

# **Organisational Culture In The Volunteer Sport Sector: A Case Study Of Sailing**

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## **Aim of the research**

The aim of the study was to investigate the culture of sailing clubs comprising the English volunteer sport sector (VSS), through the adoption of Smith and Shilbury's (2004) organisational culture framework. Its objectives were three-fold. First, to provide insight into a sport which has received little attention in the literature. Second, given the context in which the chosen framework was developed (refer to Smith & Shilbury, 2004), an additional objective was to examine its suitability for use in relation to the English VSS. Finally, with the concerns expounded by numerous authors relating to the organisational challenges in recruiting and retaining the volunteers required to maintain the VSS (refer, for example, to: Burgham & Downward, 2005, Cuskelly, Hoyer, & Auld, 2006; Taylor et al., 2010), another objective of this research was to determine the impact of club culture in relation to these challenges.

## **Literature review**

It is now over a decade since Cuskelly et al. (2006) observed how governments from around the world have become increasingly reliant on the voluntary and non-profit sectors to deliver social- and welfare- related services to their populations. Since then, this trend has continued to advance, and in the UK, for example, a common feature of recent sport policies has been the prominent level of importance placed on the volunteer sport sector (VSS) in working to deliver policy objectives. With that in mind, if the volunteers (current and potential) that comprise the VSS are dissuaded from volunteering (refer, for example, to: Burgham & Downward, 2005, Cuskelly et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2010), the danger is that the sector may no longer have the capacity to support and/or deliver policy objectives. It is important, therefore, that efforts are made to better understand the cultures of volunteer organisations, and identify any aspects of these that might dissuade individuals from volunteering.

Although sports organisations have long been able demonstrate an abundance of practices from which 'culture' can be established, the research of organisational culture in a sporting context remains a relatively new aspect of the sport management field (Byers, Slack, & Parent, 2012). In one of the area's most significant studies to date, Smith and Shilbury (2004) explored the culture of national and state sports organisations in Australia, and through their research, developed a specific set of dimensions through which the culture of sports organisations could be scrutinised — including dimensions unique to the sporting context. The authors further proposed that these dimensions 'might provide a useful launching pad for future studies on sport culture' (Smith and Shilbury, 2004, p. 161). Thus, given that the 'cultural fit' between partner organisations within the VSS can minimise potential tensions and conflict, and contribute toward the successful achievement of policy objectives (see Byers et al. 2012), the authors sought to respond to Smith and Shilbury's (2004) call. In doing so, the relevance of the framework in relation to the English VSS was explored.

## **Methodology**

Employing online observations, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis, data was collected from three grass-roots sailing organisations. Facebook and Twitter were selected as the main sources of data relating to club members; specifically, the posts of, and responses to official club accounts. In conjunction with these online observations, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced volunteer committee members from the three clubs under investigation (one from each). A interview schedule was produced in which the questions were conceived and grouped according to the 12 dimensions of Smith and Shilbury's (2004) framework. Finally, the data collection also involved content analysis of the clubs' publicly-available, official documentation (e.g., member handbooks, club rules and policies, programmes, instructions and guides, AGM minutes, and other relevant documentation) as well as that of the RYA. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data in which portions of it were de-contextualized from their original interview, online or documentation context and then re-contextualized into an appropriate dimension or sub-dimension located in Smith and Shilbury's (2004) framework.

## **Results, discussion, and implications/conclusions**

A full in-depth analysis of the data is still being conducted, and the specifics of the cultural characteristics of the organisations under investigation will be presented at the EASM conference, along with analyses that addresses the study's other objectives. Preliminary analysis, however, seems to support Smith and Shilbury's (2004) view that the sport itself impacts upon on the formation of club culture. For example, the overall

organisational culture of the clubs does not seem to vary considerably, and of the variations that do exist, local environmental factors primarily determine these.

## **References**

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- Smith, A. C., & Shilbury, D. (2004). Mapping cultural dimensions in Australian sporting organisations. *Sport Management Review*, 7, 133–165.