The Sport Organization’s Path to Identified Employees: An Examination of Organizational Antecedents of Sport Employee Identification (SEI)

Brent Oja, University of Northern Colorado
Rammi Hazzaa, University of Northern Colorado

Management - Organizational Behavior (College Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2017-424
Saturday, June 3, 2017
3:35 PM
Room: Torrey’s Peak

In a continued effort to better understand sport employees, the following study was conducted to examine how sport organizations can improve their employees’ identification. This study used Oja, Bass, and Gordon’s (2015) Sport Employee Identification (SEI) construct. SEI is based in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and reflects a need for sport specific theory (Doherty, 2013; Fink, 2013). SEI was initially posited as a two-dimensional construct that consisted of an alignment with the sport organization – similar to organizational identification – and a connection to the teams of a sport organization – comparable to team identification. A subsequent empirical examination of SEI revealed that sport employees identify with their sport organization (SO), and with sport and competition (SC) – as opposed to just the teams (Oja, 2016). The SO dimension is similar to traditional organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), and the SC dimension is an original construct that explains the identification sport employees have with sport in general. Additionally, when developing an instrument to measure SEI, it was found that team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) was not related to SEI and organizational identification was only slightly represented in the final scale – only two items from Mael and Ashforth (1992) were retained.

Oja et al. (2015) offered potential organizational antecedents of SEI. These antecedents include perceived success, perceived prestige, perceived distinctiveness, and perceived visibility of the organization and of the team or department. The proposed relationships between the antecedents and SEI are supported with past theoretical and empirical developments. For example, organizational success was thought to be an antecedent of SEI due to a sport employee possibly interpreting their organization’s success as their own success (cf. Hirt et al., 1992; Wann & Dolan, 1994). Both prestige and distinctiveness have been previously found to impact social identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Smidts, Pruyn, and Van Riel (2001) have indicated that visibility would influence social identification.

The proposed organizational antecedents were then tested for their relationships with SEI with an online survey. The survey contained the SEI instrument (Oja, 2016), as well as instruments that measured the antecedents. All participants were employees of American intercollegiate athletics departments. Following the guidelines of Oja et al. (2015), participation in the study was regulated to those who are full-time sport employees and do not have Athletics Director or Coach in their title. To diversify the backgrounds of the participants, intercollegiate athletics departments from a wide array of geographic locations were included in the sample population. Once the data was collected and inspected for missing data and multivariate normality, the data was subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Initially, a measurement model was created to assess the fit of the data to the hypothesized structure. After proper model fit was attained, the correlations between latent variables were transformed into regression paths to create a structural model. The structural model allows for the comparison of latent variables. The structural model was used to test the actual relationships between antecedents and SEI.

A total of 2,000 sport employees were invited to participate in the study. Of the 2,000 invitations, a total of 516 (N = 516) usable surveys were collected. Participants’ level of college sport was 404 (n = 404) at the FBS level, 28 (n = 28) at the FCS level, 71 (n = 71) at the Division I (no football) level, and 12 (n = 12) at a different (other) level. The tenure of the participants ranged from less than a year to 40 years. To account for the degree of missing data, Little’s missing data test was performed. Little’s test revealed that missing data should be considered MCAR with an insignificant chi-square, \( \chi^2(2207, N = 516) = 2091.14, p = .96 \).

The data was then subjected to a CFA. The measurement model had good fit statistics. The model fit indices had a significant chi-square, \( \chi^2(356, N = 516) = 765.46, p < .001 \), an acceptable CFI = .93, an acceptable TLI = .91, an
acceptable RMSEA = .05 (.043 - .052), and an acceptable SRMR = .05. Next, a structural model was created to examine the relationships between latent constructs (i.e., both dimensions of SEI and the antecedents). Results included support for distinctiveness with both SC (B = .18, p < .01) and SO (B = .27, p < .01). Prestige was also supported for SC (B = .21, p < .01) and SO (B = .27, p < .01). Visibility of the team or department was found to be an antecedent for SC (B = .19, p < .01) and SO (B = .21, p < .01). However, there was only partial support for visibility of the overall organization as an antecedent of SEI. The relationship with SC was significant (B = .13, p < .05), but the relationship with SO (B = .10, p = .14) was not statistically significant. Partial support was also found with organizational success, as SO (B = .20, p < .01) was significant, but SC was not (B = .05, p = .41). All models contained acceptable composite reliability (i.e., > .50).

The organizational antecedents were largely supported. However, visibility of the organization and organizational success did not fully hold as antecedents of SEI. Whereas, visibility of the department/team was significant for both dimensions of SEI, visibility of the overall organization was not fully supported and could be attributed to the proximity of the point of identification. Restated, sport employees may have a stronger sense of identification with their unit than with the overall athletics department and consequently are more concerned with the visibility of an entity that they feel more identified with. The significant findings for both visibility forms with SC is likely due to sport employees wanting to be publicly associated with sport (cf. Oja, 2016). Conversely, organizational success predicted SO, but not SC. This relationship with SO can be explained by individuals desiring to be members of successful organizations (Hirt et al., 1992). The lack of a relationship with SC could be grounded in a desire of sport employees to be more involved in sport and competition as opposed to having a limited role as an employee. Yet, antecedents such as distinctiveness, prestige, plus general and local sport interest were fully supported (i.e., with both SC and SO). These findings provide new insights into the social identification processes of sport employees. Namely, sport employees do concern themselves with the external notoriety of their organizations. In turn, sport organizations that can differentiate themselves from others, build a positive reputation, and produce visible teams may help their employees better identify with the sport organization.

Socially identified employees are likely to produce several beneficial outcomes for an organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Thus, building the SEI of sport employees should be of interest to sport organizations. To achieve such benefits, sport organizations should seek to build the awareness of their teams through marketing strategies that would improve team visibility. Further, by putting more resources into improving performance – simultaneously cultivating prestige and distinctiveness – sport organizations would not only improve their financial outcomes, but they might also develop identified employees. As such, sport organizations that strive for excellence would not only reap the benefits associated with high performance (e.g., increased ticket and merchandise sales), but they could also see various benefits associated with socially identified employees (e.g., lower turnover) (Mael & Ashforth, 1995).