Sports Innovation Journal, 2020, 1, 106–119
https://doi.org/10.18060/23944

Examining the Innovation Process of a Graduate Apprenticeship Program for Sport Organizations

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This case study analyzed the innovation processes that led to the adoption of a work-integrated learning program among several sport organizations. A comparative case study analysis was used to deduce the commonly shared determinants between each of the sport organizations. Having an innovation champion was key, but other factors such as lack of resources regarding staffing, the relationship between sport management programs and sport organizations, the ease of contract design, and access to good student candidates were also influential in the innovation process. For sport organizations facing similar issues, this study revealed that the graduate apprenticeship program could provide benefits. For sport management programs, it could provide a stronger relationship with regional sport organizations. This research also extends the body of research regarding the underlying mechanisms by which sport organizations innovate.

Keywords: sport, innovation process, determinants, graduate apprenticeships

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1. Problem Framing

Retaining employees and volunteers, and the decision to recruit technically proficient staff regardless of sport background and experience, are challenges faced by professional sport organizations (Taylor, Doherty, & McGraw, 2015). There are also issues related to staff burnout and workaholism (Huml, Taylor, & Dixon, 2020) and resource constraints for smaller sport organizations that may impact organizational success (Smith, Barnhill, & Sung, 2020). Sport organizations often attenuate staffing issues through student internships, a common component of sport management education featured in 78% of collegiate programs in the US (Eagleman & McNary, 2010). Senior-level sport industry professionals have claimed the internship is the most valuable element of education (Odio, 2013). Despite its academic prevalence, there is some serious concern. The primary controversy is the exploitation of interns as an unpaid or cheap labor force, something of increasing importance as lawsuits are pursued (Cho & Smith, 2015; Gargone, 2008; Schoepfer & Dodds, 2010). There are also concerns about the effectiveness of internships to build career trajectories for undergraduate students as intended (Odio, Sagas, & Kerwin, 2014). Ultimately, sport organizations seek out ways to mitigate staffing shortages at low costs, while avoiding lawsuits, and universities are seeking to provide effective work-integrated learning experiences for their students. This was echoed in the continual conversations with sport organizations participating in this research. Although these relationships began much earlier, in particular over a two-year period, this problem arose in multiple conversations between the professors in the sport management program and the sport organization stakeholders.

Innovation may be useful in solving problems faced by sport organizations (Troilo, Bouchet, Urban, & Sutton, 2016). Innovation has been shown to increase firm value, improve competitive advantage, and increase employee engagement (Anderson, Potocnik, & Zhou, 2014). In sport, the results have been mixed (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Smith et al., 2020; Troilo et al., 2016). The determinants for innovation in sport include innovation champion, organizational attitudes and design, and external forces. However, many sport organizations remain hesitant to innovate. This is perhaps due to a variety of factors, including lack of motivation for seeking out competitive advantage, perception of risk outweighing the benefit, or even the league's structure itself as monetarily cooperative (Wolfe, Wright, & Smart, 2006). For brevity's sake, this paper will focus on determinants of successful innovation adoption and implementation, and the innovation itself.

Any sport manager dealing with resource constraints or changing labor laws could find value in this staffing idea. As sport attempts to understand its potential future in a post-COVID world, more sport organizations will deal with resource

constraints. Whether it be losing gate revenue with empty stadiums (e.g., English Premier League) or suspension of match play due to positive tests (e.g., Orlando Pride), this uncertain revenue could have a long-lasting impact. So how and why did this innovative idea get formulated, adopted, and implemented? The purpose of this paper was to analyze the innovation process that led to the adoption of a graduate apprenticeship (GA) program by several sport organizations in need of mitigating staffing shortages. Not only will sport organizations that face similar staffing issues to the organizations presented in this article benefit from the findings of this study, but so too will sport organizations more broadly pursuing innovation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Work-Integrated Learning and Sport Management

