Friends in Low Places: Examining the Social Network of Professional Sport Executives in the National Hockey League

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The growing popularity of social network studies in organizational research is evidenced by the proliferation of topics ranging from interorganizational alliances (e.g., Beckman, Haunschild, & Phillips, 2004), network governance (e.g., Provan & Kenis, 2008), employee turnover (e.g., Krackhardt & Porter, 1985), to organizational citizenship behavior (Bowler & Brass, 2006). Despite the evolution of organizational social network research to explore multiple subtopics (Kilduff & Brass, 2010), scant attention has been paid to the social relationships in which managers are embedded (cf. Brass & Krackhardt, 1999; Mehra, Dixon, Brass, & Robertson, 2006). As social beings who operate in concert with others in an organization (Mintzberg, 1973), the relationships that managers have with their subordinates, peers, and superiors can reveal useful insights on group performance (cf. Mehra et al., 2006), as well as job finding, career benefits, and long-term success (cf. Cappellari & Tatsiramos, 2015; Lancee, 2016; Seibert, Kraimer, & Linden, 2001). This is especially true in professional sport, where relations between staff can be affected by leader succession and nepotism (e.g., Rowe, Cannella, Rankin, & Gorman, 2005).

Although professional sport franchises operate in a manner similar to non-sport entities (i.e., intent to earn a profit) and utilize conventional business workplace models (cf. Katz & Koenig, 2001), the finite number of teams that operate in a given league creates unique employment conditions (Flynn & Gilbert, 2001; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014). These conditions produce a scarcity of labor demand for various groups (e.g., athletes, coaches, referees) (cf. Rosen & Sanderson, 2001). Unlike athletes who rely on their physical abilities to secure employment, professional sport executives (PSE) must demonstrate strong sport business acumen in such areas as labor relations, player personnel evaluation, and financial management (Devine & Foster, 2006; Wong & Deubert, 2010). Even if an individual exhibits high quality managerial skills, attaining employment as a PSE can remain a challenge given the limited position availability. Thus, in order to gain employment, a prospective manager may seek to penetrate the market by utilizing the social network of PSEs.

Connecting with individuals who are located within a particular social network (e.g., a network of PSEs) may confer strategic advantages, including access to resources and advice (cf. Sparrowe, Liden, Wayne, & Kraimer, 2001). Moreover, knowing who to connect to and build a relationship with can enable access to employment (e.g., McDonald, 2011). But simply connecting with a PSE may not be as effective as accumulating social capital from a centralized, well-connected PSE. Identifying such PSEs may result in a greater likelihood of gaining employment as their connectedness may carry weight with PSEs in other sport franchises (cf. Lin, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to examine the social network of PSEs, and highlight those centralized, well-connected PSEs who have garnered high levels of social capital. Specifically, this study identifies key actors within a social network of PSEs that prospective managers may wish to connect with in order to raise their likelihood of gainful employment in a limited marketplace. From a theoretical standpoint, this study builds upon the existing foundation of social networks by incorporating a longitudinal focus (i.e., PSEs of one professional sport league over an elongated period of time) and determining social capital vis-à-vis measures of centrality and connectedness. Moreover, this study affirms the importance of networking in professional sport, particularly as it relates to executive management and mitigating a job market that is fraught with nepotism and loyalty (especially to former athletes).

Originating from Bourdieu’s (1986) discussion of agency and connectivity, social capital refers to the actual or potential resources linked to others through relationships. As a deductive approach to examining social networks,
this framework focuses on structural components of networks to underscore the value of certain actors vis-à-vis their relations with others (Burt, 2005). In this sense, social capital can be considered to have a ‘connectionist’ perspective that emphasizes links and ties between individuals (e.g., Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Lin, 2001). Although social capital can be conceptualized as a public or group benefit (e.g., Putnam, 1993), there are personal benefits that can be gained through social capital such as career advancement (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005).

For this study, network theory is also useful to conceptualize how some PSEs may exhibit more social capital than others. Borgatti and Halgin (2011) noted that network theory (not to be confused with the theory of networks) discusses the actors, links, and the effect of these variables on configuring a given network. As one of the foundational works in this domain, Granovetter (1973) demonstrated the link between social capital and network theory by illustrating the role that actors serve as brokers of information and resources to others. Within network theory, centrality is considered a key concept (e.g., Oerlemans, Gössling, & Jansen, 2007). Centrality depicts the structural arrangement of actors based upon their relations with others in a given network; actors who don a central profile often bridge fringe or weak actors to others (cf. Granovetter, 1973; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). As such, centrality can be utilized to determine how much social capital individuals wield.

To achieve the current study’s purpose, a network design was implemented with a nominalist approach. Network designs consist of collecting relationship-based data with clear boundaries, and performing a social network analysis (cf. Prell, 2012). Here, general managers (GM) in the National Hockey League (NHL) and their key front office executives (i.e., managers or directors of hockey operations) were assessed; ties were noted to mark all the executive staff members (whether GM or hockey operations) whom PSEs worked with throughout a given GM’s tenure. All ties were symmetrical and binary, totalling over 5,500 relationships. The tenures of NHL GMs were identified using team media guides dating back to 1917, which were accessed from the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, Canada. All data were entered into Microsoft Excel and then exported to UCINET 6 (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002) for analysis. Using measures consistent with previous sport management investigations (e.g., Warner, Bowers, & Dixon, 2012), including degree, betweenness, and eigenvector centrality, this analysis also utilized the core/periphery model to complement the centrality scores (e.g., Naraine & Parent, 2016). The core/periphery model segregates networks into a core with actors with strong ties to both core and peripheral members, and a periphery that is loosely connected to the overall network. To aid in the analysis, sociograms of the entire network and the network’s core actors were produced using NetDraw2 (Borgatti, 2002).

As of the date of this submission, the whole network sociogram has been completed, along with parts of the centrality and core/periphery model. The results of these analyses reveal that many of the centralized PSEs are former or retired players, and success (e.g., winning championships) does not necessarily indicate a PSE has more social capital. While the scores for highly centralized PSEs will be reported during the presentation, the results will enhance the present understanding of social capital in PSE networks, and highlight the importance of networking with well-connected individuals within professional sport.