

Recruiting volunteers to sports clubs

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Aim

The aim of this presentation is to explore the nature of sports volunteer recruitment in English clubs and to offer implications for guidance to sports clubs on how to recruit volunteers, particularly from outside their clubs.

Literature

Volunteers who run sports clubs are crucial to the structure of sport in England and significant to government policies which seek to use the formal structure of sport as a delivery mechanism. An estimate made in 2002, based on responses from national governing bodies of sport (NGBs), was that in England there were over 100,000 sports clubs run by volunteers, involving over 8 million volunteers (Taylor *et al.*, 2003). Sportswise (2011) report an average of 20 volunteers per sports club, and one paid member of staff.

Sports volunteers (Taylor *et al.*, 2003) and sports clubs (Sportswise, 2011) report shortages of volunteers. Sportswise (2011) report that 53% of clubs identified maintaining, recruiting and retaining volunteers as a key challenge for the following two years. However, despite problems with shortages of volunteers, it is apparent that sports clubs almost always restrict their recruitment of volunteers to people available from within the club – i.e. ex-players, players or parents of junior players (Taylor *et al.*, 2003).

Human resource management (HRM) literature acknowledges that management of sports volunteers is different from paid employees. However, it addresses issues of sport volunteer recruitment in the main by replicating best practice principles from the paid employment sector, including job descriptions, screening and interviews (e.g. Taylor *et al.*, 2008; Wolsey *et al.*, 2012). This tends to orientate towards a more formal set of processes, which translate to transactional psychological contracts and programme management (Meijs and Karr, 2004). In contrast to this, literature on volunteers and psychological contracts orientates towards more informal processes with relational psychological contracts and membership management. There remains, therefore, something of an empirical question about where on the spectrum between the two positions sports clubs are when they recruit volunteers.

Methods

The authors of this presentation, together with Coachwise UK, conducted research in 2011 for the Office of Civil Society, as one of a number of European Year of Volunteering projects commissioned by the UK Government.

The subject of this project was 'Opening up Sports Volunteering to the Wider Community'. In the course of researching recruitment of volunteers from outside sports clubs, issues were raised concerning how volunteers are recruited, what approach previous guidance to volunteer recruitment took, and how such guidance could be improved. The research for this project consisted of two phases: first focus groups with four clubs and interviews with two key agents from National Governing Bodies (NGBs), all with experience of recruiting volunteers from outside their clubs; and second, testing draft new guidance on volunteer recruitment from outside clubs with six clubs and six key officers responsible for volunteering from NGBs, County Sport Partnerships (CSPs) and Sport England

For this presentation, secondary analysis was undertaken of the Coachwise research project evidence, particularly to connect it with relevant literature from HRM on recruiting and managing volunteers in sport. A coding framework of seven criteria was used to identify where the research subjects (sports clubs, key agents from National Governing Bodies and County Sports Partnerships) lay on the spectrum from formal/programme/transactional processes to informal/membership/relational processes.

Results

The results demonstrate that in practice volunteer recruitment processes in UK sports clubs orientate towards the formal/transactional/programme management extreme. However, there are more than a few instances of practices from the informal/relational/membership management extreme. The criteria most consistent with the former extreme are fitting the person to the job rather than vice versa, and utilising formal induction processes. The most common exceptions in practice to more formal processes are pragmatic multi-tasking by new volunteers, and ad hoc coordination of new volunteers by a number of people within the club, rather than a volunteer coordinator. The use of external agencies such as NGBs, CSPs or community volunteer centres is unusual for sports clubs, more because of lack of knowledge than rejection of this option. However, whether recruiting from within the club or from outside the club, the research undertaken informs the nature of recruitment and induction of sports volunteers in clubs, particularly the appropriate balance between formal and informal processes.

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