

Building stronger sports clubs

Making or buying volunteer efforts

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Empowering
volunteers



Governing sports clubs

Sports clubs in Europe are important organizations for the fulfilment of the pastime of many European citizens. In total, a number of around 50 million EU-citizens aged above 15 years (12%) are member in a sports club (Eurobarometer, 2014). Although there is much variety between the sports clubs in all European countries, some central elements are also present. All sports clubs that are present in Europe have 1) voluntary membership, 2) orientation towards the interests of members, 3) democratic decision-making structure, 4) voluntary work, 5) autonomy, 6) a non-profit orientation and 7) solidarity (Heinemann & Horch, 1981; Ibsen, 1992). This means that these clubs can be considered as very social organizations: everybody present in the club is supposed to be an equal member and decision making is based upon the 'one member one vote' principle. However, this does not mean that clubs remain without organizational leaders or organizational management. In fact, the members that are in the board of the club appear to have a very important role in the continuity of these organizations.

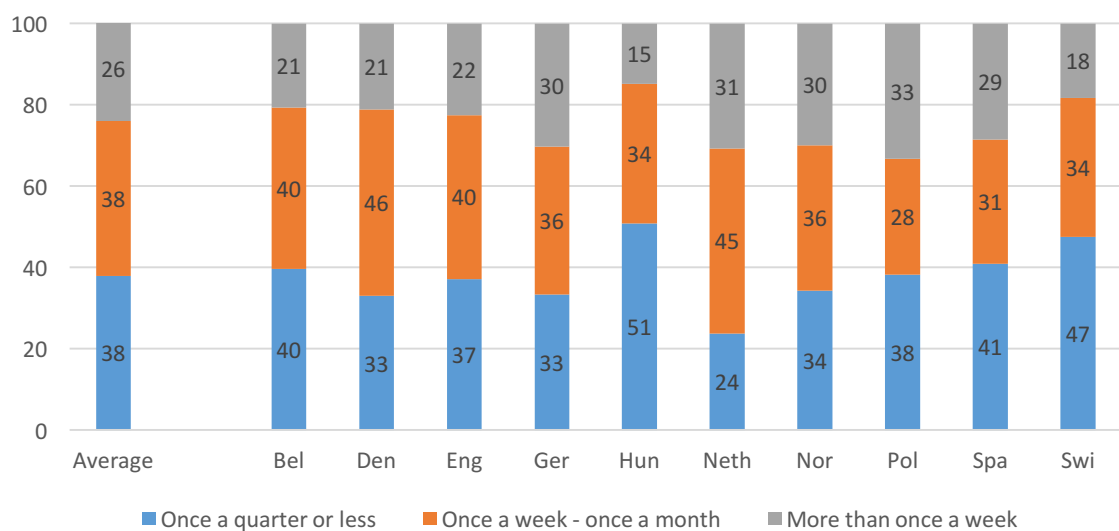
It goes without saying that the role of board members is getting more important as well. In times of emerging complexity because of a number of societal developments, it becomes crucial to show leadership and to set the tone for the sport club. That way, clubs can still pursue their ultimate goal: continuity of the club. Continuity is, in the absence of clear organizational goals such as profit maximization, the most important objective in sports clubs. After all, any sport club is aimed at survival in the long-run. Some clubs might also pursue other goals, such as sporting success or supporting sociability, but this very much varies from club to club.

In order to reach continuity, board members need to have a good understanding of their club and they need to show vision in the way the clubs should develop. Dutch research (Van der Roest et al., 2017) shows that board members need to invest in getting to know their members and sharing responsibilities with them. However, a lot of members of boards in sports clubs generally have too little time to engage in these strategic activities. Most of the time, they are too busy with administrative tasks that have to be carried out. Welch and Long (2006) showed that club secretaries are by far the board members who put most hours in their clubs. Another problem concerning the burden of administrative tasks is that these tasks provide little visibility in the club. Only few people are aware of the tasks that are performed in the background of the club's management (Cuskelly, Hoye & Auld, 2006). This gives the volunteers who operate these tasks little recognition from other members in the club. This is troublesome, as recognition is known to be one of the key motivators for volunteers to be active (Egli, Schlesinger & Nagel, 2014).

