Exploring Competitive Advantage and Volunteers in Different Sport Organizations

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Management - Volunteers (Other)  
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Organizations compete against one another for resources and to succeed (Barney, 1991). Management research has readily examined competitive advantage (CA), which occurs when an organization creates “more economic value than the marginal competitor” (Peteraf & Barney, 2003, p. 314). Yet, it remains poorly understood in sport, a weakness, especially given the various types of organizations found within the field and the importance of volunteers, a distinguishing feature of the field. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of CA in sport, and the role of volunteers as a CA resource.

The resource-based theory (RBT; cf. Barney & Clark, 2007) was developed to focus on the internal resources of organizations to explain CA rather than its environment (cf. Porter, 1979, 1981). CA arises from resources that are valuable, rare, non-imitable, and supported by the organization (Barney, 1991, 1995). These four characteristics form Barney’s (1995) VRIO framework, which allows resources to be evaluated according to CA.

To date, CA has been examined in professional sport (e.g., Wolfe, Wright, & Smart, 2006), intercollegiate athletics (e.g., Anderson & Birrer, 2011), National Olympic Committees (e.g., Robinson & Minikin, 2012), and sponsorship (e.g., Amis, Pant, & Slack, 1997). However, research in sport has focused on athletes and coaches, while other resources (e.g., volunteers) and organizations (e.g., events) are poorly examined. Given the dependence on volunteers within the Canadian sport system, and the decline in volunteering (Vézina & Crompton, 2012), volunteers are becoming more valuable and rare, and should therefore be a source of CA.

Methods

An exploratory multiple case study design was used (cf. Yin, 2018), which included a community-level para-sport organization, a professional sport organization, a community-level recurring sport event, and a community-level for-profit sport organization. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with one executive and one volunteer of each organization, and complemented by document analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data were analyzed thematically (cf. Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016) in NVivo 11.

Results

Preliminary results indicate the meaning of CA as being associated with a value creating strategy, defined as being unique or different from one’s competitors, rather than generating economic value as per the traditional CA definition in the management literature. Various tangible (i.e., human and financial) and intangible (i.e., culture, reputation, and history) resources were identified as sources of CA. Finally, volunteers were identified as a source of CA according to Barney’s (1995) VRIO framework.

Discussion

Results shed light on elements to consider pertaining to CA in sport, and the role of volunteers within the strategy of organizations to achieve a CA. Findings have practical and theoretical contributions. For instance, results can inform volunteer management practices in organizations to leverage human resources as a source of CA. In contrast, the application of RBT in multiple settings expands the relevance of this theory in additional settings, but demonstrates a need to adapt the theory by moving beyond an economic focus, which has dominated current research on this phenomenon.