

ENHANCING NGB FUNCTIONING USING ORGANISATIONAL DESIGN

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Abstract

While structure and performance are established fields of organisational research in sport, little has linked these concepts to understand how design choices of sport organisations can enhance performance. Conceptual links between structure and functioning were associated by Mintzberg (1983) in frameworks of organisational design. He stated organisational design “means turning those knobs that influence the division of labour and the co-ordinating mechanisms, thereby affecting how the organisation functions” (p. 25). In this way, design incorporates two noted components of structure – the division of an organisation into its components and coordinating mechanisms used within it (Slack & Parent, 2006).

Sport organisational structure research has commonly been limited to positivist approaches producing descriptive taxonomies of organisational forms. Prior studies therefore have limitations in their analytical ability to assess the effects of structure on performance. More recently, configurational research approaches have been used to develop performance frameworks of NGBs (Bayle & Robinson, 2007). Such studies allow differentiation and integration to be used as variables to assess structure at group, organisational and system level, developing understanding of how different components of NGB systems act and the resultant inefficiencies that arise from this interaction. The current research complements this configurational approach in sport by investigating design changes made to NGB structures that have enhanced organisational functionality. Organisational functioning in turn is one component of NGBs multi-dimensional performance elements (Bayle & Madella, 2002).

In exploring this issue, data was collected from three detailed case studies of Australian NGBs. Participant NGBs were drawn from a sample (n=12) defined as Corporate Sport NGBs (Shilbury, & Kellett, 2010) that represent the largest and most structurally complex NGBs in the region. Organisational charts, strategic plans and annual reports were first analysed to provide background for each case. A total of 35 in depth interviews were then conducted with board members, CEOs, general managers

and operational staff within each NGB. Exploration of the interplay of differentiation and integration led to the identification of barriers to functioning and classification of structural changes implemented to manage each barrier and enhance organisational functioning.

Examination of organisational structures confirmed various sources of difference between NGB departments and a high need to integrate various parts of the organisations to achieve collective outcomes. Given these characteristics, five groups of issues were identified that impacted the organisations ability to achieve optimum functionality. These issues were either present in the organisation or were previous issues which had impacted functioning. Issues were classified broadly as strategy and governance issues, structural issues (e.g., change, role clarity), conflict issues (e.g., goal, resources), information and knowledge issues and finally, culture and people issues.

Having identified barriers to functionality, the key research question sought to determine the structural alterations organisations undertook to alleviate such barriers to functionality. Under definitions of structure (Parent & Slack, 2006), such changes could be represented by decisions to divide work or by investments made in coordinating mechanisms. While vast, nine design choice categories can be classified in two groups pertaining to functioning within the NGB (e.g; enhanced communication tools, IT mechanisms, cross functional teams) and within its wider system (e.g.; strategic alignment between national and regional bodies).

When implemented, NGBs demonstrated structural changes enhanced the functionality between departments or organisations within a sport system. These were translated as tangible resource gains (financial or human) or reported gains in NGB functionality (e.g. greater communication, information flow or clarity, resource optimisation, lack of politics).

As expected given the complexity of sport organisations and their emergent professionalisation and commercialisation, lessons can be learnt from studying the evolution of NGB structures and their adaptation. Theoretically, the findings add to the performance framework identified by Bayle and Robinson (2007) with aggregated findings used to develop characteristics of highly functional NGBs. Additionally, the use of a configurational research framework allows structural design to be studied in more detail, including empirical investigation of differentiation and integration in sport organisations and guidance for the effective use of these variables in future research.

Findings demonstrate that structural design choices made by organisations have dual impacts on functioning by both creating and alleviating barriers to functionality. Practically, the identification of structural alterations to aid functioning encourages a proactive approach to organisational design for sport organisations. Given future agendas for sport organisations include continually evolving governance structures, the need to incorporate new media operations and continuing pressures on funding and high performance systems, NGB structures will continue to evolve. An understanding of design adaptations made by organisations therefore represents a continuing agenda of potential learnings for other NGBs.

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