Odio (2013) suggested the internship is a mechanism by which to increase the relevance of the sport management degree. Indeed, there is evidence the internship remains a vital part of the sport management educational experience (Gargone, 2008; Odio, 2013). However, as pointed out in this article, the internship process is ripe with issues related to legality and efficacy (Cunningham, Sagas, Dixon, Kent, & Turner, 2005; Gargone, 2008; Odio et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2006; Schoepfer & Dodds, 2010). Work-integrated learning is when a student is simultaneously learning at a higher education setting while also being employed or volunteering with a relevant organization. Degree apprenticeship programs, one avenue of work-integrated learning, is defined as a student being enrolled in a degree program at a university, while also being employed as an apprentice at an outside organization (Bravenboer, 2016). In programs abroad, such as the degree apprenticeships in the UK, Fleming and Haigh (2017) found among all stakeholders there was a perception of neither the workplace, nor the university being a more dominant learning environment for the participating students, and thus found benefit in learning from both environments. This more integrative, long-term approach to learning tended to strengthen the connection between learning and doing (Fleming & Haigh (2017). This is a much different design than the final-semester internship approach more common in sport management in the US, which has had mixed success in helping students prepare for the sport industry (Martin, Fleming, Ferkins, Wiersma, & Coll, 2010).

2.2. Innovation Process Model and Determinants for Sport Organizations

To begin, the term *innovation* for this paper includes an idea, process, or product that is both new and useful to the unit of measure (Anderson et al., 2014). A commonly used innovation process framework in sport management (Greenhalgh, Dwyer, & Biggo, 2014; Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012) is the Damanpour and Schenider (2006) model detailing three stages of the innovation process: initiation, adoption decision, and innovation implementation. The initiation phase includes problem recognition, generation of solutions, and consideration of possible innovations. Then in the adoption phase, the organization evaluates a proposed innovation and makes a decision of whether or not to accept it. The last stage, implementation, consists of modification, preparation, and distribution of the innovation to its intended users. Identified determinants for successful sport organizational innovation include the innovation champion, organizational attitude, external communication, and linkages, among others.

For example, the innovation champion is an individual committed to ensuring the development and success of an innovation (see Greenhalgh et al., 2014; Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Winand & Anagnostopoulos, 2017). Greenhalgh et al. (2014) found the innovation champion for a new NFL mobile app pushed transformation at the managerial level toward higher risk taking and a more receptive attitude toward innovation. When an innovation champion is not present, the innovation process may more likely be abandoned if problems arise. In terms of organizational attitude, for instance, favoring of newness in nonprofit sport organizations has resulted in knowledge creation/appropriation and innovation among staff members (Winand, Scheerder, Vos, & Zintz, 2016). When innovations were successful, they had a multiplier effect in building confidence in change (Winand & Anagnostopoulos, 2017). Motivation also plays a key role in determining whether a sport organization engages in innovative behavior. Due to significant competition between different kinds of sports, sport organizations are motivated to innovate to satisfy the need of maintaining and extending market share (Ratten, 2016). Organizational design is another determinant of innovation among sport organizations. Examples include organizational capacity and simple design (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012) and informal structures and strategic consensus due to few actors (Nordin & Svensson, 2007).

Involved and interested external parties (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012) and external communication (Greenhalgh et al., 2014) are also important. Related to higher education, Gerke (2016) found industry-university linkages to be beneficial for sport innovations. Inter-organizational relationships play a role as determinants of sport innovation. For example, inter-organizational citizenship

behavior (ICB) boosted innovation by managers employing constructive interactional approaches between firms (Gerke, Dickson, Desbordes, & Gates, 2017). Nordin and Svensson (2007) also determined public-private relationships and joint risk-taking had a positive impact on the level of innovation at a ski resort. In short, external environmental entities are useful to sport organizations by generating new ideas and solving problems with resources the sport organizations otherwise might not have. Other potential determinants in sport include uncertainty, organizational focus, radicalness, magnitude, and pervasiveness in the adoption and implementation phases (Wolfe et al., 2006). Seifried, Katz, and Tutka (2017) also found the seriousness of the exogenous shock, competency, and compatibility of technology, available resources, isomorphism, and geography as mediators, or determinants, of the innovation process for sport organizations.

