

The Provision Of Off-Field Player Development In The Australian Football League

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Aim of the paper

The Australian Football League Players' Association (AFLPA), the National Rugby League Players' Association (NRLPA), the Australian Cricketers' Association (ACA) and the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) have each expressed concern with aspects of the modern professional sport workplace that risk diminishing the personal development of players, especially in preparing them for life after their professional sporting career. Issues of primary concern include the increasingly performance oriented nature of the workplace; the pressures associated with high performance sport; the time demands of players for preparation, training, recovery, meetings, medical treatment, and club or league appearances; as well as the intensity of playing schedules. These Player Associations have sought in recent and current collective bargaining negotiations with their respective leagues or national governing bodies to protect players' rights for what are called "off-field player development" programs, as well as dedicated funding support and allocated time to participate in such programs while actively pursuing a professional sporting career.

The purpose of this study was to: (1) identify the range of club practices within the Australian Football League (AFL) in regard to the provision of off-field development opportunities for players; (2) understand players' attitudes and motives for undertaking off-field development activities; (3) understand coaching and club management personnel attitudes and understanding of the role of off-field development in the context of the AFL players' workplace; and (4) identify improvements in the provision of the off-field development environment for AFL players.

Theoretical background

Following Swanson (2001, p. 304), this paper utilizes human resource development (HRD) theory, in particular the core beliefs that "organizations are human-made entities that rely on human expertise in order to establish and achieve their goals [and that human expertise (in this case AFL players)] is developed and maximized through HRD processes and should be done for the mutual long-term and/or short-term benefits of the sponsoring organization and the individuals involved". The value of employers investing in their employees' personal development is generally well accepted in sporting environments (Aquilina, 2013; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Pink, Saunders & Stynes, 2015).

Methodology

The research method provided a comprehensive view from all key stakeholders involved in the design, delivery, monitoring, and consumption of player development programs within the AFL system. Data collection was undertaken in 5 discrete stages throughout the 2015 AFL season: (1) Focus group interviews with 2 groups of Player Development Managers (PDMs) from all 18 AFL clubs; (2) a survey of a cohort of 60 accredited player agents; (3) 34 interviews within a sample of 5 AFL clubs with senior and assistant coaches, football managers, senior club executives and PDMs; (4) interviews with 4 players; and (5) interviews with the 6 AFLPA staff involved in the delivery of player development programs. Relevant documentation of club policies and practices in relation to off-field player development was also reviewed.

Results/discussion

Eight themes were identified from the analysis of the data and included player motives and attitudes, player workloads, program delivery logistics, the player development environment, the role of PDMs within AFL Clubs, the effectiveness of the relationship between club PDMs and the AFLPA, the design of the AFLPA driven program and Player Agents' role in player development. The results highlighted that off-field player development is universally considered an essential part of the workplace for players and clubs and should continue to be supported by clubs, the AFL and the AFLPA. The design of a player development program and its delivery should be individualized as much as possible to suit the background, motives and capability of individual players. The study found there is variable quality, support and resourcing for player development between the 18 AFL clubs, highlighting the need for greater consistency in service provision between clubs for players and that additional resourcing and improved capability is required for PDMs to function effectively.

Conclusions/implications

The findings provide insight into how a meaningful and effective off-field player development program could be provided within the context of the AFL. The study highlighted that improvements are needed in the planning, monitoring and reporting of player development objectives, activities and outcomes within clubs and that there needs to be greater integration of AFLPA program design and delivery with club-based PDMs. There is also a need for more formalised sharing of player development practices between clubs and the AFLPA to ensure clubs and the AFLPA provide the best possible off-field development environment for players that fulfills the core beliefs of HRD theory.

References

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