Toward New Thinking on Careers in Sport: An Application of Boundaryless Career Theory

Michael Odio, University of Cincinnati

Management - Other (Other)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Abstract 2017-270  
Saturday, June 3, 2017  
9:20 AM  
Room: Torrey’s Peak

Jobs and careers in sport management are a frequent topic for research, and are often a core consideration for sport management education (Eagleman & McNary, 2010). But what does “working in sport” mean? A 2014 report by CareerBuilder.com boasted about the recent growth of the sports industry and showed historical data for sports-related employment. The report listed the largest increases were in 1) Meeting, convention and event planners, 2) Concierges, and 3) Audio and video equipment technicians. The report also included bartenders, office clerks, and janitors in their list of sports-related jobs. While all of these positions exist within some definitions of the sport industry, they bring attention to the lack of a consistent framework for studying careers in sport.

The vastness and complexity of the sports industry make it difficult to make practical or theoretical generalizations or study as a whole. From an economic perspective even the boundaries of the sport industry are not universally agreed upon (Milano & Chelladurai, 2011). Previous attempts in marketing (Pitts, Fielding, & Miller, 1994) and management (Todd & Kent, 2009) have provided some frameworks for studying parts of the industry but are far from universal. The value of these existing frameworks is that they provide bounds for studying different phenomena and making generalizations. The present study will propose a new direction for establishing a framework for studying careers in sport.

The value for such a framework can be found in what we already know about certain careers in sport. Perhaps no careers in sport are as well-researched as those of coaches (Bloom, 2002; Mielke, 2007), some sports executives (Fitzgerald, Sagaria, & Nelson, 1994; Wong, 2013) and professional athletes (Coupland, 2015). Research exists on the career stages, transitions, and racial and gender representation for these professions, primarily because they are more highly structured and visible. If a sufficient framework were established then many of these issues could be studied in other sport professions that are more elusive and less defined.

Boundaryless Career Theory (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) has provided a lens through which many fields have been studied. The theory originally evaluated the extent to which a career is driven by (or contained within) an organization or by individual agency (Arthur, 1996), that is, it was primarily concerned with crossing organizational boundaries. However, the interpretation of the theory has vastly expanded to include occupational and cultural boundaries (e.g., Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). For example, previous research has examined the various career transitions and labor movement in different parts of the information technology industry. Most notably in recognizing how frequent moving between organizations in Silicon Valley became a norm, something not found in a comparable cluster of tech companies in Massachusetts (Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2002). This freer flowing of labor between organizations is partly credited for their overall success compared to that of the Massachusetts counterparts, and points to how focusing on career development and labor movement can reveal new information about the functioning of an industry.

In the sports context, Odio & Kerwin (in press) used secondary data to examine career movements between organizations in different sectors of the sport industry (i.e., public, private, non-profit, college) and movements in and out of sport. The results showed high levels of mobility between certain sectors, as well as high incidences of people leaving sport-related employment and then returning. Although the study yielded some useful insight by examining the types of organizations people moved between, its scope does not fully capture the complexity or diversity of careers existing within sport.

To accomplish this, five initial levels are proposed as an alternate, sport-centric framework that clusters professions in sport based on their functional distance (not physical distance) from and involvement with the sports field or product. The first level is labeled “on the field” and includes athletes and coaches; professionals in this level of sport are immediately involved in and have direct influence over the performance of the sport. The second level is
“managing the field,” which includes positions such as general managers, scouts, and other administrators; people in this level have much at stake with the sport product and have considerable influence on it, but not direct control. The third level is “observing the field” and consists of broadcasters, media, public relations, and bookies among others; careers at this level still revolve around what occurs on the field but have no direct influence on it. The fourth level is “supporting the field” and includes positions such as risk management and security, food and beverage, facility operations, marketing, and sales; these individuals’ roles are significantly more removed from the field of play but are nonetheless integral to the proper functioning of the sport industry. The fifth level proposed is “supplying the field” and consists of sponsors, equipment manufacturers and others who may have a stake in what occurs on the field, but whose primary tasks are far removed from it.

Some knowledge exists about how careers may unfold within and across these levels. For instance, many athletes, equipped with their knowledge of the sport, remain on the first level as coaches or transition to levels further away from the field. However, less is known about common career pathways between professions at other levels, if they exist. Studying the permeability of these boundaries (including boundaries within levels) and the conditions under which they are crossed would greatly help to understand the progression of careers in sport and overall labor movements. This could translate to practical implications such as changes in how organizations recruit talent, and the framing of sport management educational curricula and career preparation, which could be aimed at particular levels. Moreover, this model can be used as a framework for generalizing knowledge about work in sport to certain populations, and can serve as a platform for proposing and exploring further characteristics of work in these professions.

The proposed framework is designed to inclusively analyze careers and labor in the sport industry. It provides a more realistic way to study the diverse careers in sport (e.g., bartenders, video technicians, sport marketers) in relation to each other that is more focused than studying the different sectors of the industry (e.g. Odio & Kerwin, in press), and not tied to the organization (e.g., sport-producing or sport-supporting organizations; Todd & Kent, 2009). Additional dimensions to the framework will be put forth in the presentation including how career transitions between sports, and between levels of sports differ at each level, as well as thoughts on how this framework can be expanded in future research.