Job Satisfaction at Sport Mega-event Work: A Tale of Two Cities

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Organization of large scale sport events entails unique challenges to human resource management. Several organizational characteristics of the event organizing committee make it particularly difficult to maintain a satisfied workforce (Van der Wagen, 2007). An organizing committee is established for the sole purpose of preparing and delivering an event. The temporariness means event employees have to seek new jobs after the event (Xing & Chalip, 2009). The organizing committee, particularly those for the Olympic Games, often starts with a small staff but goes through rapid expansion when it is close to the event (Theodoraki, 2007). This rapid growth exerts substantial amount of pressure on the event employees (Wilkund, Davidsson, & Delmar, 2003). Although the symbolism of the event may render a sense of history for event employees (McDonald, 1991), the significance of the event also means the stakes for successfully delivering the event are high, thus causing further stress.

In traditional human resource management literature, job satisfaction is considered to be important because it affects performance (Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985), turnover (Tett & Meyer, 1993), and commitment (Russ & McNeill, 1995). While this is equally applicable to event management, the nature of the event organizing committee may result in different manifestations of job satisfaction. An event organizing committee goes through distinctive phases from event planning, preparation to delivery and wrap-up. Different dynamics and issues are associated with each phase (Parent, 2008). The most drastic change occurs during the event and the focus shifts from preparation to actual operation. The work environment, tasks involved in daily work, and the social contexts around the event change accordingly. These changes may reset the parameters that define job satisfaction. Previous studies found that peer support, opportunities to grow through the job, and emphasis on the social significance of the event augment meaning to the event work experiences prior to the event (McDonald, 1991; Xing & Chalip, 2009). However, these studies have not looked into event workers’ evaluation of their job and factors contributing to job satisfaction at different phases of the event work, particularly during the event. Yet, this is a pivotal question to address as an organizing committee’s success is defined by the successful delivery of the event which is to a large degree dependent on the event workers’ willingness to perform at the time of the event—a time when the termination of the organizing committee is pending. This study examines the effects of job attributes on event workers’ job satisfaction both prior to and during the event.

The Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG) was used as a case study. Data collection started at the end of August, 2008, immediately after the Beijing Olympic Games (August 8th to 24th, 2008) and prior to the Beijing Paralympic Games (September 6th to 17th, 2008). Participants were 307 paid BOCOG employees (49% male, 51% female). Their average age was 31.6 years (SD=7.6 years) and they had worked for BOCOG for an average of 28.3 months (SD=20.1).

The participants were instructed to evaluate their job attributes and overall job satisfaction separately for two periods: the first period was from the time they started to work for BOCOG to the time before the start of the operation phase which was typically defined by the opening of the Olympic Village; and the second period was the duration of the event. Warr, Cook, and Wall’s (1979) job satisfaction scale was adopted. The participants evaluated the following job attributes on a 7-point Likert scale from very dissatisfied to very satisfied: physical work conditions, the freedom to choose one’s own method of working, fellow workers, recognition received for good work, immediate boss, the amount of responsibility given, rate of pay, opportunity to use one’s ability, chance of promotion, the way the work unit is managed, attention paid to suggestions made by the employee, hours of work, amount of variety in the job, and job security. They also evaluated their overall job satisfaction in the two periods. SPSS 16 was used for the analysis. Two linear regression analyses were conducted to examine job satisfaction prior to the event operation and job satisfaction at the event. The dependent variable is job satisfaction. The independent
variables are study participants’ gender, age, tenure with BOCOG, and the 14 job attributes.

For the period prior to the event, the overall regression was significant, $F(17,267)=10.623, p<.001$. The model explains 40.3% of the variance. Out of the 14 job attributes, four were statistically significant: BOCOG employees’ satisfaction with their physical work environment is positively related to their job satisfaction ($\beta=0.181; p=0.004$); the degree to which the job offers opportunities to use their ability also has a positive impact ($\beta=0.232; p=0.003$); chance of promotion was important to the workers ($\beta=0.148; p=0.042$); and so was job security ($\beta=0.127; p=0.033$). In addition, while age and BOCOG tenure did not affect job satisfaction, the male participants were significantly more satisfied about their employment with BOCOG than the female participants ($p=0.032$). During the event, the overall regression was significant, $F(17,265)=11.189; p<.001$. Forty two percent of the variance was explained by the model. Five job attributes were significant or nearly significant. Rate of pay has the biggest influence on job satisfaction ($\beta=0.278; p<.001$), followed by job security ($\beta=0.159; p=0.006$). Satisfaction with the immediate boss also affected overall job satisfaction ($\beta=0.140; p=0.033$). In addition, how the work unit is managed also matters to the study participants ($\beta=0.136; p=0.061$) and the amount of variety in the job affects their overall satisfaction ($\beta=0.119; p=0.076$). Similar to the finding for the pre-event period, male workers were happier about their job than their female counterparts ($p=0.066$). Further, both age and BOCOG tenure became significant job satisfaction predictors: the older employees were more satisfied with their job ($\beta=0.179; p=0.001$), and the longer the employees had worked for BOCOG the more likely they were dissatisfied with the job ($\beta=-0.160; p=0.003$).

These findings painted an intriguing picture of event work. Clearly, BOCOG employees evaluated their job in different manners in the two periods. Prior to the event, opportunities for applying one’s ability, chance for promotion, the physical environment of the work, and job security were significant contributors to job satisfaction. During the event, while job security was still important, their focus on job satisfaction shifted to pay rate, the amount of variety in the job, the immediate boss, and the way the work unit was managed. Interestingly, while age and tenure did not affect job satisfaction prior to the Games, they became significant factors when the event started. Taken as a whole, event workers value different aspects of their job at different stage of the event organization. While opportunities for growth, either through using one’s abilities or through rank progression, were valued in their daily work, employees are much more realistic when working at the event. This makes intuitive sense as the completion of the event also signals the termination of the job and they have to worry about their pay checks in the future. The results also corroborate findings in Xing & Chalip’s (2011) follow-up ethnographic work on BOCOG employees: while temporariness was not a major concern two years prior to the Games (Xing & Chalip, 2009), the pending job termination was salient and caused emotional strains when the researchers revisited the workers immediately prior to the event. Further, for those who had a longer tenure with the organization, job termination may involve greater psychological and financial costs compared to those who had been with the organization for a short time. Interestingly though, the effect of the job termination was not salient until the event actually took place.