

Researchers explore whether athletics organizations should hire fans

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While most employees might experience a dip in workplace morale from time to time, what happens when someone works for a sporting organization of which they are also a fan? Does their productivity ebb or flow when the team is winning, and do they feel appreciated or understood when all of the focus seems to be on coaches and players on the field? University of Kansas researchers have published research exploring those questions and laying the groundwork for models that can address organizational identification of sport employees, leading to better-performing organizations and happier, more productive employees.

Researchers have studied organizational identification, or how employees related to their organization of employment, for decades but have left the sports business world untouched. Jordan Bass, assistant professor of health, sport and exercise sciences; Brent Oja, a KU doctoral student, and Brian Gordon, assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, published their research in the journal *Sport Management Review*. They combined a deep review of literature on organizational identification with an ethnographic study Bass did with employees of a major university athletics fundraising department.

"Sport employees are in a unique space where they're often fans but also employees of the organization," Bass said. "We thought their identification might be a bit muddy. It was clear when we looked at the data that there is something different going on there compared to most other organizations. Organizational identification didn't fully explain

what we were seeing."

The researchers focus on middle management, or people who are not athletics directors or coaches. They perform work from accounting, fundraising and tech support to ensuring players' equipment is ready by game time. Oja, who has worked in various university athletics departments as an equipment manager, said he was drawn to understand more about that level of employee.

"Frankly, having been a member of middle management in several organizations, I noticed there was a feeling of 'we don't matter' or 'we're just cogs in the wheel,'" Oja said. "But a lot of our students are going to be working in those types of jobs. We want to have a good way to understand our people who work at that level. You can say they make up the core of an organization."

Organizational research has shown that when people feel their jobs are not understood, their connection to the organization suffers. Bass found that held true with the athletics employees he surveyed. They reported that if someone didn't understand their job, the connection suffered, or if they felt someone wouldn't understand they weren't a coach or athletics director they simply gave generic descriptions of their work and didn't feel as much pride in their careers.

He also found, however, that among employees who are also fans of the team, they reported being willing to work long hours and on occasion accepting less pay because they are able to attend games and remain part of an organization they love. Employees who were not fans reported frustrations related to the on-field athletics, but a wider body of data could help illustrate how common that is and whether it affects performance.

There is a debate about whether it is better for sporting organizations to

hire fans. Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, for example, has gone on record saying he doesn't want to hire fans, and Bass and Oja hope to provide evidence of whether that's a good idea. In future research they hope to develop survey instruments and research models that can apply specifically to sport organization middle-management employees. Existing tools don't apply directly enough to be truly effective, they said. Such measures could study what they call sport employee identification.

That measure, known as SEI, could be potentially lucrative for both organizations and employees. It could address countless job satisfaction questions, including:

- Whether performance is related to the teams' on-field success
- Whether people work harder if they have an emotional connection to the team
- Whether productivity dips because employees feel compelled to watch games
- Whether frequent turnover of coaches affects employee morale
- How athletic directors' and general managers' leadership styles affect [employees](#)
- How sport middle managers proceed through their career path
- Whether or not being a fan affects employee longevity.

The answers could help guide hiring practices, employee relations of college and professional sports organizations, and help individuals find organizations that fit them and their skills best.

"Hopefully this research will open the door into how we can turn these students, volunteers and middle managers into future general managers, or to help them find their niche while helping organizations as well," Oja said.

Provided by University of Kansas

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