

Predicting the Retention of Sports Officials: The Influence of Stress, Commitment and Perceived Organisational Support.

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Abstract

Organised sport is finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain people willing to take on the role of official, judge or umpire, particularly in community sport. Sport officiating is often viewed as one of the most difficult and onerous tasks in organised sport. Research conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005[2]) revealed that the number of sports officials in Australia declined 21% from 1993 to 2004, from 425,800 to 335,400 people. The picture in the United States and Canada is just as bleak. Deacon et al (2001[5]) reported 30% of officials with the Canadian Hockey Association quit each year. In a survey conducted by the National Association of Sport Officials (Sabaini, 2001[7]), 85% of high school sports administrators detailed a decline in the number of officiating registrations within their state.

Conversely, ABS data (2007[3]) indicates the number of Australians participating in organised sport or physical activity rose from approximately 4.05 million people in 2002 to 4.4 million in 2006. There is currently a push by all levels of government and many National Sport Organisations (NSOs) to further increase levels of participation in organised sport. For this increase to occur it is necessary to increase the capacity of the sport system as a whole, raising concerns about long-term sustainability. An increase in the capacity of the officiating aspect of the sport system can only be achieved through three possible alternatives: recruiting more officials, increasing the workload of current officials (i.e., more games per official), or increasing the career length of current officials (i.e., increased retention rates amongst sports officials). The purpose of this study was to test the efficacy of an organisational support management intervention strategy aimed at increasing the retention of early career sports officials. Using a quasi-experimental field-based pre and post-test research design a sample of officials were assigned to either a treatment or a non-treatment group. The treatment group was exposed to strategies designed to increase perceptions of organisational support. Previous research has reported that the stressors of officiating, (Taylor et al., 1990[10], Anshell & Weinberg, 1996[1], Rainey & Hardy, 1999[8]) and sport commitment (Van Yperen, 1998[11]) influence burn-out or intention to stay. A retention model was developed for this study to determine to what degree perceived organisational support moderated the influence of stress and commitment in predicting the intention of officials to continue.

Early career officials were defined as those who had less than five seasons officiating experience. A total of 242 rugby officials were invited to participate in the study and were allocated to either a treatment (n = 133) or a non-treatment group (n = 109). A

number of mentors were trained by the researchers to deliver on-going support to the treatment group of officials. Treatment and non-treatment group members completed pre and post-season on-line surveys which included measurement scales for: officiating stress (Taylor, et al., 1999), sport commitment (Scanlan, et al., 1993[9]), perceived organisational support (Eisenburger, et al. (1986)[6], and behavioural intention (Ajzen, 1991[4]). The pre-season survey also included items seeking demographic and officiating experience. A total of 102 officials (51 treatment and 51 non-treatment) completed the study.

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to test whether changes in commitment (five sub-scales), stress (five subscales) and perceived organisational support (three subscales) scores predicted changes in intention to continue officiating. The regression models were significant for both the treatment ($F(13,37)=5.4, p<.001$) and non-treatment ($F(13,37)=5.0, p<.001$) groups. However, the R-squared change statistics for organisational support ($F(3,37)=2.9, p<.05$) was significant for only the treatment group. Perceived organisational support was a significant predictor of intention to continue ($\beta=0.40, p<.01$) after accounting for the variance explained by commitment (enjoyment, involvement opportunities) and stress (time pressure). The results suggest that early career officials are responsive to management intervention strategies designed to influence perceptions of organisational support. The responses of non-treatment and treatment group members revealed that their intention to continue refereeing was influenced by the commitment and the stress they experienced as an official. However, perceived organisational support was shown to increase intention to continue officiating amongst treatment group officials. This suggests that appropriately designed and administered organisational support strategies have the potential to ameliorate the negative effects of stress and build upon the positive nature of commitment in the decisions of early career sports officials to continue officiating. Sport NGBs could potentially reduce the costs of recruiting and training new officials if they are better able to support those officials who are already part of the organisation.

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