Enhancing Innovation in Sport Management With Design Thinking: The Case of an Australian Professional Cricket Franchise

Greg Joachim, University of Technology Sydney
Nico Schulenkorf (Advisor), University of Technology Sydney
Stephen Frawley (Advisor), University of Technology Sydney
Katie Schlenker (Advisor), University of Technology Sydney
Adam Cohen (Advisor), University of Technology Sydney

As sport marketplaces become more crowded and competitive, sport organizations will need to seek novel approaches to both traditional and “wicked” problems. Design thinking has gained popularity in the broad field of management as a human-centered approach to generating such innovation. It provides a way for non-design practitioners (such as sport administrators) to incorporate the ostensive (‘thinking’) and performative (‘doing’) dimensions of expert design practice into their own non-design practice in pursuit of organizational innovation (Carlsgren, Rauth, & Elmquist, 2016). As such, design thinking has the potential to enable sport organizations to not only overcome problems, but also identify and capitalize upon opportunities.

However, weaknesses of design thinking have been identified in the literature. Design thinking has been shown to be practically and theoretically disconnected from extant and ongoing design research (Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla, & Çetinkaya, 2013), depriving design thinkers of ongoing advances made in the design field and preventing the development of embedded knowledge that designers generate through experience. Design thinking is also frequently sold as a toolkit (Kimbell, 2011) to be used only situationally, leaving would-be design thinkers unsure of how to implement design thinking into their organizational culture and practice.

The purpose of this study was to develop a conceptual model for adaptable design thinking (aDT) that aims to correct these weaknesses of design thinking in a sport management context. The aDT model provides value to sport management practitioners and design researchers alike by directly linking design theory and research with context-specific design thinking practice. Each discrete design execution is undertaken in three phases: purpose, activity, and execution. In phase one, the design thinking practitioner is prompted to select a purpose for the design activity they are about to undertake. In phase two, a specific design activity is identified by which the organization will approach the purpose identified in stage one. In phase three, the activity is executed in the way that will best achieve the specific purpose selected in phase one. Each member of an organization’s design thinking team will develop design expertise to different extents through use of the aDT model, allowing them to generate their own embedded design knowledge.

The aDT model has been applied and tested through a qualitative case study with the Sydney Sixers, an organization responsible for the management of teams in both Australian professional T20 cricket competitions: the [Men’s] Big Bash League and Women’s Big Bash League. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, artefact and document analysis, and video recording. The Sixers were found to already be engaging in design activities that suited the adoption of aDT into their practice. Against this background, we were able to employ the aDT model in an intervention specifically tailored to their operational context. As a result, design expertise was developed (to differing extents) in all members of the organization. Overall, we demonstrate that design thinking holds practical and theoretical value in sport management and offer suggestions for maximising/leveraging that potential to enable enhanced innovation in future sport management research and practice.