

Using technology in community sport organizations: A case study of innovation adoption and implementation

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Abstract 242**

Although innovation is viewed as fundamentally important to organizational competitiveness and effectiveness, it has been understudied within the non-profit sector (McDonald, 2007; Zimmermann, 1999). In particular, the study of innovation within community sport organizations (CSOs) has received minimal research attention. This is somewhat surprising given the size, extent, and influence of CSOs. For example, in Canada CSOs comprise the largest proportion of non-profit and voluntary organizations (Hall et al., 2004).

CSOs are almost exclusively run by volunteers, who take on various administrative, coaching, and support roles within the organizations (Cuskelly et al., 2006). As such, CSOs tend to be characterized by a culture of tradition and informality, and in turn are often reactive rather than proactive, and pragmatic rather than strategic (Taylor, 2004). However, pressures to innovate are also present. Although resources are scarce, there is an increasing demand from members and external stakeholders (e.g., funders, parent sport organizations) for improved service quality and enhanced sophistication and professionalism with administrative tasks (Hall et al., 2004; Taylor, 2004). Technological advances within society in general also contribute to the pressure for CSOs to innovate.

While innovation is often operationalized as a single event phenomenon, it is actually a multi-event process (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006) following the three basic stages of initiation, adoption, and implementation. Much of the innovation research has focused on the adoption phase, yet Wolfe (1994) argued that the implementation of innovation and the impact of it on organizational performance are important considerations. Damanpour and Schneider (2006) noted that the adoption and implementation of innovation are influenced by factors at the managerial level (e.g., the attitude of leaders), organizational level (e.g., a culture that supports innovation), and environmental level (e.g., grants that encourage innovation).

In this presentation, the results from the second phase of a case study on technological innovation within a particular CSO will be discussed. An amateur soccer association, in partnership with a local technology company, developed the Electronic Game Sheet (EGS). This system replaced paper game sheets with an electronic version that collected game data using handheld devices and provided near real-time reporting on the Web. In the first phase, the case was studied during the initiation stage with a focus on strategic decision making. In the second phase of the case study, the factors contributing to the adoption and implementation of the innovation were studied at the managerial, organizational, and environmental levels.

Research Method: Data were collected from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the president and senior staff members of the CSO, and key personnel from the technology company. A focus group was conducted with registered players. All participants were asked to discuss the implementation of the EGS, the impact of it on the operation of the organization, and how the project was received by the key stakeholders. Observations of referees and players using the EGS were conducted during its initial roll-out and six months later. The interviews, focus group, and observational field notes were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed using coding and theme analysis, as well as visual data analysis techniques.

Findings and Implications: Despite initial resistance by some of the end users (i.e., referees) and some technical and operational challenges, the EGS was adopted and implemented in a successful manner. The success was evident in the fulfillment of the initial goals and by the general satisfaction of the referees, players, and staff. While it is important to highlight this case as an example of how technology can be used to increase efficiencies and improve the competitive advantage of the CSO, the specific details regarding the implementation process are relevant only for CSOs pursuing innovative projects using similar technologies. The more salient discussion is on the factors that contributed to the successful initiation, adoption, and implementation, which may be applicable for other CSOs pursuing innovative technology-based projects.

At the managerial level, the success of the innovation can be attributed to strong and insightful leadership and committed staff.

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The president consistently exhibited a positive attitude regarding its implementation. Her commitment to it is indicative of her awareness of how the implementation of the EGS fit into the strategic plans for the organization. This is in contrast to the reactive decision making style that is typical in CSOs (Taylor, 2004). Staff also exhibited a committed attitude to the value and importance of the EGS. While these findings are consistent with other innovation research, an interesting situation exists in this case with respect to the volunteer status of the president and the workload of staff that is typical in non-profit organizations.

At the organizational level, the organizational design and size of the CSO contributed to the successful implementation of the EGS. Although it is growing in membership and facility size, the CSO has maintained a simple structure and a small staff size. As a result, there was good communication between the board, staff, referees and players in relation to the implementation of the technology. In addition, the organization was flexible with operational rules pertaining to the use of the technology (e.g., player eligibility).

At the environmental level, a partnership with a local technology company, personal connections with a key user group (referees), and societal expectations for increased access and immediacy of information were vital to the successful implementation of the project. The technology company provided training to referees and have remained in contact with the CSO to make subsequent changes. The referees association were involved in the specification of the technology and were vocal supporters of it. Many of the players actively use technology in various aspects of their lives and were excited by the enhanced services resulting from the EGS.

Conclusions: From the case study, we learned that innovation for community sport organizations and other non-profit sport organizations is not insurmountable. However, decision makers must understand and appreciate the context in which the innovation is introduced and implemented. As illustrated in this case study, successful implementation requires managerial support, organizational capacity and flexibility, and a favourable environment. An outcome of this study is prescriptive insights that can assist other CSOs as they pursue their own technological innovation projects.

Complete references will be provided at the presentation.