This article aims to provide a framework for sport organizations and sport management programs to produce their own solutions rather than providing a simple description of our idea to solve our identified problem. Therefore, rather than providing a copy-paste manual for practitioners and sport management programs in creating GA programs, we aim to also describe the innovation process by which it was created. Understanding the possible factors affecting the innovation process will likely improve efficiency and strengthen outcomes.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

The sport organizations included in this study were a motorsport facility (MSF), Double-A baseball organization (DBO), and a Rookie League baseball organization (RBO). The university, through which the GA program was facilitated, was located in the Southeast United States. The sport organizations included made up the entirety of organizations who had utilized the GA program through the university at the time of this study. A member of the university identified stakeholders from each of the sport organizations who could provide information pertinent to the innovation processes that led to the implementation of the GA program at their respective organizations. This university member was also a stakeholder due to their role in the innovation processes for each of the sport organizations. References to the participants will be done through the pseudonyms listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Stakeholder Pseudonyms and Corresponding Positions

Pseudonym	Position
Bert	General Manager of Motorsport Facility
Madison	Senior Director of Human Resources of Motorsport Facility
Roger	Vice President of Double-A Baseball Organization
Vincent	General Manager of Rookie League Baseball Organization
Nora	Sport Management Program Coordinator and Assistant Professor at the University

3.2. Data Collection

Interviewees were asked, in semi-structured interviews, how the GA program was initiated and to narrate how it came to fruition for their organization, to allow them to freely express views (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Additionally, they were asked why they agreed to the program, their perceived risks and benefits of the program, and how the program aligned with their organization's goals and missions. Questions were created during the interviews to expand upon topics, per the semi-structured format. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.3 Analysis

A case study approach was chosen as outlined by Yin (2003) to maintain a focus on "why" and "how" questions; an inability to manipulate the behaviors of stakeholders; coverage of contextual conditions because of their relevance to the phenomenon under study; and ambiguous boundaries between phenomenon and context. Thematic analysis was conducted to uncover common determinants shared between the sport organizations (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Similar to Hoeber and Hoeber (2012), the innovation process model was used as a framework for the themes in coding the interviews. Emergent themes for the passages were determined and then categorized a priori by type of determinant (i.e. managerial, organizational, or environmental). Further categorization occurred by which the identified determinants were resolved into the phases of initiation, adoption, or implementation. Finally, the common determinants between the cases were distinguished and analyzed. In brief, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What common determinants influenced the innovation processes for the sport organizations?

RQ2: When during the three stages did these determinants influence the innovation process toward or hindering successful completion?

4. Results and Discussion

The following sections analyze the common determinants for each innovation process phase, condensed in Figure 1.

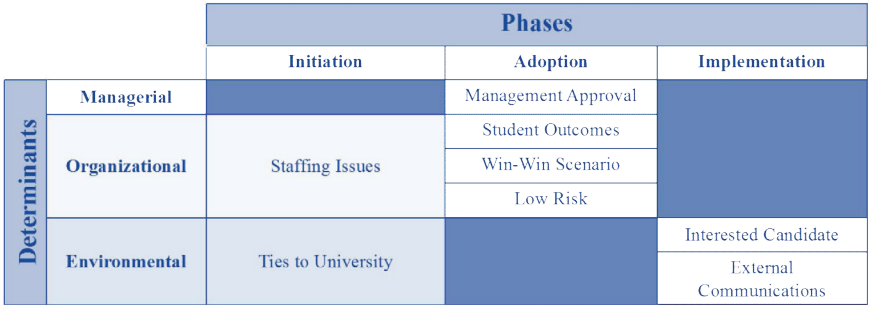

Figure 1. Common innovation determinants and their corresponding phases commonly found across the sport organizations that implemented the graduate apprenticeship program.

