Investigating Intention to Continue Coaching: Results of a Field Based Intervention Study with Practicing Coaches

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Sport is central to Australia’s social fabric and has the ability to enhance national pride and community health. Organised sport has attained this status largely through the work of volunteers, particularly sport coaches, who support participants from grass roots to the high performance level. The Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey conducted by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC, 2009) has indicated that along with declining rates of participation in organised sport, coach involvement also appears to be declining.

Declining coach involvement is a major concern for sport organisations because coaches are integral to the effective delivery of organised sport. Understanding why coaches decide to leave their sport organisations has received attention from researchers (Duda, Balaguér, & Crespo, 2003; Kelley, Eklund, & Ritter-Taylor, 1999; Pease, Zapalac, & Lee, 2003; Price & Weiss, 2000). In contrast, little attention has been given to why coaches decide to stay in coaching. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the factors influencing the sustained retention of coaches.

A modified version of Penner’s (2002) theory of sustained volunteerism was used as a framework for measuring three categories of variables: (a) personal factors (i.e. personal beliefs and values; pro-social behaviour; and motivation to volunteer); (b) organisational factors (i.e. organisational commitment; job satisfaction; emotional attachment; costs associated with leaving; and obligation to stay); and (c) systemic factors (i.e. perceptions of coaching education and accreditation program quality; government sport policy; and liability concerns).

The study was conducted in three stages with the first stage considering personal, organisational and systemic factors that influence continued involvement in coaching. Focus groups with coaches from 11 sports in regional and metropolitan areas in the state of Queensland provided coaching specific, organisational and sport system information to inform scale development for a research instrument used in stage two. Using an online survey instrument, stage two of the study collected survey data from 623 coaches about their perceptions of coach management practices in sport clubs, intention to stay involved as a coach, and knowledge and attitudes of coaching career pathways. The survey also collected data on demographic characteristics, volunteer motives, commitment, and behavioural involvement as a coach.

The purpose of stage 3 was to test the efficacy of a coach development program to influence coaches’ intention to continue (ITC) coaching using a quasi-experimental field-based pre- and post-test research design. Results from stages one and two informed the development of the coach development program which was designed to run for 12 weeks and included units on coach and team manager interactions, dealing with parents, and developing coaching careers. Coaches received weekly emails with discussion topics and information relevant to each unit. At the end of each unit, coaches attended an informal meeting to discuss email topics, network with other coaches, and hear from a guest high-performance coach.

Basketball and field hockey coaches were the participants in a non-equivalent (pre-test and post-test) control group, 12 week field study. Eight sport associations were involved: two regional (one control, one test) and two metropolitan (one control, one test) in each of the two sports with a total 339 coaches. Four facilitators (one for each test group) coordinated delivery of the coach development program locally. Pre- and post-intervention survey data were collected via an online survey. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the four facilitators after the intervention program to gather data about the effectiveness and issues with the program. Survey data were analysed using SPSS software. Interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed for thematic analysis using an open, axial and reflective coding process. The survey instrument measured Penner’s (2002) three categories of variables which were modified from results of stages one and two (i.e. personal, organisational, systemic factors). One hundred and eleven surveys were returned from 339 control and intervention participants across the eight sport associations (response rate 32.8%). Participants had a mean age of 40.2 years ($SD = 10.2$) and an average of 11.8 years ($SD = 8.7$) coaching experience.

Examples of important personal motivations for coaching included factors such as: I want to continue to see people enjoying

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this sport; and I have access to resources to further my coach education. Unimportant motivators included: I want to establish a coaching career; and I like the rewards and recognition I receive from the sport association. Pre- and post-intervention mean scores paired samples t-test indicated that the control groups’ ITC decreased significantly from pre- \(M = 4.37\) to post-intervention \(M = 4.18\) \((t(46) = 2.03, p < .05)\). The intervention groups’ ITC also decreased (from 3.91 to 3.79) but was not significant \((t(64) = 1.46, \text{NS})\).

The key finding from this study was that the intervention program impacted on coaches’ decisions about ITC suggesting that ITC can be influenced by management actions and regular communication with coaches. However, if left alone, coaches may be more likely to consider dropping out as earlier research has shown that ITC relates to retention (Azjen, 1991; Fishbein & Azjen, 1975). An interesting finding was that the number of years a coach had been coaching was not a good predictor of ITC. Work on employee retention has suggested otherwise (Kim & Lee, 2007; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979; Ramlall, 2004; Spencer, 1986).

Another important finding resulting from multiple regression analysis was that ITC was influenced by coaches’ affective commitment (i.e. coach’s enthusiasm and sense of community/belonging to the sport organisation). This was operationalised in this study with questions: I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career as a coach, with the sport association; I enjoy discussing the sport association with people outside it; and, I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to the sport association (reverse coded). Encouraging affective commitment through regular communication and mentoring with coaches may assist sport organisations to improve coach retention. Other implications for sport organisations were identified and shared with Queensland sport and these will be discussed along with study limitations and opportunities for future research.