

Strategic Human Resource Management in Professional Soccer: Identifying the Reasons for High Turnover Rate and Ineffective Transfer Practice in the K-League

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Aim

This exploratory study, which sought to identify the reasons for the high turnover ratio of foreign players in the K-League, included an analysis of the perspectives of the main stakeholders involved in the recruitment and release process. Also, this study was designed to propose a procedural model that could capture the detailed process of player recruitment to identify commonly made errors, which contribute to the high turnover ratio of foreign players.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

With its rise to regional prominence in Asia, the Korean professional football league (K-League) has undergone structural adaptations, including the expansion of teams and the inclusion of foreign players. Both of these changes are in accordance with the adapting regulations that have been purported to work in elevating the quality of the league (Manzenreiter & Horne, 2004). Regarding international talent, the K-League allows each team to have up to four foreign players on its roster.

The successful integration of foreign players has been considered instrumental in winning games in international football (Flores, Forrest, & Tena, 2010). Despite significant financial and physical commitments required in the recruiting of foreign players, there has been a high turnover ratio for such recruits. During the 2017 K-League season, 22 of the 52 foreign players were either released or recruited in the middle of the season. This high turnover ratio (42.3%) is not a temporal phenomenon, rather it represents a permanent aspect that underpins Korean professional football as an examination of five recent seasons revealed that the mid-season turnover ratio of the foreign players has remained at around 40%. From the team's perspective, such turnover causes issues such as the need for re-engaging in a recruitment procedure within a limited timeframe and the need to provide extra remuneration to the departing player for the early termination of the contract.

Human resource management literature in sport views teams as people-oriented organizations (Taylor, Doherty, & McGraw, 2015) in which human capital is regarded as most crucial managerial consideration (Chelladurai & Kerwin, 2017). In line with this view, professional players are the main assets for every professional club. Of the limited research in this area (e.g., Schokkaert, 2016), findings have revealed that human capital turnover has little to no relevance to the player management as the process, goals, and strategies for recruitment and release significantly differ from typical organizations. Literature on employee turnover in football has investigated the effect of in-season manager changes (Besters, van Ours, & van Tuijl, 2016), while scrutinizing the dynamics that lead to player turnover remains an understudied area. However, as the problems associated with the management of foreign players is vivid, tracing the spectrum of the recruitment practice from the point of talent identification to contract termination is essential to discover the underpinnings of the high turnover ratio.

Research Design and Implementation

A qualitative research design was adopted to secure in-depth data through the use of semi-structured interviews. Twelve K-League stakeholders - two general managers, five head coaches, and five agents - were interviewed. Each participant was interviewed at least once and the length of interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes.

Results and Discussion

Through the analysis of the collected data, nine distinctive steps were identified, which can be classified into three distinct phases of player identification and recruitment cycle. The *identification phase* is composed of three stages; need assessment, data collection, and identification of possible players. The *negotiation phase* consists of observation, identifying barriers, and actual transfer. The *integration phase* is made up of adaptation of players, performance evaluation, and action for making contractual decision. Having identified the procedural steps, participants provided a wide spectrum of ideas regarding what might contribute to the high turnover ratio; however, the most common themes that emerged involved the following: inefficient communication system between the stakeholders, underdeveloped scouting strategies, in-group tension and conflict, imbalance in bargaining power, and group culture that favors immediate results over long-term success.

Conclusion and Implications

As the results of this study reveal the possibilities of using a different theoretical approach to address the dynamic of human resource management in the realm of professional players. Starting from the identification phase, the practice of recruiting professional athlete differs from the process in a usual organization setting. This finding can be used to develop a procedural model that incorporates critical components. In addition, the findings of this research can assist practitioners as the results reveal commonly made mistakes that lead to ineffective recruiting and recruits. Reflecting on the process and problems, by reflecting on the results of this study practitioners will be able to reduce the level of uncertainty and risk in their foreign player investments.

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