4.1. Initiation

This phase included recognizing a problem and idea generation for that problem. The common determinants were staffing issues and ties to the university.

4.1.1. Organizational determinants

The organizational determinant of staffing issues was expressed uniquely in each of the organizations. At the MSF, the staffing issues were related to a data overload for its newly created research division, for which it needed assistance to process the data but could not afford to bring on a new full-time employee, according to Nora. For the DBO, there was a corporate sales position that the organization was struggling to fill, which Roger described as "… a tough spot to get qualified folks." The RBO was trying to maintain consistent staff, but struggled to do so because it was unable financially to hire full-time staff. Vincent commented on this saying, "… we're not going to hire a full-time staff of three, four, five, or six people here and go full time, pay benefits, and do all that kind of stuff." Most importantly, the staffing issues for each of these organizations formed the problem for which the GA innovation was developed to solve.

4.1.2. Environmental determinants

Each of the sport organizations had ties to the university in some way before the initiation of the innovation. For the MSF, Bert described how his organization relied greatly on the university's programs to put on company's events.

According to Nora, Roger from the DBO had taken an interest in "being in the classroom and being involved with our program" by speaking to her sales classes regularly. Lastly, Vincent from the RBO was a former student of the university and was familiar with the staff of the sport management program. An impact of this determinant was the provision of a connection between these sport organizations and the university, supporting Gerke's (2016) conclusion that industry-university linkages benefit sport innovations. Additionally, Nora was linked to the initiations of the GA through her self-described "relational-type" personality that carried into her perceived role as the lead salesperson for the innovation. Considering Hoeber and Hoeber (2012) suggested having involved and interested parties as an environmental determinant, Nora's influence on the innovation processes supports this contention.

In fact, Nora and Roger's continued working partnership was the instigator for this idea. Despite its prevalence in the UK, Germany, and even within the domestic medical field, Nora had no previous awareness of these programs. As she put it, "That initial conversation was all about problem solving. Over lunch, talking to Roger about issues they were having that we maybe could help with. Then saying, 'I wonder if we could …'" Roger and Nora sat down over lunch to talk about the MSF's problems. Nora wanted to see how the sport management program could help. One problem was a summer undergraduate intern that Roger wanted to continue with them. However, the student was graduating and Roger did not have the resources to hire the student full-time. The student had expressed interest in going to graduate school, so Nora, being the graduate coordinator, sought out advice from the graduate school about potential options. The graduate school alerted her to its previous contracts in the medical field, and that it handles all the human resources aspects of these student placements. The organization essentially only had to sign a contract and write the check. Nora went back to Roger with the details and cost. For both Nora and Roger—the idea generators of this program—the idea was simply a way to solve a very specific problem in that moment in time. As Nora put it, "it was not a profound process to get to this idea. I'm sorry it's not a sexier story." It was not until after it was initially adopted by the MSF that Nora saw its potential for other sport organizations dealing with staffing issues and the short-term nature of internships.

4.1.3. The graduate apprenticeship idea

The idea helped answer this problem through creatively extending a university's graduate assistant contract to outside sport organizations. A similar program exists at the University of South Florida's Sport Management program with a year-long paid co-op experience where students attend class two days a week and work for local sport organizations three days a week. However, in this program,

students work for two years for an organization and attend class simultaneous online through asynchronous means. Graduate students would perform 20 hours of weekly work for a particular sport organization, were full-time students of an online master's sport management program, and received the benefit of paid tuition and the standard university stipend. As a result, the sport organizations were able to utilize students at a fraction of the cost of a full-time employee and students gained experience in the workplace for two years.

