

Which Competencies Do Active and Former Elite Athletes Require to Optimise Their Employability and Employment?

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Aim

The objectives of this presentation are (1) to investigate active and former European elite athletes' perceptions of the competencies required to optimise their employability and employment using the Athletes' Competency Questionnaire for Employability (ACQE), and (2) provide examples of how the (results of the) ACQE can be used in practice.

Theoretical Background

Given that only few elite athletes are sufficiently financially rewarded to make a living out of their sport, many engage in a dual career (i.e. combining elite sport with study or work) and/or make the transition to the labour market when they (plan to) terminate their athletic career (Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007). In order to successfully prepare for and engage in their post-athletic career, research has shown that elite athletes require effective competencies (e.g. life management, resilience, career planning) to cope with the concurrent and possibly conflicting demands they face at different levels of their development (i.e., athletic, academic/vocational, psychological, psychosocial, and financial; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016). While qualitative research identified a range of competencies that athletes require to cope with the challenges of preparing for and engaging in a post-athletic career (Torregrossa et al., 2015), no instrument is available to date examining active and former athletes' perceptions of their competencies across different nations, sports and systems. Such an instrument could aid practitioners in providing targeted feedback and setting up effective interventions by identifying athletes' strengths, weaknesses, and competency gaps. In response to this lack in methodology, the Athletes' Competency Questionnaire for Employability (ACQE) was developed and used as part of the Erasmus+ Sport project "Be a Winner In elite Sport and Employment before and after athletic Retirement" (B-WISER).

Methodology

With institutional ethics approval, 954 17-to-69-year-old elite athletes (Mage=26.3, SD=10.0; 46% female) from six European countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Slovenia) completed the ACQE. Participants included three groups of elite athletes in specific career stages: 703 active elite athletes (74%), 43 former elite athletes preparing for a first employment (5%), and 208 employed former elite athletes (22%). First, participants evaluated their perceived possession of 31 competencies (e.g., self-discipline to manage the demands of different life domains) on a 5-point Likert scale ("1-very poor possession" – "5-very strong possession"). Second, participants were presented the same 31 competencies, and selected the five competencies they felt (would) give them a competitive advantage in the labour market (in comparison with employees without an elite sport background). The list of competencies was developed based on research literature (e.g., De Brandt et al., 2017), expert review, and a pilot study with 65 elite athletes who evaluated the relevance for athletes' employability or employment. Active athletes answered from the standpoint of preparing for future employment, while former athletes responded from the standpoint of preparing for a first-time employment or securing sustainable employment. SPSS was used to analyse the collected data. Exploratory structural equation modelling (ESEM) will be performed to investigate the factor structure of the ACQE.

Results

Participants reported average-to-strong possession of their competencies ($M=3.77$, $SD=.86$). Former elite athletes who were employed perceived the strongest possession of their competencies ($M=3.90$). Overall, participants reported the strongest possession for their ability to be goal-oriented, dedication to succeed in different life domains, the ability to collaborate with colleagues, and self-discipline to manage the demands of different life domains. Those four competencies were among the top five competencies for strongest possession for all three groups of athletes. Participants reported the weakest possession for their ability to create a professional network, the ability to identify themselves with the culture of their organisation, and the understanding of their own career interests and options. Athletes' perceived possession of their ability to remain self-confident after mistakes was especially lower in former athletes preparing for a first-time employment. Participants perceived their ability to be goal-oriented, the self-discipline to manage the demands of different life domains, and the ability to cope with stress effectively as the top three competencies that they felt gave/would give them a competitive advantage in the labour market. The ESEM results will be presented during the conference.

Conclusion

This study identified athletes' perceptions of their competencies to optimise their employability and employment during three specific career stages. The findings on perceived possession and competitive advantage can be used as an evidence base for stakeholders (e.g., career counselors, employers, sport federations, educational institutions) to target specific competencies in different career stages, addressing athletes' strengths and weaknesses in preparing for and/or securing employment. Furthermore, the factor structure resulting from the ESEM analysis can allow practitioners to structure and operationalize their work with active and former athletes. We notify the reader about potential social desirability biases and suggest that the validity and reliability of the ACQE is further examined. Notwithstanding further validation, the ACQE seems to hold considerable promise as a formative self-assessment tool for athletes and identification-support tool for practitioners.

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