

Causes and consequences of professionalization in Swiss national sport federations

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Aim of paper

International competition and expectations of different stakeholders (state, sponsors, member clubs, media, etc.) have pushed national sport federations (NSF) to adapt their structures, activities, staff and positions, and even organizational culture, resulting in profound organizational changes. Today many NSF rely on, for example, institutionalised management, formalization and standardization of processes, and employment of people with specific qualifications. NSF have been generally observed as professionalizing and transforming from traditionally volunteer-driven and member-orientated federations to increasingly business-like organizations (cf. Ruoranen et al., 2016; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011). The aim of this paper is to explore causes and hindering factors of professionalization, as well as positive and negative consequences in Swiss NSF. For this purpose we consider professionalization using a broad multifaceted scope (Ruoranen et al., 2016). By understanding relationships between causes and consequences of professionalization, NSF may be better prepared to assess internal and external challenges, optimize their structures and performance, as well as to avoid unintended side effects of professionalization.

Theoretical background

Research has assessed causes and drivers in terms of environmental influences and internal factors that may trigger or hinder professionalization, as well as consequences of organizational changes (for an overview, Dowling et al., 2014). This has often been undertaken by means of case studies (O'Brien and Slack, 2004). Nagel and colleagues (2015) have summarised current sport management and sport sociological literature and positioned all relevant perspectives into a multi-level framework of forms, causes and consequences of professionalization. This framework differentiates causes and consequences into three levels: 1) external environment, 2) (internal) sport federation, and 3) internal environment. Particular internal and external factors fostering professionalization in NSF are, for example, pressure from government, expectations of sponsors, media and umbrella organisations, strategic capability of the board, and key individuals. Traditional culture, increased workload and scarce financial resources can hinder professionalization (for more details, see Nagel et al., 2015).

Methodological design and analysis

A qualitative content analysis was applied. We conducted semi-structured interviews with key people (mostly CEO, President and employee(s) from the Executive Office) of seven NSF in Switzerland (floorball, gymnastics, ski, volleyball, handball, fencing and a federation for sports for people with disabilities). The interviews, as well as available documents (e.g. annual reports, protocols) were analyzed deductively for causes and consequences of professionalization following the three levels of the framework developed by Nagel and colleagues (2015).

Preliminary results and discussion

For these seven Swiss NSF, causes for professionalization were mainly found at the external level. The significant dependence on financial subsidies and the expectations of potential suppliers have driven NSF to professionalization. This is also caused by increased international competition in high-level sports and enhanced interest in and presence of (competitive) sports in the media. To best garner financial support, the NSF primarily endeavour to gain media visibility, which appears to be impossible without professionalization in various ways. In many cases, key actors, particularly board members or (new) CEO, have had considerable influence on (starting) professionalization processes, whereas member clubs and regional federations appear to hinder professionalization efforts. Considerable formalization, e.g. goal setting, strategies and processes, follow from the requirements of the umbrella organization Swiss Olympic. Negative consequences of professionalization were found at the federations' internal level, for example, overcharging and a loss of autonomy of member clubs and regional federations. Within the NSF, there have been unintended side-effects on volunteer and paid staff relationships, and on balancing the benefits and disadvantages of sponsor and partnerships for the sport. Professionalization has fostered differentiation and shared leadership between executive and operative bodies. Many steps of professionalization appear to be determined by prior decisions that call for subsequent action. This could mean that, at a certain point, a NSF does not have any other option than to continue with professionalization, as long as other NSF are on the same path.

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