

Predicting the stay or leave behavioral intentions of early career sports officials: Results of a quasi-experimental field-based research project.

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**Management/leadership
Abstract 2009-055**

**May 28, 2009
5:20 PM**

**25 minute oral
(Lexington A)**

Organized sport is finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain people willing to take on the role of official, judge or umpire, particularly in community sport. Sport officiating is often viewed as one of the most difficult and onerous tasks in organized sport. Research conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) revealed that the number of sports officials in Australia declined 21% from 1993 to 2004, from 425,800 to 335,400 people. The picture in the United States and Canada is as bleak. Deacon et al (2001) reported 30% of officials with the Canadian Hockey Association quit each year. In a survey conducted by the National Association of Sport Officials (Sabaini, 2001), 85% of high school sports administrators detailed a decline in the number of officiating registrations within their state.

Conversely, ABS data (2007) indicates the number of Australians participating in organized sport or physical activity rose from approximately 4.05 million people in 2002 to 4.4 million in 2006. There is currently a policy push by all levels of government and many National Sport Organizations (NSOs) to further increase levels of participation in organized sport. For this increase to occur it is necessary to increase the capacity of the sport system as a whole, raising concerns about long-term sustainability. An increase in the capacity of the officiating aspect of the sport system can only be achieved through three possible alternatives: recruiting more officials; increasing the workload of current officials (i.e., more games per official); or increasing the career length of current officials (i.e., increased retention rates amongst sports officials). Previous research has reported that the stressors of officiating, (Taylor et al., 1990; Anshell & Weinberg, 1996, Rainey & Hardy, 1999) and sport commitment (Van Yperen, 1998) influence burn-out or intention to stay. A behavioral intention model was developed to examine the extent to which perceived organizational support moderated the influence of stress and commitment in predicting the intention of officials to continue officiating.

This presentation builds on earlier quantitative aspects of this research project by reporting the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data. Qualitative data were collected post-season from a sub-sample of officials who had participated in a quasi-experimental field-based study. The study used a pre and post-test design to test the efficacy of organizational support as a management intervention strategy aimed at increasing the intention of early career sports officials to continue officiating. In the field-based study officials were assigned to either a treatment or a non-treatment group. The treatment group was exposed to strategies designed to increase perceptions of organizational support. Early career officials were defined as those who had less than five seasons officiating experience.

A total of 242 rugby (football) officials were invited to participate in the study and were allocated to either a treatment (n=133) or a non-treatment group (n=109). Mentors were trained by the researchers to deliver initial and on-going support to the treatment group. Treatment and non-treatment group members completed pre and post-season on-line surveys which included measurement scales for: stressors of officiating (Taylor, et al., 1999); sport commitment (Scanlan, et al., 1993); perceived organizational support (Eisenburger, et al. (1986); and behavioral intention (Ajzen, 1991). The pre-season survey also included items seeking demographic and officiating experience. A total of 106 officials (51 treatment and 51 non-treatment) completed the study. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to test whether pre and post intervention commitment, perceived stressors of officiating and perceived organizational support predicted changes in intention to continue officiating. The final regression models were significant for both the treatment ($F(23,27)=7.1, p<.01$) and non-treatment ($F(23,27)=6.4, p<.01$) groups. However, the R-squared change statistics revealed that organizational support did not account for any unique variance in intention to continue after the variance explained by commitment and stressors was entered into the regression equations for both groups.

In order to further explain the results of the quantitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person with 12 officials from both treatment and non-treatment groups by asking a series of questions linked to the key constructs investigated in the quantitative study. Participants were selected from officials who had completed the pre and post-season surveys and agreed to be interviewed. To ensure that a wide cross-section of officials were interviewed a number of selection criteria were used. These included officials whose scores were either particularly high or low on perceived organizational support items, treatment/non-treatment group members, gender and geographic region. Interviews ranged between 30 and 120 minutes duration, with an average of 50 minutes. Interviews were digitally and transferred to PC for transcription, coding and analysis

2009 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2009)

using open and axial coding and constant comparison. Participants' identities were protected by the use of aliases known only to the researcher.

Sources of stress commonly cited were abuse from players, coaches and spectators before, during and after games; performance concerns, and time pressures. Important commitment themes centered on initial involvement linked to family and friends. Enjoyment and fun were seen as key factors in continued involvement and in rewards sought. Awareness of support systems was high across the group. Opinions were divided on psychological/social supports, the majority happy with mentoring and affective support being offered, especially members of the treatment group. Negative perceptions of support centered on isolation of officials, both geographically and socially, leading to a lack of feedback believed to be detrimental to performance improvement. Suggestions for improvement to support centered on continuity and consistency of feedback, recognizing officials for effort and good refereeing, and flexibility in appointments to allow for work, study and family commitments.

While the results of the quantitative study provided no evidence that organizational support strategies significantly influenced the decisions of officials to stay or leave, the qualitative data suggested that officials were likely to value and respond to improved support and development opportunities. The findings of this research suggest that appropriately designed and administered organizational support strategies may have the potential to ameliorate the negative effects of stress and build upon the positive nature of commitment amongst officials. However, the decision making processes of sports officials' intention to stay or leave are much more complex than the modeling developed for this study. Sport organizations may be able to reduce recurring costs of recruiting and training new officials if they are better able to support those officials who are already part of the organization. Ultimately, the widespread implementation of a program of organizational support needs further research before recommending such strategies as a means of increasing the behavioral intentions of early career officials to continue officiating.