

## Coworker knowledge sharing among elite footballers: Perceptions from the German Bundesliga

**Authors:** Kim Werner, PhD (1), Geoff Dickson, PhD (2)

### **Institutions:**

1. Hochschule Osnabrück, University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Business Management and Social Sciences, PO Box 1940, 49009 Osnabrück, Germany

2. AUT University, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences, School of Sport and Recreation, PO Box 92006, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

**E-mail:** k.werner@hs-osnabrueck.de

### **Aim of paper and research questions**

Learning from others at work is important. Coworker knowledge sharing occurs when an employee shares information, knowledge, and expertise with other employees. Previous studies demonstrate that informal interactions with peers are a predominant way of learning (Boud & Middleton, 2003). In contrast, formal and systematic learning has proven to often be marginal and less effective. Peer learning has received considerable attention in the educational literature. However, the number of studies investigating coworker learning and knowledge sharing amongst sport managers or athletes is very small (Jenkinson, Naughton, & Benson, 2014). The current research focuses on coworker learning and knowledge sharing by professional footballers. The following research questions guide this study: (1) In what domains/areas do elite footballers learn from their peers / team mates? (2) How do elite footballers share information, knowledge and skills with other players?; and (3) How does peer learning impact the knowledge and ability of elite footballers?

### **Literature review**

A large variety of terms describe the learning processes among colleagues, coworkers and peers. Despite varied terminology, the common underpinning value is that learning occurs across various domains through the interaction with peers, colleagues or co-workers (Kim & Yun, 2015). This benefits both the individual and their organisation. Through organisational routines, the learned individual knowledge is converted into organisational knowledge. Knowledge and an organisation's capability to create and use this knowledge is key to an organisation's sustainable competitive advantage. However, when it comes to coworker learning and knowledge sharing among athletes, the sports management literature has focused mainly on the role of the coach. These studies analyse coach characteristics, coach education, coach development and learning as well as coaching models and skills and coaching effectiveness (e.g., Coté & Gilbert, 2009). In contrast, knowledge sharing and transfer among athletes and teammates as well as its role for athletes' performance has received very limited attention (Berman, Down, & Hill, 2002).

### **Methodology, research design and data analysis**

Due to the dearth of previous studies in this field, an exploratory qualitative case study design was adopted. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 elite football players from the German Bundesliga. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis, a method that

searches for themes or patterns in qualitative data, was used for data analysis.

### **Results, discussion and implications**

Preliminary results demonstrate that teammates serve as valuable tools for knowledge acquisition. The most important learning mechanism is imitation/observation. Knowledge sharing among elite footballers is a very selective process. Elite footballers share information and knowledge only with few personal and close contacts. Personal, confident conversations are important channels to exchange physical (football) knowledge (i.e., knowledge on physical fitness and football skills such as corner and penalty kicks), mental knowledge (i.e., tactics, mental fitness) and social skills (i.e., dealing with coaches, fans, player advisers and the media, contract negotiations, handling celebrity status). Professional football clubs are not strategically fostering knowledge exchange and transfer among footballers. Since the findings point to the value of knowledge sharing and transfer among elite footballers and to a positive impact on players' performance, the study highlights the opportunity to strategically build, use and transfer peer knowledge in professional football to build a competitive advantage.

### **References**

- Berman, S. L., Down, J., & Hill, C. W. L. (2002). Tacit knowledge as a source of competitive advantage in the National Basketball Association. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 45(1), 13-31.
- Boud, D., & Middleton, H. (2003). Learning from others at work: communities of practice and informal learning. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 15(5), 194-202.
- Coté, J., & Gilbert, W. (2009). An integrative definition of coaching effectiveness and expertise. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 4(3), 307-323
- Jenkinson, K. A., Naughton, G., & Benson, A. C. (2014). Peer-assisted learning in school physical education, sport and physical activity programmes: A systematic review. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 19(3), 253-277.
- Kim, S. L., & Yun, S. (2015). The effect of coworker knowledge sharing on performance and its boundary conditions: An interactional perspective. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 100(2), 575-582.