Personnel Selection in Sales Departments of Professional Sport Organizations: The [Un]masking of Biases

Janelle E. Wells, University of South Florida
Michelle G. Harrolle, University of South Florida
Nels Popp, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Management - HRM (Professional Sport)  Saturday, June 1, 2019
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  1:05 PM
Abstract 2019-385  Room: Napoleon D3

Resources, particularly human resources, are the most valuable asset of an organization. According to Barney (1991) rare, valuable, and barely substitutable resources provide organizations a competitive advantage. As such, the identification and cultivation of talented salespeople is essential to the financial health of sport organizations as tickets, media sales, and sponsorships are the most important sources of revenue (Pierce & Irwin, 2016). Moreover, the recruitment of talented salespeople is critical to a sport organization’s success as sales positions are the main entry point into the industry, and “high turnover among sales employees…reduces organizational productivity and sales efficiency” (Popp, Simmons, & McEvoy, 2017, p. 100). Thus, there is a need to examine the gatekeepers – the hiring sales managers, who grant access to these opportunities.

Managerial and sociological research on personnel selection have repeatedly revealed the significance of emotions when managers make hiring decisions (Imdorf, 2010). A wide variety of customer interactions makes it essential for organizations to recruit and retain a diverse sales staff (Friday, Hightower, & Friday, 2015). Furthermore, sport provides an interesting space to study diversity, because of the wide range of products sold by teams, each of which require a unique set of skills and personality types (Irwin, Sutton, & McCarthy, 2008). When examining sales managers during the hiring process in the professional sport industry, stereotypes, institutional theory, and similarity attraction may help reveal how norms, beliefs, and values influence the existing policies and rituals of organizational hiring practices. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to unmask the hiring biases of sport ticket sales hiring managers.

Twenty-one (N = 21) semi-structured interviews were conducted with sales hiring managers from teams in North America’s four professional sports leagues (Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association, National Football League, and National Hockey League). Three key themes emerged: similarity selection bias, gut feeling, and insular networks. Related to personal traits, Justin, a Vice President for an NBA team with 20 years of sales experience stated, “I’m super aggressive, I’m super competitive…that is what I am looking for.” The majority of hiring sales managers’ expressed the need to trust their gut feelings. For example, Don, a Director of Sales in MLB with 20 years of sales experience stated, “I can tell within 5 minutes of bringing somebody in for an interview if it’s going to be [a] potential fit.”

All participating sport franchises relied primarily on traditional face-to-face one-on-one unstructured interviews to make hiring decisions, even though unstructured interviews have been shown to not always be highly accurate (Slaughter & Kausel, 2013). Our work revealed similarity biases in which hiring managers consistently referred to and compared their own personality traits and personal work experiences. Exploratory in nature, this study was one of the first to unmask the hiring biases of managers within ticket sales departments. Practically, sales hiring managers should consider engaging the assistance of keen recruiter, incorporating assessments, and conducting more trainings. Theoretically, the study extended the personnel selection and sales literature by gaining a better understanding of biases during the sales hiring process.