Developing the Sport Industry Career Path Model as a Career Advising Tool in Sport Management: An Extension of Holland’s Theory

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The proliferation of sport management programs over the past thirty years has led to the question of how so many programs can adequately educate and place 8,000 graduates each year into a competitive marketplace where the number of job seekers exceeds the relatively fixed number of available jobs (Jones, Brooks, & Mak, 2008; King, 2009; Mathner & Martin, 2012). In response, sport management programs at colleges and universities attempt to inform students about the realities of a sports career (Pierce, Wanless, & Johnson, 2014), prepare students for jobs in sport (Parks & Parra, 1994), provide guidance for students seeking a career in sport (Hutchinson, Sagas, & Quatman, 2010), and direct students towards specific career goals that meet their individual needs (Todd & Andrew, 2008). However, faculty often encounter students who are “uncertain of the most effective and efficient path to follow in the attainment of their desired profession” (Hutchinson et al., 2010, p. 561). Guidance from faculty is essential to help students understand competition for jobs, salaries, and the characteristics employers are seeking from graduates (Mathner & Martin, 2012). Faculty members are uniquely positioned to help students identify which career path or work environment would be the best fit for their personality, interests, and skills.

Unfortunately, sport management currently lacks a theoretical framework upon which faculty members deliver career advice regarding which occupational disciplines (e.g. marketing, sales, operations) best fit student needs. While improvement has been made in many facets of sport management education and professional preparation, the lack of a theoretical framework to match students with occupational disciplines is a glaring void in advising students who are searching for meaningful employment after graduation.

The purpose of this research is to create the Sport Industry Career Path Model (SICPM), a framework based in Holland’s theory of vocational personalities and work environments, to guide students to a best-fit career path in the sport industry. College athletics was chosen as a starting point for this research because it contains a variety of occupations in which sport management students seek to work after earning a degree (e.g., marketing, ticket sales, sports information). Using Holland’s theory, a three-letter Holland code for various intercollegiate athletic occupational disciplines will be obtained. The outcome of this research is to use the codes to match students with congruent occupations that are likely to produce satisfaction, retention, and productivity (Holland, 1997).

Holland’s theory of vocational personalities and work environments is widely accepted in vocational psychology. Within Holland’s theory, persons and work environments can be categorized as one of six types: The realistic (R) environment is characterized by systematic use of objects, tools, and machines for practical, concrete activities. The investigative (I) environment is characterized by the use of analytical, scientific, and verbal skills that result in problem solving or knowledge creation. The artistic (A) environment is characterized by ambiguous and unsystematized competencies to create art forms or products. The social (S) environment is characterized by social activities and interpersonal skill in order to inform, train, enlighten, or help other people. The enterprising (E) environment is characterized by persuasion and manipulation of people to attain organizational or personal goals. Finally, the conventional (C) environment is characterized by the systematic manipulation of things or numbers in a precise way such as keeping records and organizing data according to prescribed plans.

The six types of personalities and environments are arranged on a hexagon where the types adjacent to one another are more similar than they are to types more distant on the hexagon. People and environments resemble all of the types to a degree and possess a unique combination of all six types. However, the highest two or three letters are used to match people with occupations. According to Holland (1997); “People search for environments that will let them exercise their skills and abilities, express their attitude and values, and take on agreeable problems and roles” (p. 
4). An individual’s occupational personality (three-letter Holland code) is determined by completing the Self-Directed Search (Holland, 1994), while a work environment code is determined by industry professionals completing the Position Classification Inventory (PCI; Gottfredson & Holland 1991). So, if an individual’s three-letter code matches the work environment’s three-letter code, there is an increased level of congruence whereby the individual’s skills and interests would be appropriately matched to their work environment improving satisfaction, stability and achievement (Holland, 1997). For example, realistic types populate realistic jobs because the environment rewards realistic interests and behaviors. Kristof (1996) described this person-environment fit as the compatibility between an individual and a work environment that develops when there is a perceived congruence between one’s individual characteristics and the environment in which he/she works or would like to work. A perfectly congruent person would possess a three-letter code of SER and work in an SER occupation.

The work environment code of each occupational discipline in the industry will be established by using Holland’s PCI. The PCI provides a method for classifying any position or occupation according to Holland’s typology of work environment (Gottfredson & Holland, 1991). The PCI is an 84-item inventory in which employees describe the demands, rewards, values, fostered competencies, and opportunities for expression of abilities in the work environment. Each environmental model is represented by 13 items to which respondents answer Often, Sometimes, or Seldom/Neve. Items are scored 0 or 1 and reported as a profile across the six dimensions, with scores ranging from 0 to 13. The results produce a profile of scores for each Holland type. The psychometric properties, validity, and reliability of the instrument have been established in several studies (Gottfredson & Holland, 1991; Maurer & Tarulli, 1997).

An email distribution list of 6,000 employees working in college athletics was created by selecting four institutions from each conference in each NCAA division. Two emails were sent one week apart and the link was open for a total of three weeks. A total of 1,753 emails (29%) were opened by recipients, and 566 completed the survey (9.4% of emails sent and 32.3% of emails opened). Division I accounted for 62% of respondents, and males accounted for 59%. Fourteen of the fifteen occupational disciplines recorded at least ten responses, meeting Gottfredson & Holland’s requirement of ten responses per discipline.

Administration of the PCI will create the SICPM with a 2-3 letter Holland code for each occupational discipline. This research fills a theoretical and pragmatic void in the area of sport management career advising by specifying the Holland profile for occupational disciplines in intercollegiate athletics. After students complete personality testing in the form of the Self Directed Search or other assessments through their university’s career center, they will be armed with their Holland profile. The student, with the help of their career advisor, can then cross-reference their Holland profile with the SICPM to begin identifying the best work environment for the student. The SICPM will be a valuable resource for sport management students trying to identify a career path that fits their personality, sport management faculty charged with providing students with career and professional development advice, university career centers assisting students with the choice of academic major during their freshman year, and sport managers making hiring decisions.