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Research Article

Human Resource Challenges in the Sports Industry: Recruitment, Retention, and Talent Development Narrative Review

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Abstract

Across many segments of its workforce, the sports industry faces unique challenges with recruitment, retention, and talent development. This is, in part, due to the visibility and sensitivity of sports-related occupations to cultural, emotional, and seasonal fluctuations, and the performance of employees at all levels. We conduct a narrative review of recent literature from 2020 to 2025 related to these three challenges. We found evidence in support of competitive, informal, short-term, and irregular employment systems, high commitment and high-identification labour forces from a variety of sports-related organisational segments. We postulate that these competitive systems tend to attract high-commitment employees, but over the long term can lead to normalized work over the long term, limited labor mobility, increased exclusion, burnout, and turnover. We also examine the recent research related to the work-life balance and many of the challenges from abuse, particularly bullying, and gender discrimination, poor job design, and the unregulated use of artificial intelligence and HR analytics within the industry. We recommend shifting from informal, reactive staffing systems to transparent, formal systems of recruitment and onboarding, inclusive career systems, continuous professional development, and well-being safeguards. We offer a strategic, integrative framework that relates the context of the sports industry to specialized HR practices and employee talent.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sport organizations' competition occurs on the field and in commerce and the labor market. Clubs, leagues, governing bodies, athletic departments, academies, event organizations, fitness businesses, and the nascent esports operations involve multiple coaching, sport science, medicine, analytics, administration, and marketing, media, and governance, and technology skills. Research that classifies sport-industry human capital shows that knowledge, networks, and capabilities of the role define the sport's career paths. Consequently, sport organizations have been slow to adapt to the core labor market, which has evolved from systems based on seasonal and informal networks, as well as unpredictable activities and performance.

This means that the sport-related HR challenge is broader than the "search for talented people." Recruitment systems determine the skills and talents of the people that will enter the sport. Retention systems determine the capabilities and skills of the staff over time. Finally, talent development practices of the organizations adapt staff to the new technologies and standards of the labor market. It has been noted that talent management in the sport must be understood in a domain where sport performance and the organizational identity of the sport, as well as the stakeholders and the labor market, define the sport's domain of management.

This review is broader than athlete development since it encompasses employees and professional contributors throughout the sport ecosystem. Talent systems have implications on HR and workforce systems, but the focus is on coaches, officials, sport administrators, analysts, health and performance staff, business employees, and sport managers. The goal of the review is to understand contemporary HR issues on the basis of recruitment, retention, and development; focus on diversity, well-being, job design, and digital transformation; develop strategic responses; and identify the focus of future studies.

2. NARRATIVE REVIEW METHODOLOGY

A specific narrative searching methodology was used to review sport management and HRM literature dated from 2020 to 2025. Search terms included sport HRM; sport workforce; recruitment, retention, and turnover; talent management; job design; and sport officials and coaches' well-being; work-family balance; diversity and gender; employee identity; artificial intelligence; HR analytics; and algorithmic recruitment. Priority was given to authentic and verifiable journal articles. Other reviews, such as systematic and scoping

reviews, provided context for job design and coaches' mental health. Given the review's focus on critical synthesis, it is a narrative review and does not claim to satisfy all the PRISMA guidelines.

3. Theoretical Foundations of HRM in Sport

Here, human capital theory and the resource-based view provide the starting point. Tacit knowledge is extremely important in sport organizations, consisting, for example, of coaching and performance-analysis expertise, knowledge of medical and rehabilitation processes, and knowledge of sponsors and leagues, as well as the knowledge and memory of the organization itself. Weight et al. (2021) show the range of human-capital archetypes in sport, while Hassan et al. (2022) show that, in sport, talent-management systems address attraction, development, deployment and retention, as opposed to a single training intervention. Seen in this way, employee mobility is expensive because the new employee is only recruited after a considerable lapse of time and the relational and contextual knowledge is lost.

Social-exchange and psychological-contract theories describe how and why employees are concerned with how organizations treat them. Employees have a myriad of expectations related to recognition, workload, opportunities for development, job and income security, fairness and reciprocity. In cases where organizations make a minimal effort in line with employees' passion for the sport, and provide weak, if any, support with regard to career progression, the social exchange is perceived as unbalanced. The most recent literature on sport employees and their passion is of great relevance because excessive passion is energetically engaged and may lead to obsessive behavior that in turn facilitates the normalization of excessive work (Oja & Zeimers, 2025). Strong identification with a club, sport or cause can strengthen an employee's attachment and commitment. This may reduce the employee's inclination to challenge inappropriate but deeply engrained behaviors.

