

Study points to 'unintended consequences' of heavy data surveillance in rugby

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A 'Big Brother' data culture in rugby driven by performance management threatens to create heightened distrust, anxiety and insecurity among players, according to a new study.

The qualitative research, based on interviews with 10 players, coaches and analysts at an English Premiership club, suggests that data culture in the professional game can have [unintended negative consequences](#) on team morale.

Publishing their findings in the journal *Organization*, researchers from the University of Bath's Department for Health suggest [performance](#) metrics can play an important role in team management and coaching, but argue that teams must be mindful of their potential negative effects on players and on team morale.

For their study, interviewees told a story of how metrics and [key performance indicators](#) (KPIs) surrounded their every movement of their lives on and off the pitch. As a result, the researchers concluded, players increasingly focused on their own statistics rather than the performance of the team as a whole.

Against a backdrop where players were evaluated against KPIs covering factors such as their weight and diet, through to their performance on the pitch, including tackle rate in order to 'achieve optimal performances' some of the responses included:

"I can't do this because my stats might be wrong, might look wrong and why would I put myself in that position on a Monday morning because I can't win. That is exactly what it was, and players froze."

"You know we're not a financial institution, we're not run on numbers, we're people, we're emotional people."

"I say I don't have a problem with the amount of statistics, with the amount of monitoring they do with me, but it's the way they [the coaches] then deal with those statistics. I'm very much aware of how you can make statistics appear a certain way to certain people and manipulate

them, so that's only where my concern comes in, where one minute it's positive but at whatever point they want to, because of the amount they have on you, they can turn either way, they can bend it wherever they want."

One particular concern for interviewees involved a notional score given to players: a so-called 'Work Efficiency Index', a number calculated based on multiple factors in the game. It was one example among others where players felt increasingly judged on numbers rather than their true performance.

The researchers stress that it is not necessarily the amount of data collected in training and in matches that is a concern, but rather how data is interpreted and communicated by clubs.

Dr. Shaun Williams of the University of Bath's Department for Health explained: "The constant inhalation of numbers shackled the players' natural affinity and decision making, as they became subordinate to the metrics. Our study poses vital questions for those involved in high performance in terms of how linear and mechanical life can be made for employees or athletes. In this [longitudinal study](#), we found fear and resentment both grew as [players](#) became too rational and risk averse in the constant presence of surveillance and monitoring."

Lead author Dr. Andrew Manley, also of the Department for Health at the University of Bath, added: "Although the use of analytics can work to reveal hidden value and generate efficiencies, it is important that further research focuses on the restrictive consequences and emotive responses tied to a more encompassing form of worker control. Our study points to some of the unintended consequences that can occur as a result of such heavy data surveillance and the impact constant [performance management](#) has on the personal lives of those subjected to such organisational environments."

More information: Andrew Manley et al, 'We're not run on Numbers, We're People, We're Emotional People': Exploring the experiences and lived consequences of emerging technologies, organizational surveillance and control among elite professionals, *Organization* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1350508419890078](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508419890078)

Provided by University of Bath

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