Athlete-Centric Employment Branding During Market Entry

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10-minute lightning talk (including questions)

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This study analyzes how leagues use labor strategies when entering markets occupied by incumbent leagues. Scholars have shown rival leagues use higher salaries to attract athletes (Forster & Pope, 2002; Kahn, 2000), but there are other human resource management strategies available. Therefore, research on new leagues’ human resource strategies is needed to explain how start-up leagues enter labor markets. I used a multiple case study design to analyze four leagues’ labor strategies during market entry.

Literature Review

Since athlete human resources are critical to sport teams and leagues (Gerrard, 2005; McLeod & Nite, 2019; Smart & Wolfe, 2003), strategic human resource management can be used to create and maintain a human resource competitive advantage (Boxall, 1998). For example, Ströbel, Maier, and Woratscheck (2018) demonstrated how organizational support could be used to reduce professional athletes’ turnover intentions. However, there has been less research on how teams and leagues can use strategic human resource management to acquire athletes in the first place. New leagues can use employment branding to attract athletes, which is “a firm’s efforts to promote, both within and outside the firm, a clear view of what makes it different and desirable as an employer” (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2005, p. 501). Leagues are likely to brand their employment using high-involvement work processes, which provide workers control over how they do their job, either at individual or at higher levels (Boxall & Winterton, 2018). They may also brand employment using high-commitment employment practices, which enhance employee commitment to the organization instead of controlling them with rules (Walton, 1985).

Method

I conducted a multiple case study of four leagues that entered North American markets from a rival position: National Women’s Hockey League (NWHL, 2015-), BIG3 (2017-), Alliance of American Football (AAF, 2019), and Premier Lacrosse League (PLL, 2019-). I collected secondary interviews with league executives (n = 29) along with league documents and news articles (n = 206). Data was coded using the Goia methodology (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012) (Guetzkow’s U (= .02) and Krippendorff’s alpha (α = .89) showed good reliability). Codes were analyzed using cross case analysis (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and the extended case method (Burawoy, 1991).

Results and Discussion

The NWHL, BIG3, PLL, and AFF used athlete-centric employment branding to acquire athletes. Leagues offered high-involvement work processes (player-led structures, athlete autonomy, and contingent rewards) and high-commitment employment practices (social justice, health and well-being, competitive pay). Executives also branded leagues as distinctive and favorable employers. Interestingly, executives’ employment branding was directed at the public as well as athletes, raising the prospect of spectator-based employment branding in sport. However, NWHL and AFF had incidents that contradicted their athlete-centric messages, so employment branding may be a superficial promotion rather than a genuine improvement to athletes’ employment. I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of athlete-centric employment branding, along with the potential for a new model of athlete labor where leagues give athletes commitment and involvement as perquisites of employment rather than goals to be won.