Athletic Director Duties and the Evolution of College Athletic Department Capabilities

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years, college athletics has generated increasing amounts of media attention and revenue. Increasing salaries have shifted responsibilities to more specialized roles for both administrators and coaches (Khan, 2009). With this evolution, new skills are needed to meet the needs of the changing environment (Levinthal and Myatt, 1994). When organizations change, employee turnover increases and new talent is acquired to access knowledge and keep the firm on par with competitors (Rao and Drazin, 2002). In this manner, organizations learn by building knowledge stocks through individual knowledge and competencies (Bertini and Tomassini, 1996). Over time, the same job title can require a completely different set of skills based on continuous evolution, education, and development of talents. Within college athletic departments, the need for knowledge of new revenue streams has increased the need for specialization in these areas. This paper seeks to explore how capabilities have changed in college athletic departments by analyzing the backgrounds of athletic directors over the past 20 years.

Literature Review

Individual knowledge stocks are a key tenet of organizational learning (Bontis, et al., 2002). One benefit of hiring to access knowledge is the ability of the employee to convert their knowledge from tacit to explicit (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). In doing so, the individual assists in building organizational knowledge stocks and allows the firm to develop capabilities related to this information. The combination of the individual knowledge and new capabilities can then be used to change a firm’s strategic position (Aime, et al., 2010). This series of events allows firms to adapt their knowledge stocks to evolve with the industry.

When competitive environments are changing, the capability to integrate this new individual tacit knowledge into the organization is paramount (Grant, 1996). This is important across capabilities at differing levels. For example, some capabilities may be specific to specialized activities of the organization, completed by individuals, while others may involve numerous workers in a broad based task (R&D, quality control, etc.) (Grant, 1996). For a university athletic department, integration across nascent departmental boundaries may be driven by changes to NCAA policy or a desire for the organization to learn new capabilities. Hiring workers already possessing this knowledge, particularly if the knowledge is innovative, can be a successful strategy of meeting the needs of a changing industry (Aime, et al., 2010). As the knowledge within an organization evolves, the workforce is constantly changing to reflect the skills needed to execute the changing responsibilities.

Additional research has approached the issue of knowledge acquisition by focusing on career paths of workers. Sport scholars have assessed how different career trajectories can bring different perspectives and skills to an organization (Fitzgerald, et al., 1994). Beyond the orientation of backgrounds, this paper approaches career paths as an accumulation of knowledge that can be deployed in various settings. Examining careers can be used to explore areas of tacit knowledge acquired by hiring organizations. Within college athletic departments, the range of needed tacit knowledge continues to expand as additional alumni, faculty, media, and legal stakeholders exert their influence within the organization.

Methodology

College athletic directors were selected due to the broad duties assigned to this position and the role’s centrality to the operations of athletic departments. Data was collected on 300 athletic directors in each of the three NCAA divisions. Key attributes recorded include gender, age, tenure, undergraduate institution, degree program, race, coaching experience, playing experience, college athletic department experience, and business experience. This
Results and Discussion

Results demonstrate changes in skills possessed by athletic directors and deeper knowledge stocks and capability development by athletic departments. Our research notes that current athletic directors possess different educational and work backgrounds as those from just twenty years ago. Business and administrative experience has replaced coaching or playing experience as one of the leading hiring indicators. Although this effect is stronger at the Division I level, Division II and Division III also experience the phenomenon. To access this new knowledge, the tenure of athletic directors has decreased and outgoing administrators are replaced with younger, more specialized individuals. The proliferation of sport management programs has led to an increase in hires with an educational background in sport, as well as those possessing a graduate level degree. Accessing these additional skills has brought a greater diversity (of race and gender) to college athletic departments.

This paper contributes to theory providing greater depth and understanding to how organizations adapt longitudinally to the need for different capabilities. This suggests that athletic departments adapt to the need for new capabilities by placing greater emphasis on hiring administrators with these skills. The study also illustrates how these resource constrained organizations transfer newly acquired knowledge throughout the organization, including through the adaptation of organizational structures and technologies. Practical contributions of this paper include recognition of the increased number of career paths for those seeking to become involved in collegiate athletics. As college athletic departments continue to evolve, matching changing capability needs to workers who possess these skills will be essential for organizations to remain competitive.