

Marching in the Glory: Working for a Sport Mega-Event

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**Session 10: Other
Presentation (25-minute)**

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The proliferation of sports mega-events worldwide has garnered substantial interest in the past two decades (Roche, 2000). This is not surprising given the social, cultural, political, economic and environmental implications associated with mega-events (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006). In order to understand these significances, the meanings associated with events must be identified and explored. Sports events are multifaceted, consisting of rituals, rites, festivals, and spectacles (MacAloon, 1981). As cultural manifestations, the meanings that sport events obtain vary when they are hosted in different locales. Examples are ample. The Athens Olympic Games symbolized, in part, the revitalization of Green-Hellenic culture (Tzanelli, 2004), whereas the Beijing Olympic Games has been used to promote China's international image and the harmonization of East-West civilization (Xu, 2006).

Although there is an emerging understanding of some public meanings that sport mega-events obtain, little is known about the ways that meanings of sports mega-events are appreciated by those who put the event together (i.e., workers of the organizing committee). A unique exception is McDonald's (1991) ethnographic account of the ways that the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (LAOOC) developed an organization culture during the months leading to the Games. While McDonald's work sheds light on meanings forged by the LAOOC at the organizational level, she does not address meanings as they were experienced by workers at the event.

Sport mega-events enable multiple narratives and embedded genres that are laden with symbolic meanings (Chalip, 1992). Yet, daily working experiences are mundane, closely knitted to one's interpretation of meanings in life (Purcell, 1967), and emotional (Boudens, 2005). Thus, workers at sports mega-events experience both symbolic and mundane aspects in their work lives. Identification of the ways that workers at an event interpret their work lives therefore enables examination of the ways that multi-level meanings interact as they are integrated, negotiated, or even discounted. Practically, since the structure of event organizing committees pulsates (i.e., the organization experiences rapid expansion during the pre-event phase and is then downsized or even dismantled at the event's conclusion) (Hanlon & Jago, 2004), an understanding of event worker experiences can aid event management by providing the necessary insight for formulation of human resource strategies that can enhance organizational performance.

The present study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to study the experience of workers in the Beijing Organizing Committee (BOCOG), which will host 2008 Olympic Games. Participants in the study were twelve current BOCOG employees from ten different BOCOG departments with an average age of 28.5 years (SD=3.7 years). They had worked at BOCOG for an average of 27.7 months (SD = 9.5 months). Semi-structured interviews were conducted from March to July, 2006 in Chinese. The 12 interview audio-files in Chinese were transcribed and translated into English, which generated 141 pages and 6329 lines of interview texts. The interview texts were examined multiple times, line by line, for meaning units and connections between those units. Key phrases were used to identify themes and formulate a schematic outline. This process was iterated by bringing themes and connections back to the text until the extracted themes and their connections fully captured meanings in the interview texts. Coding consistency was obtained by having two coders work through the materials, each comparing their findings and resolving any differences via consensual discussion.

The analysis generated seven themes describing the BOCOG context, and five themes describing BOCOG working experience. The seven contextual themes are: (1) the Olympics are great and grand; (2) the Olympics are valuable for China; (3) the Olympics illustrate the challenges that China faces in the 21st century; (4) BOCOG is high profile; (5) BOCOG is unique; (6) BOCOG helps us understand Chinese society; (7) I love (do not love) sport. The five experiential themes are: (1) the daily work is mundane; (2) BOCOG is a government bureaucracy; (3) privilege has its privileges; (4) my immediate working environment nurtures me; (5) this job is special but worthwhile. Four additional themes are used by workers to interpret and integrate the context and experience themes: (1) my work at BOCOG allows me to test and develop myself; (2) working at BOCOG represents living a passionate life with idealism; (3) I get to be part of history; and (4) I have to adjust and confront.

These findings demonstrate the cognitively complex and emotionally ambivalent nature of mega-event work. They also show that the "mega" character of the event renders meanings that enable workers to negotiate ambivalence about their work lives. Further, an immediate work environment that is supportive helps to buffer the cognitive and emotional challenges that derive

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from the "mega" character of the event. Implications for managing human resources at mega-events are discussed.

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