

# Making Sense Of The Sack Race; The Impact Of Managerial Change In The English Football League

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## Aim of paper

The aim of this paper is to examine the effect of managerial change in the English football league using a longitudinal data set.

## Theoretical background

In professional football it is widely regarded that the role of the manager is one of chronic insecurity (e.g. Flint, Plumley & Wilson, 2014). Most organisations encounter changes in leadership at some point, but there is normally a natural time for such a change (Tena & Forrest, 2007). However, changes in football will often be made at unconventional times and within-season. This tends to be due to the intense pressure placed on modern day football managers to achieve consistently high club performance, driven by the continuing rise in revenues available to football clubs competing in elite leagues. Our theoretical discussion covers three contrasting theories that attempt to explain the association between manager change and organisational performance (Hughes, Hughes, Mellahi & Guermat, 2010). These are *scapegoating* theory (managers are replaced as a ritual to signal that the board has taken action address poor performance), *vicious-circle* theory (manager change continually damages performance because replacement events disrupt already established processes and bring with it instabilities and tensions that can further deteriorate performance, and *tenure and life-cycle* theory (new manager develops new processes, a new team and a fresh strategy that will improve long-term performance through continual learning and identifying where adaptations are necessary).

Research into managerial change in professional team sports is not a new phenomenon with obvious examples from American team sports (e.g. Giambatista, 2004) and European football (e.g. Bell, Brooks & Markham, 2013). However, the timing of this study is pertinent given the rises in revenue at professional club since the inception of the Premier League and whether or not such rises in revenue have led to more pressure on managers and increased managerial dismissals. Our findings provide clubs with statistical evidence as to whether or not sacking a manager has an impact on on-pitch performance. This in turn enables clubs to maximise revenue streams, as better on-pitch performance provides a direct impact on revenue.

## Methodology

Data was collected from official Premier League and Football League websites as well as the League Managers Association which documents the managers of all football league clubs and their respective length of tenure. Data was collected from the beginning of the 2000/01 season, up to, and including the 2015/16 season. Both descriptive and statistical data analysis techniques (independent t-tests and repeated measures one-way ANOVAs) were used to consider whether or not changing a manager made a difference to the on-pitch performance and also whether or not there were more beneficial effects depending on the position of the club in the league (e.g. whether or not they were fighting for the title, for promotion or fighting to avoid relegation).

## Results, discussion, implications

Over 15 seasons, the most instances of managerial change occurred in the EFL 2 (43.6%), followed by the Championship (39.1%), EFL 1 (34.7%) and the EPL (27.2%). Significant differences were observed in all four leagues when considering the number of points per game accumulated by teams who make a managerial change and those who do not. Further analysis revealed that a managerial change is more beneficial for clubs in the bottom half of the league, particularly for the EPL. Paired t-tests revealed that there was a significant increase in points per game for teams in the bottom half of the EPL ( $t(63) = 2.88, P < .01$ ).

These findings are important given the impact that relegation can have on a club in a financial context. Data indicates that a place in the EPL is worth a minimum of £100m with relegation from the EPL signaling a £60m reduction in revenue. Our findings suggest that in this instance sacking a manager would be the right decision from a financial standpoint. The results have implications for clubs competing in English football and can be considered within strategy discussions in respect of managerial changes at first-team level. Points per game and league position change can be analyzed to attempt to define whether or not there is a 'right' time to dismiss a manager. Furthermore, our study advances and updates the extant literature by analyzing the four professional soccer leagues in England over a longitudinal time period.

## References

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