An important development that might hinder a lot of sports clubs is a trend towards 'episodic' volunteering, in which volunteers contribute less continuous time to a club, but dedicate their time in small blocks of time, showing less attachment to the organization (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). In Europe, a lot of countries are already dealing with many volunteers who contribute once a quarter or less (see Figure 1). This is not necessarily a problem for sports clubs, as the total time of volunteering is not decreasing. However, it does make it more difficult to organize the key administrative tasks that require continuous attention from core volunteers. Moreover, as more and more volunteers dedicate their time episodically, "the increased burden of organizing more volunteers, each giving less time, falls on the remaining 'core' volunteers (Cuskelly, 2005)." (Nichols, 2016, p. 15).

For sports clubs, a re-orientation on their board roles and board activities therefore seems needed. If boards are looking to pursue the ultimate goal of continuity of their organizations, it seems fruitful to redefine tasks and to see what tasks are crucial to the club. As becomes clear, clubs seem to have an increasing need for more strategically-oriented board members or volunteers. It is, then, important to get them into these positions and to have enough time to invest in the club's strategy. In order to fulfill the administrative tasks that are still needed to be done, clubs might need to 'outsource' some of the volunteer work. To do so, they first need to define which tasks are crucial to keep in-house and which tasks can be placed outside the club. In other words: volunteering can be broken down into 'make-or-buy-decision' (Miles & Snow, 1984). This paper deals with the question how these decisions can be defined in sports clubs and it offers solutions to

Figure 1. Frequency of volunteering in sports clubs in ten European countries (n=13,082)



Source: Van der Roest, Van der Werff & Elmoose- Østerlund (2017)

Volunteers: a resource based view

Many initiatives aimed at the development of sports clubs focus on the opportunities and threats that might occur in the environment of clubs (e.g. Open club, Sportplus, etc.), but less attention is paid to the unique attributes different clubs have. In what structures do clubs operate and who are the volunteers in the clubs? These elements might be at least of equal importance as the environmental elements surrounding clubs, such as the neighbourhood or the demographic development the club has to deal with.

Barney (1991) developed a view on the resources that might give firms a *sustained competitive advantage*. He sought to explain why certain resources (that is: "all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, etc." (Barney, 1991, p. 101) give firms the opportunity to develop a *value creating strategy* that cannot be duplicated by other firms. He argued that in order to develop such a strategy, the resources of any firm must be **valuable, rare, imperfect imitable and non-substitutable**. Even though clubs might not be interested in competitive advantages in the traditional way, it is interesting to see how clubs can create value for their members that cannot

be found in other clubs. After all, these value creating strategies can provide any club a unique position that gives them the opportunity to fulfil their most important objective: continuity of the club.

Following Barney, any club's resources should be valuable, rare, imperfect imitable and non-substitutable. According to Barney, resources of the club can be divided into three categories: physical capital resources (location, buildings, equipment, etc.), human capital resources (specific training, experience, relationships) and organizational capacity resources (structure, planning, systems). For sports clubs, their physical capital resources and their organizational capacity resources are pretty fixed. It is not very easy to change their location or their buildings because most clubs are dependent on local governments in this respect. Moreover, the equipment used for practicing sports also provide little opportunity to improve value creating strategies that cannot be replicated. Organizational capacity resources are most of the times determined by national sport federations. They prescribe structures, controlling mechanisms and systems that should be used by clubs.

However, the human capital resources in sports clubs do provide clubs with opportunities to become unique. In fact, the people in the club are the most central element of what makes a club popular or successful. Therefore, it is of great importance that volunteers in any club can dedicate their time and attention to the activities that matter in the club. This would provide clubs with the opportunity to make these volunteers to become a 'sustainable competitive advantage'. In order to do so, volunteers must:

- provide **value** in the organization. Barney suggests that a view on opportunities and threats surrounding organizations does not give enough information on the way organizations deal with them. The organization must have the capabilities or the capacity to exploit opportunities or to neutralize threats. For volunteers, this means that they should dedicate themselves to tasks that are beneficial to the organization.
- have the ability to become a mix of people that are **rare**. Everybody has its own capacities and own values. However, this does not make all human capital resources unique. Only when a mix of volunteers provides synergy that is very specific to the club, this makes this group of volunteers a rare group.
- be **imperfect imitable**. When volunteers and other members in the club have dedicated their time and support for the club for a number of years, a specific organizational culture emerges. This culture can be very specific to the club and might, when the requirements of value and rareness are also met, give the club a value creating strategy and competitive advantage over other sport organizations.
- not be easily replaceable, or **substitutable**, by other forms of resources. In other words, if other forms of resources or capabilities can replace the efforts volunteers make, these efforts might still have value for a club, but they do not provide unique value creation. And this is, actually, the key question in this white paper. In order to get the volunteers of any club to perform tasks that can create sustained competitive advantage, they have to concentrate on the tasks that are central to that very club.