Talent management theory brings these concepts into the context of a workforce system. Recruitment should focus on identifying strategically important skills and capabilities. Development should strengthen technical skills and leadership. People should be placed where these capabilities are most valuable during deployment, and retention should safeguard the limited knowledge of employees while providing them with sustainable careers. The example that follows reveals that recruitment, retention, and development must be considered together within the management of human resources, as they cannot be separated.

Table 1. Theoretical frameworks for understanding sports-industry HRM

Framework	Core idea	Sport-industry application	Primary HR implication
Human capital theory	Knowledge and skills are productive assets.	Coaching, analytics, medical, commercial and governance expertise create performance value.	Recruit and develop scarce capabilities; protect knowledge continuity.
Resource-based view	Valuable, rare and difficult-to-copy resources can create advantage.	Tacit know-how, networks and integrated staff capabilities may differentiate organizations.	Build internal capability systems rather than depend only on external hiring.
Social exchange	Perceived support and reciprocity shape attitudes and behaviour.	Recognition, fair workload and manager support influence commitment.	Retention depends on credible organizational support, not passion alone.

Person-organization fit	Value alignment affects attraction and attachment.	Sport identity can strengthen belonging but also normalize sacrifice.	Recruit for fit without creating cultural homogeneity or exclusion.
Psychological contract	Employees hold implicit expectations about the employment relationship.	Career opportunity, development, security and fairness shape trust.	Clarify expectations and follow through on development promises.
Talent management	Strategic roles require integrated attraction, development, deployment and retention.	Sport organizations need pipelines for technical and leadership roles.	Link workforce planning, succession and learning to strategy.

4. Unique Human Resource Characteristics of the Sports Industry

Sport employment is unique in that it attracts a public-facing workforce that is dedicated and committed to a large degree by its irregular hours, unsteady income, seasonal high demand, performance unpredictability, and idiosyncratic work. These traits of sport employment can make job design more challenging, albeit more interesting and rewarding. Loghmani, Sotiriadou, and Doyle's (2024) systematic review demonstrates that, though it is an important area of interest, job design remains largely neglected in sports management scholarship. Typically, job descriptions do not exist and positions are more likely to be shaped by the scheduling of events. This is more likely to occur in sport organizations that are smaller in size.

Sport employees often report strong identification with both the broad sport and their own organizations. This form of identification strengthens resilience and participation in collective action and is made possible by a "calling" orientation (Inoue et al., 2022; Oja et al., 2023). In this context, long work hours become routine. However, the greatest concern becomes the combination of calling and overwork. This scenario causes a notable rise in both burnout and the propensity to leave the job (Huml et al., 2025). To balance calling and overwork, HR systems design meaning and commitment at the expense of the sport's dedication and loyal constituency.

5. Recruitment Challenges

5.1 Scarce Skills and Relationship-Based Labor Markets

Competition for positions in management, coaching, and business roles that exist in sports, adjacent entertainment, and various media and digital technologies creates a challenge to recruit in the industry. Recognized human-capital research suggests the need for more role-specific HR strategies for sports organizations as a result of the archetypical position that sports roles hold in the careers of practitioners. Recruitment for these roles is made much more challenging by informal networks and reputation. When networks are relied on, and referrals are the main source of recruitment, organizations will have little variation in their employee demographic.

5.2 Employer Branding, Fit, and Inclusion

It is common for sports organizations to have strong consumer brands. However, a well-known team brand does not equate to a strong employer brand. Candidates take into consideration the quality of leadership and the location, quality, and work load of their potential job, as well as a variety of other determinants. Recruitment strategies that focus on passion, without communicating the realities of rigid work schedules, and limited career progression creates a psychological-contract gap after entry. Inclusion is yet another strategically challenging area. In their examination of professional sport organizational

cultures, Hindman and Walker (2020) illustrate the obstacles women managers face as a result of embedded sexism. In their work, Piggott and Matthews (2021) argue that adequate formal governance structures and procedures are essential for addressing the gender gap and leadership in sport. These studies suggest that in order to recruit inclusively, more than just diversified advertising is needed. Selection committees, networks, promotion processes, and organization norms need to be examined as well.

