Human Capital Legacy and Event Career Path: Lessons from the Athens 2004 Olympic Games

Chrysostomos Giannoulakis, Ball State University
Kyriaki Kaplanidou, University of Florida
Michael Odio, University of Cincinnati
Laurence Chalip, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Management/leadership Thursday, June 2, 2016 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2016-091 4:50 PM (Legacy South 2)

The Summer and Winter Olympic Games are each held every four years in different locations around the worldwide. While the world is fixated with the action and stories of the athletes and their home countries, behind the scenes many people are and have been working full-time to deliver the event (Heere & Xing, 2012). When the International Olympic Committee (IOC) awards a country the right to host a Summer or Winter Games, a new Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (OCOG) is formed to plan, manage, and execute the Games in that country. Each OCOG has a life span of approximately eight years, in which it grows from a handful of employees at its inception to thousands at its peak before being dissolved after the Games are over, leaving those workers unemployed. Although their life span and structure may differ, organizing committees (OCs) for other mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup and the National Football League’s Super Bowl share similar development and evolution patterns due to their temporary nature (Parent, 2008). This constant cycle of forming and dismantling OCs has created a complex set of human resource issues, as new OCs must recruit employees with the necessary knowledge and skills to plan and execute each event. Depending on the event’s demands, there may not be sufficient human capital for OCs to hire locally, thus forcing them to recruit across the country or even internationally (Xing & Chalip, 2012) and creating an international market for event employees.

Review of Literature
Previous research on event employees has shown mega-event work to be a meaningful milestone in their career that can lead to professional growth and new opportunities (Odio, Walker, & Kim, 2012; Xing & Chalip, 2012). Indeed, the knowledge and skills acquired by employees as a result of working on an international sports mega-event makes them valuable assets to the local community, as well as the global mega-event labor market. The economic, social, political and environmental legacy of mega-events is extensively discussed and under continuing scrutiny (Preuss, 2007). However, little is known about the knowledge development legacy from working at the OCOGs although identified as a pivotal factor from local residents of host cities (Kaplanidou, 2012). Further, neither the development of the careers of those who deliver the events is clear, nor the way in which their newly acquired knowledge and skills are used after the event. A broad perspective incorporating career development theory (e.g., Forrier, Sels, & Stynen, 2009; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) and existing knowledge about the operations of mega-event OCs (e.g., Xing & Chalip, 2009; Xing & Chalip, 2012) is needed to disentangle these issues. Knowledge of how careers intersect with or unfold within the realm of mega-events can be beneficial for those who choose to work for OCs, as well as those who oversee them. As such, OC administrators can work to retain the necessary knowledge and skills gained from these employees to increase their organizational effectiveness and plan effectively events in the future.

Purpose
The purpose of the study was to: (a) identify the knowledge and skill set acquired by employees during the Athens 2004 Olympic Games; (b) examine factors (e.g., functional area, level and type of position, personal/social/cultural/financial factors etc.) that influenced the career decision-making process post Games; (c) understand the impact of their knowledge development from the Athens Games on their current job and life stage.

Method
A qualitative methodology via semi-structured interviews was employed to examine perceptions of former Athens 2004 employees relative to knowledge acquirement and subsequent career paths. Participants, who were all from Greece, were recruited through a purposeful sampling procedure to ensure a diverse representation in terms of gender, age, and level of position during the Olympic Games. Four categories based on interviewees’ employment
status were formulated: (a) individuals currently working in Greece, while also collaborating with international sport events; (b) individuals working in Greece in the sport industry; (c) individuals working in Greece in non-sport fields; and (d) individuals working permanently in Qatar. Seventeen in-depth interviews were conducted either in person or via Skype during the summer of 2015, were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative output was managed using NVivo 10 (QSR International, Doncaster, Australia).

Results

Preliminary findings from transcriptions, based on the constant comparison method proposed by Merriam (1998) and open coding, illustrated the following themes: (a) networking, (b) Olympic-level skillset, (c) context-based career path choices, and (d) knowledge development. For networking, most respondents pointed out the pivotal role of networking in either breaking through the mega-sport event industry or establishing a presence in mega-sport events. Nonetheless, participants noted the importance of becoming an expert in a specific functional area, an asset that could be complemented by networking. In terms of skillset, all respondents characterized their experience in Athens 2004 as “once in a lifetime,” “unique,” and “career milestone.” Project management, teamwork and team management, and communicating effectively in a diverse environment with different stakeholders were identified as dominant acquired skills. The majority of acquired skills were utilized and applied in participants’ subsequent positions depending on the context. Nevertheless, for some of them being part of the Olympic Games was a “red flag” when seeking employment in Greece after the Games, due to their overqualified status and assumptions from employers of being highly paid. Lack of a transition plan for Athens 2004 employees resulted in a cluttered domestic job market, especially for employees not affiliated with sport management. Regarding career paths, the decision to work or not in the sport event business post-Games was influenced by personal lifestyle choices (e.g., family, patriotism), networking, and perception of experience during the Games. Employees inspired by the vision of Olympism, the project-based status of the Games, and interpersonal relationships developed within OCs mostly worked on subsequent OCOGs or other international sport events. Finally, participants discussed how knowledge developed through their Olympic experience was tied to managing relationships in the work environment to achieve project management goals.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the human capital legacy and career paths of Olympic Games employees, based on the case of Athens 2004. Factors related to knowledge development, in tandem with project management skills that were applied in all subsequent jobs, were identified. Enhanced networking opportunities were identified and allowed for international sport event job acquisition. OCs and the IOC may utilize this information for recruitment, placement, and retention strategies within host cities and communities, while cultivating systematically on human capital legacy. Perhaps the application of a survey of incoming employees about knowledge levels on their job requirements and an exit survey at the end of the event may illustrate how much is gained in terms of knowledge during the Games.