

HRM In The A-League's Early Years: The Global Recruitment Strategies Of Small To Medium-Sized Local Football Franchises.

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Aim of the research

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the perceived and potential effectiveness of the planning, recruitment and selection processes employed during the establishment of Australasia's only fully professional football league, focusing specifically on the strategic acquisition of marquee migrants from the global market place.

Theoretical background

Strategic human resource management (HRM) can noticeably increase the levels of commitment exhibited by current personal, while also shaping a sports organisations culture, identity and reputation (Taylor, Doherty & McGraw, 2008). An HRM framework effectively documents the different processes that employers follow to both recruit and retain their paid or unpaid workforce. Hoyer, Nicholson, Smith, Stewart and Westerbeek (2012) present the following seven stages in their HRM framework; planning, recruitment and selection, socialisation and orientation, training and development, compensation and rewards, performance management and retention. In 2008, Elliott and Maguire examined the recruitment systems utilised within Britain's Elite Ice Hockey League (EIHL) to recruit professional ice hockey players from North America, revealing the importance of informal networks and social relationships. Bradbury and Forsyth (2012) have also examined the use HRM procedures within elite-level sport, adapting the main components of the HRM selection process into a sporting context. The assertion behind this research was that poor selection decision can not only limit an athlete's career progression, but also bring a premature end to their future/potential earnings. Rather than try to cover every aspect of Hoyer et al's (2012) seven-stage HRM Framework, this paper specifically focuses on the planning, recruitment and selection phase.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The researchers utilised an interpretive qualitative case study approach, allowing for the completion of an in-depth investigation that retains the holistic and meaningful characteristics attached to all real-life settings (Yin, 2009). The underlining belief associated with this approach is that knowledge is created through interactions between the investigator and the respondent representing the object of investigation. Semi-structured interviews, involving open-ended questions, were carried out over a two-year period with twelve professional sports administrators from Australia and New Zealand, selected specifically due to their first-hand involvement in the planning, recruitment and selection of players and coaches. Thematic analysis, involving familiarisation, indexing, charting and interpretation, was used at the conclusion of the data collection process, allowing the researchers the opportunity to extract, compare and triangulate individual perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the planning, recruitment and selection practices employed by the respondent's organisations (Yin, 2009).

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

The findings reveal that an ad-hoc and often inconsistent approach was adopted to recruit the first wave of marquee migrants and overseas players into the A-League, with several club owners admitting that they were influenced by the players perceived off field appeal (i.e. their ability to put bums on seats, sell shirts and connect with the local migrant communities) than their professional attributes (i.e. their ability to out perform their local teammates and provide a competitive advantage on the field). In comparison, the first wave of A-League coaches were typically recruited solely on their past results and/or ability to extract the best results with the human resources available/provided. It was however acknowledged that the nationality of the coach had a direct influence on the nationality of the players recruited, resulting in many clubs over-looking local employees in favour of those from overseas. In keeping with the findings of Elliot and Maguire (2008), established social networks/relationships emerged as one of the most common methods of acquiring players from outside the local region, many of whom were not required to experience the same recruitment process as their local, often younger, teammates. The cost-effectiveness of recruiting high profile "big money" foreign signings in a salary-capped environment was questioned, with several interviewees admitting that the acquisition of an experienced marquee migrant on a short-term contract was initially prioritised over the long-term investment in established local recruits. Many of the A-League teams have, over the last five years, subsequently formalised their relationships with overseas clubs, reducing their reliance

on their employees personal networks and resulting in what was perceived to be a much more structured “professional” approach to acquiring the services of the marquee migrants. The conclusions and recommendations suggest the adoption of less subjective, more scientific, approach to local and international player recruitment, prevalent in the more established football markets of Europe and South America, and/or other professional sporting codes found in Australasia (e.g. AFL, Rugby League).

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