4.2. Adoption

This phase included evaluating a proposed innovation and deciding to accept it or not. The common determinants were management approval, student outcomes, the win-win scenario, and perception of low-risk.

4.2.1. Program adoption details

The details were ironed out in a constant conversation between Nora and Roger, and Nora and the graduate school office and the office for research. A student could be chosen by the sport organization for a one-year contract, with the verbal agreement for a second year, contingent upon the student's performance. The sport organization was in communication with Nora, the graduate coordinator, about the requirements of admission to the graduate program. Therefore, the sport organizations sought out undergraduate students who would at least meet the minimum requirements for admission. While the student applied for admission, the contract was drafted by the university's office of research and grants, due to its previous experience, then reviewed by the MSF's lawyers. The student was subject to all university graduate assistantship policies and procedures. Once the student was chosen and accepted to the graduate program, the graduate coordinator treated their hiring similar to the four graduate assistants the program had itself. She oversaw their GA contract with the university's central human resource department, which processes all graduate assistantships. Also, any financial or process issues the students had were first brought to the graduate coordinator, not their sport organization supervisor. Payment to the graduate apprentices was the same as any other in-house GA, going through the university's payroll.

4.2.2. Managerial determinants

In the adoption phase, there was one managerial determinant present in each of the cases, which was management approval. For the MSF, Bert "was instantly intrigued with the idea but wasn't necessarily sold on it," according to Nora, because of his concern over possible HR issues that could arise. However, he ultimately approved the GA program and agreed to push it forward. For the DBO,

Roger brought the GA proposition to his director of ticket sales and then his boss. Roger described their reactions as, "From a budget standpoint they loved it. Because it's the opportunity to get a dedicated employee. Technically for a quarter of the salary." Roger received overwhelming approval from upper management to take on the GA program. In the case of the RBO, Vincent stated, "So, when the whole idea of 'Do we want to do this,' came up for me it was like, 'Absolutely, I don't want to lose Erica and I don't want to lose Randy.'" Similar to the DBO, one of his main justifications was that it made sense from a financial standpoint, since the GA cost less than a full-time employee. Considering the GA program needed management approval in order to be adopted by the sport organizations, this was a necessary and limiting determinant for the innovation processes.

4.2.3. Organizational determinants

There were two organizational determinants that affected the innovation process in the adoption phase. These consisted of student outcomes, the win-win scenario, and perception of low risk. With regard to the influence of his organization on student outcomes, Bert stated, "How do we use it to benefit those students that are coming out of [the university] that can learn something here and that can help them not only learn and grow? It can help their resume. It can maybe help them get their foot in the door somewhere else." For the DBO, Roger described how he thought students have a tough time relating to full-time jobs after graduating and that the GA program would give them a realistic perspective of the workplace, which would help their careers by knowing what to expect. When referring to his current GAs, Vincent claimed, "Hey, we've got a family here and we want to keep our family tight." He expressed that he wanted to help them get their graduate degrees and move them along through the process of having a career in the sport industry. This common notion of responsibility to bettering the outcomes of students demonstrated the organizations' benevolent attitude toward students and increased their willingness to adopt the GA program.

Tying into this perceived responsibility was the win-win scenario. Stakeholders from each of the sport organizations expressed how they felt as though they were getting the benefits of an employee, while furthering the career path of the students, thus creating a situation where all sides received substantial benefits. Nora also held the belief that the GA program was a win-win situation, claiming, "I do feel like the experiences in the network, in the education, are equally as valuable as that paycheck in the work they are receiving." While the process involved her supervision of their contracts, Nora felt it was not an undue burden. The betterment of student outcomes in conjunction with cheaper labor for the sport organizations created an enticing and convincing win-win scenario.

