including confirmatory factor analysis techniques commonly used in the literature. The final phase of the analysis utilized structural equation modeling to assess the relationships within the hypothesized research model.

#### RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results provided strong support for the discriminant validity between the identification constructs. In addition, the structural equation analysis provided support for all of the relationships within the hypothesized model. That is, a positive significant relationship was found between job engagement and all four of the identification predictors specified in the model (organizational, team, sport, and brand). The results of the current study therefore suggest that multiple targets of identification are indeed present within sport organizations. Specifically, two such targets (team and sport type) would generally be considered targets of identification which exist primarily (if not exclusively) in the sport context. In addition, the results indicated that each of these identification constructs independently predict the multi-dimensional concept of job engagement within this setting. In response to previous research not accounting for multiple targets of identification, this study contributes to the literature by introducing these sport-related concepts as additional targets of identification in the organizational context. Implications include the consideration of human resource practices which specifically account for sport-specific phenomena in relation to employee engagement. Future research should consider the presence of other sport-specific attitudes and their potential impact on additional outcomes within the organizational context.

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