Applying the above principles to human capital resources, Lepak & Snell (1999) defined human resources using two dimensions. With these dimensions, it becomes apparent how to make make-or-buy-decisions regarding human capital in organizations. First, human capital may have a high or a low strategic value for the organization. This value is organization-specific and it must help any specific organization to neutralize threats from their environment or to exploit opportunities. Strategically valuable staff can

thus be defined as the human capital that can “contribute to the competitive advantage or the core competence of the [organization]” (Lepak & Snell, 1999, p. 35). Second, human capital resources can be judged from the perspective of uniqueness. For sports clubs, it is important not to only recruit talents on the field, but also in the organization of the club. The higher skilled the board members within the club are, the higher the chance that they are able to actively engage in the club’s strategy (cf. Van der Roest, 2015). However, unique talents are not necessarily needed for every volunteer position. For example, volunteers running the bar do not require highly specific skills. Their availability is more important than their competences.

Quadrant 1: Key volunteers

The volunteers in this quadrant form the core of the organization. They provide a strategic value in the club, as they are primarily concerned with strategical matters in the club. Moreover the mix of people within this quadrant have unique skills that fit within the club (high degree of club-specificity). It is likely that the people involved in these positions have a long standing in the club. Their team-based production has developed over time as they have become socialized in the club. In the words of Barney (1991), their production is socially complex and causal ambiguous (cf. Lepak & Snell, 1999). This could have negative consequences for clubs as well, as the volunteers within this quadrant are difficult to replace.

Quadrant 2: sport volunteers

Sport volunteers, such as coaching staff are widely available in the ‘volunteer market place’ and coaches are, even at an amateur level, sometimes considered as paid volunteers (Cuskelly, Hoye & Auld, 2006). Their contribution is very valuable to the organization, because they are directly involved in the core business of clubs, that is the sport activity itself. However, their activities are not very unique to a specific sports club: they could also offer their activities to any other club in the same type of sports. Because coaches can quite easily switch between clubs, clubs are hesitant to invest in them. Offering them courses to develop their skills, makes them more attractable to other clubs, which can pose a threat to their current clubs. Therefore, when clubs do invest in them, coaches are sometimes offered contracts with obligatory stays for multiple seasons.

Quadrant 3: worker volunteers

The volunteers in quadrant 3 often form the backbone of any sports club. These volunteers make sure all operational tasks within the club are performed. Yet, their value in a more strategical sense is low. They do not directly interfere with the club’s core activities on the sports field. Moreover, their uniqueness is low as well. Because they are involved in operational tasks, these tasks are most of the times lower-skilled tasks, such as cleaning the pavilion or preparing the grounds. Within this quadrant, a lot of affective and normative commitment for the club is typically found. The tasks performed can be quite repetitive or even boring, which asks for motivated volunteers.

Quadrant 4: specialized volunteers

The fourth quadrant consists of volunteers who are responsible for specialized duties. These duties have increased over the last two decades as the legal responsibilities for all organizations in society have increased. This is not different for sports clubs (Cuskelly, Hoye & Auld, 2006; Janssens, 2011).

Volunteers within this quadrant thus have important task, but these tasks do not directly benefit the core competence of the club. Rather, their contribution is supportive for the club’s central activities. Their skills can thus be obtained externally, by hiring administrative forces or by co-operating with other clubs. This could be the case by shifting tasks from the club level to the federation level.

One of the problems in volunteer management is the fact that highly skilled volunteers, with plenty of unique qualities perform their tasks in quadrant 4. As the duties in this quadrant have increased over the last years, many skilled volunteers find themselves performing administrative tasks. However, this prevents them from executing key board roles such as working the strategic direction for the club, functioning as a link between board and members and planning for future financial needs in the long run (cf. Cuskelly, Huye & Auld, 2006). Hence, their human capital value for the club remains limited. The next section provides solutions to increase the value of volunteers in sports clubs.

Figure 2. HR Framework for volunteering

Uniqueness of human capital	High	<p>Quadrant 4: specialized volunteers</p> <p>Volunteer roles: Administrators</p> <p><i>HR Strategy: Co-operation, hiring</i></p>	<p>Quadrant 1: key volunteers</p> <p>Volunteer roles: Board members, key coaching staff, coordinators</p> <p><i>HR Strategy: Value-based HR practices</i></p>
	Low	<p>Quadrant 3: worker volunteers</p> <p>Volunteer roles: Bar tenders, cleaners, groundsman</p> <p><i>HR Strategy: affective and normative commitment, material incentives</i></p>	<p>Quadrant 2: sport volunteers</p> <p>Volunteer roles: Coaching staff</p> <p><i>HR Strategy: Obligatory stays, payment</i></p>
		Low	High

Value of human capital

Based on: Lepak & Snell (1999)

Applying the HR framework: make-or-buy?