Lastly, the perception of low risk impacted the adoption of the GA program. Bert claimed the risk of the GA program was the potential of getting students who failed at their assigned tasks. However, he followed that so long as they gave forth effort and were "… humble, hungry, and smart," his organization could find use from them. Thus, the risk would be lessened. Roger stated, "To be honest, I don't really see one," when asked about the potential risk of taking on GAs. Lastly, Vincent described how the DBO had shown the GA program could work for its type of organization, which provided precedent and a positive perception toward the innovation. The notion of the GA program carrying low risk for the sport organizations likely eased doubts of its potential when the adoption decisions were made.

4.3. Implementation

This phase consisted of modifying, preparing, and distributing the innovation. The common determinants were interested candidate and external communications. Notably, the only common determinants found were environmental.

4.3.1. Environmental determinants

The first environmental determinant was finding an interested, qualified candidate. For the MSF, this was a current intern who was trained, had developed relationships with the staff, and was interested in research and motorsports. For the first GA at the DBO, Nora recommended a student who was interested in working in baseball, and doing sales in particular, thus taking on the difficult-to-fill corporate sales position mentioned previously. For the RBO, Vincent described the interest from his GAs, who were former interns, as follows, "It says a lot about these two kids. They want to be here. And they want to get their master's and all that good stuff too, but they wanted to be here." Without interested candidates, the program could not exist, and thus is a limiting determinant in the implementation phase.

The second environmental determinant was external communications, specifically meaning the communication between the adopting organizations and the university. Vincent stated, "It's just a marriage that has to work and there has to be consistent and constant communication," from which he further claimed that without an open line of communication between him and Nora, issues would likely arise. The latter was substantiated when discovering that the MSF no longer utilized the GA program because of a breakdown in communication. Madison explained that the university had not notified the MSF of potential GA candidates for several years. A lack of external communication seemingly contributed to the MSF ceasing implementation of the GA program. Finally, Roger suggested that a network with the university notifying him of potential candidates would be an

effective way to maintain the program. These instances supported Greenhalgh et al.'s (2014) assessment that external communication is an influential determinant for sport innovation.

5. Conclusion

The thematic analysis revealed several influential determinants that led to the implementation of a GA program at several sport organizations. In the initiation phase, the common determinants of staffing issues for the sport organization and strong relationship with the sport management program impacted both problem identification and idea generation, with a singular individual, Nora, playing a key role. This echoes previous work regarding the innovation champion (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012). The adoption phase was affected by management approval, student outcomes, the win-win scenario, and perception of low risk. This belief in the student outcomes of the program could make this program supersede previous sport industry's belief that the internship is the most important aspect of a sport management education, should it be implemented more broadly (Odio, 2013). Without management approval, the GA program would have ceased to continue, a limiting determinant. Student outcomes, win-win scenario, and perception of low risk were each used as positive arguments in favor of adopting the GA program. Lastly, lack of interested students would have disallowed the GA program from being implemented, and external communications was found to affect the continued implementation of the GA program, similar to Greenhalgh et al.'s (2014) findings.

Practically, the common determinants such as staffing issues or ties to university could be useful in diffusing the GA innovation. For example, sport organizations that have staffing issues and ties to a local university could be identified as ideal candidates for implementing the GA innovation. With the potential change in labor laws related to internships, the GA-type role could be a beneficial "win-win" for organizations seeking to fill that gap. Constant conversation between sport management programs and industry could result in similar programs or even more exciting innovations.

In terms of the innovation framework, the evidence in this paper suggests practitioners and educators should develop long-term relationships. Nora spent time going to lunch with regional sport practitioners, getting to know them as people, and building trust and context-specific knowledge. Then that trust and knowledge translated into problem-solving sessions, producing useful outcomes. Practitioners should value sport management programs as avenues for problem solving due to campuses' cross-discipline setting, academic training in critical thinking, and particularly for more teaching-focused institutions, a student-centered approach that could provide high-quality young talent. The innovation

process does not have to be formal, as seen in this research, but time spent problem-solving with practitioners and academics could result in unique solutions for the sport industry.

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