Gendered Evaluations of Sport Domain Knowledge & Expertise: Impacts on the Hiring Process for Male and Female Job Candidates

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Since the passage of Title IX, scholars have tracked the progress of women in sport, paying particular attention to the gender ratios of participation, coaching, and administrative positions in college athletics and beyond. Today, men and women participate in college athletics at near equal rates, yet the percentage of women employed in the sport industry continues to lag behind men. Women hold 36.2% of athletic administrator positions at NCAA athletic departments, and more than 11% of schools have no female athletic administrators on their staffs (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014).

Even in functional areas where women dominate the positions in other industries, in sport, these roles are still typically occupied by men. For instance, in the United States, women hold 60% of public relations and marketing positions across all industries, yet in sport, men dominate the profession (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Hardin & Whiteside, 2012; Toth & Cline, 2007; Whiteside & Hardin, 2012; Wohl & Stein, 2016). Men hold 87.9% of sport information director positions at NCAA athletic departments, and the marketing and promotions staffs are similarly male-dominated (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Cunningham, 2007). When women are hired by sport organizations, they are often relegated to positions with less power or limited to positions relating to women’s sports (Whisenhant, Pederson, & Obenour, 2002; Whiteside & Hardin, 2010; Yiamouyiannis & Osborne, 2012).

Research has demonstrated the benefits of a gender-diverse workforce, arguing that the addition of women’s skillsets leads to better performance compared to homologous staffs (Cunningham, 2007; Fenwick & Neale, 2001). Yet sport organizations remain male-dominated. Previous literature has explained this lack of progress through a variety of lenses, including institutionalization, hegemonic masculinity, homologous reproduction, gendered discourses, and role congruity (e.g. Burton, Borland, & Mazerolle, 2012; Cunningham, 2008; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Whisenhant & Mullane, 2007). The present study builds on prior work in role congruity and gender stereotypes to examine a specific aspect affecting the hiring and promotion of women in sport: perceptions of sport domain knowledge and expertise.

Chelladurai (2005) suggested that by basing hiring decisions on candidates’ competency, organizations can create diverse workforces. Yet research has shown that the competency of male and female candidates is evaluated differently, even when applicants have similar backgrounds and experience (Burton, et al., 2008; Heilman, Block, & Martell, 1995; Spence & Buckner, 2000). In sport, one area of competency that appears to matter is sport domain knowledge and expertise. Swanson and Kent (2014) established that domain expertise and knowledge played a role in perceptions of leadership credibility and prototypicality, though the authors did not examine whether any differences existed based on the leader’s gender. Other work has examined the role of a sport background in the hiring process as well as in perceptions of career success (e.g. Burton et al., 2008; Joseph & Anderson, 2016; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). These works suggest that different standards may exist for men and women when it comes to sport domain knowledge and expertise.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the gender differences related to sport domain knowledge and expertise during the hiring process of sport organizations. Specifically, we will conduct a 2 (applicant gender: female, male) x 2 (past sport participation: competitive athlete, no athletic participation) x 2 (work experience: has worked in the sport industry, no sport industry experience) to examine how one’s sport background and gender influence perceptions of sport knowledge and hireability. Based on the previously mentioned literature, we expect applicants with past sport participation will be rated higher on perceptions of sport knowledge ratings (H1a) and hireability.
(H1b) than their counterpart with no sport participation background. We also anticipate applicants with sport industry experience will receive higher ratings in sport knowledge (H2a) and likelihood to be hired (H2b) than those without previous experience working in sport. Finally, we will also examine how the applicant’s gender can also influence these relationships. We hypothesize that applicant’s gender and past sport participation will interact such that men with past sport experience will be rated more positively in terms of sport knowledge (H3a) and hireability (H3b) than female applicants with the same background. We also expect gender to interact with sport work experiences such that men with sport industry experience will receive higher ratings in sport knowledge (H4a) and hireability (H4b) than women with the similar work experience.

The participants for this study will be approximately 300 athletic administrators at the athletic director and associate or assistant athletic director level at NCAA Division I institutions. Individuals in these positions were selected as they will have had the requisite experience of evaluating job applicants for a director-level position at a college athletic department. Via an electronic survey, participants will be presented with a job posting and candidate resume for a marketing director position at an NCAA Division I athletic department, and will be randomly assigned to one of eight scenarios, each with a slightly altered description of the candidate’s gender and background: Male/female college athlete with sports work experience, Male/female college athlete with no sports work experience, Male/female non-college athlete with sports work experience, and Male/female non-college athlete with no sports work experience. A marketing director position was chosen for the study because it does not require the specific sport knowledge of a job in an area such as sport information, and because marketing positions, while commonly held by men in sport organizations, are held by near equal numbers of men and women across all industries in the United States (Cunningham, 2007; Wohl & Stein, 2016). Therefore, participants should hold no preexisting gender stereotypes about the “ideal” candidate for the job unrelated to the sport industry specifically. Once reviewing the application materials, participants will then respond to multi-item scales that measure hiring recommendations (Satore & Cunningham, 2007) and perceived sport knowledge (Swanson & Kent, 2014). Items will be measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale. Manipulation checks will be included to ensure participant recognition of the independent variables. We will perform MANCOVA (IVs: sport participation, sport work experience, and gender; DVs: perceived sport knowledge and hiring recommendation) to test all hypotheses, controlling for participant gender and tenure.

This study has implications for both academics and practitioners. For sport management researchers, it adds to our understanding of the dearth of women in sport leadership positions by examining the impact of sport domain knowledge and expertise on hiring decisions. For practitioners, it shines a light on the implicit biases that hiring managers may possess about male and female job candidates’ sport domain knowledge and expertise, which could lead to recommended changes for job candidate evaluation and hiring practices.