In order to improve the value of highly skilled volunteers, it is necessary to move volunteers from quadrant 4 into quadrant 1. After all, these volunteers are already highly skilled. This means they have to take up a more central position in the club, moving into strategically important positions. Earlier on, I already argued that too many board members find themselves in doing too much administrative work. Because we have now found that these tasks are important, but provide little value to the organization, it is obvious to see that specialized tasks should be obtained from outside the club. This will cost the club money, as these workers should be hired from outside the club. However, in the long run it might give the club a competitive advantage. After all, clubs with a higher proportion of key volunteers should be better able to define their own strategies, neutralize threats and exploit opportunities.

ICT alternatives to specialization

To avoid the high costs that are involved in obtaining specialized services from workers outside of the organization, sports clubs might also look to invest in ICT systems that can replace efforts that are now made by volunteers. In the last years, the possibilities of ICT solutions for administrative tasks have improved greatly. From emailing members with one simple address list instead of delivering letters to each members to advanced member relationship systems in which volunteer tasks can be assigned to volunteers: there are a lot of possibilities and these modes of communicating can be of great use in attracting and retaining volunteers (Watt, 2003). However, the research on ICT use in sports clubs is quite limited (Østerlund, 2013). The research that has been done provides promising results: Gulbrandsen (2009) and Østerlund (2013) both found positive correlations between the use of electronic modes of communication and recruitment of volunteers. Østerlund (2013, p. 160) thus recommends the use of electronic communication with members and volunteers for recruitment and retention of volunteers, among other recommendations.

Recommendations for easier recruitment of volunteers

- (1) Involve organization members in major decisions
- (2) Delegate decision-making and tasks across multiple committees and individuals
- (3) Recognize volunteers by granting them perks and material incentives
- (4) Formulate a specific strategy describing how to recruit volunteers
- (5) Employ electronic modes of communicating with members and volunteers.

Østerlund (2013, p. 160)

In order to make optimal use of electronic communication, national sports federations play a pivotal role. They are in the position to decide on an overarching technological system for sports clubs.

The role of national sports federations

National sports federations have an important role in the governance of voluntary sport clubs at the local level. On the one hand, they can support clubs with policies and with direct support at the organizational level. On the other hand, the relationship between national sports federations can also be troublesome, and pressures on clubs might arise from policies at the national level (Nichols et al., 2005; Van der Roest, Vermeulen & Van Bottenburg, 2014). Because national sports federations operate at the national level, they can decide more effectively on make-or-buy-decisions than local voluntary clubs can do. First, national sports federations are equipped with a large number of professional staff, which gives them an advantage in knowledge levels. Second, because national sports federations represent a large number of organizations, they can negotiate and obtain purchasing advantages for clubs. This changes the make-or-buy-decision at stake.

In order to obtain the best solution for clubs, national sports federations need to stay in close contact with clubs. Research has shown that the professional knowledge gap between national sport federations and local clubs can result in resistance from volunteers (Nichols et al., 2005; Thibault, Slack & Hinings, 1991). Rational decisions can then end up being counter-productive. This means national sport federations need to listen carefully to volunteers and attempt to empower them in their work.

Conclusion

Voluntary sports clubs play an important role in delivering sports for all. In Europe, around 50 million citizens participate in these volunteer-led organizations. In order to reach continuity in an emerging complex environment, clubs need to invest in their volunteers and make sure their volunteers can fulfil the role in which they are most valuable to the club. One way to analyse a club's volunteer roles is to classify them in four quadrants. This way, it becomes visible what volunteers' unique qualities are and what their strategic value for the club's central processes is. When the HR-framework is applied to volunteers, it is clear that the value of highly skilled volunteers can be improved. One way to do so is considering make-or-buy-decisions. Clubs should increasingly ask themselves whether they want volunteers on a job or they want to obtain human capital from outside the club in any way. An important substitute for volunteers are ICT alternatives. ICT solutions can save volunteers time and support volunteers in their work. Research has shown that clubs who use ICT solutions have shown higher recruitment and retention numbers for volunteer work. Further research should focus on specific ways in which ICT solutions might be used in clubs to support and empower volunteers.

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