5.3 Algorithmic Risk and Digital Recruitment

Utilizing digital tools in recruitment provides organizations with the opportunity to reach a larger audience and more efficiently manage applicants. Artificial intelligence provides assistance in applicant screening and skills matching as well as scheduling and forecasting workforce needs. Human Resource management research emphasizes the danger posed by the use of algorithms and the strong possibility of reproducing unfair discrimination. This is particularly the case when the data underlying an algorithm, the features used by the algorithm, or the criteria used to evaluate the algorithm, are all based on the historical conduct of the workforce. The transformative potential of Artificial Intelligence and other advanced technologies is accompanied by significant governance challenges. These tools should be treated as providing automated rankings rather than neutral facts by employing bias testing, data minimization, and clear accountability and using transparent job criteria and a human review process.

6. Retention Challenges

Retention is influenced by a variety of issues including the workload, security and support, recognition of efforts, leadership, and the emotional meaning of sport work. Flexibility, balance, and boundary management are important because remote work has the potential to disrupt the work-life balance. Sport organizations often have a culture which results in a lack of work-life balance for employees, regardless of their remote work status.

Well-being risks span all occupation groups. Frost et al. (2024), in a systematic scoping review, report mental-health issues for elite-level coaches. Coaches are pressured by performance demands, job insecurity, travel, being in the public eye, and having to take care of the welfare of others. Officials are also under pressure. Downward et al. (2024) indicate referee abuse, quitting intentions, and well-being are interrelated. These studies demonstrate the need for retention strategies designed to improve psychosocial conditions, not just improve pay. A retention strategy that raises pay while keeping the abusive environment, chronic overwork, and job insecurity intact may not be very effective.

Passion and identification also need to be interpreted and understood in a balanced way. Oja and Zeimers (2025) among sport employees, differentiate between harmonious and obsessive passion. Harmonious passion may remain flexible enough to allow for disengagement and engagement with other life spheres; obsessive passion may have the opposite effect. HR leaders should avoid a cultural environment that frames exhaustion as commitment and values permanent unavailability.

7. Talent Development and Career Systems

Talent development in sport should be beyond the level of technical certification. Organizations need to have structured onboarding, mentoring, and role-related learning as well as functional mobility, flexible leadership and management development, and succession planning. Hassan et al. (2022) indicate that talent management in sport is shaped by sport-specific contextual factors, and is an apt example of a value chain view of development (integrated, seamless thinking in respect to talent and strategy). For sport scientists and sport technical specialists, talent management should focus on the specialist continuous professional development, as the fields are fast changing. For managers, development is needed in sport business (i.e., finance, people management, and more).

Career visibility plays an integral role in retention. Where clubs or governing bodies are small, higher-order levels will be few. Hence, career progression cannot depend exclusively on promotion. Lateral career moves, leadership of new initiatives, job enhancement, secondments, mentoring, and skills pathways bring growth without the need for artificial titles. In designing jobs, sport managers should focus more on autonomy, task significance, feedback, and clarity of role (Loghmani, Sotiriadou, & Doyle, 2024). Development should also incorporate succession planning for roles that, if vacant, will inhibit support to athletes and disrupt commercial and regulatory affairs.

Well-Being, Diversity, and the Employee Experience

A talent system that thrives on well-being and inclusion integrates these capabilities into the core of the workforce. In contrast, in the sport sector, these are often cast as welfare peripheral activities. With the sport system's public scrutiny, its unpredictable environments, the work of sport and travel, and the emotional stakes of athletes, sport creates some of the

highest demands on public emotion. In the case of coach mental health, there is also the need for support that is confidential, psychologically safe leadership, balance in workload, and clarity in task and role definitions (Frost et al., 2024). These demands and needs are similar for sport officials and administrators as they face threats of abuse and chronic conflicts.

Diversity is also linked to retention and development. Gendered organizational cultures often challenge women managers (Hindman and Walker, 2020). Empirical work on female sports officials shows that the diversity climate is important in both the sports and workplace environment (Cunningham et al. 2024). In the work of Strode et al. (2024), women coaches face gendered organizational cultures. From these studies, it can be concluded that relying solely on target setting for recruitment is not sufficient. Organizations also need to clearly define the routes for promotion, sponsorship, mentorship, safe reporting, demographically representative decision-making, and measurable results in everyday workplace climate.

Section 9. Digital Transformation of Sports HRM

The coming developments in sport HRM will incorporate people analytics to a greater extent. Workforce dashboards can reveal turnover, skills gaps, staff overtime, absences, and employees' learning needs. Predictive models may support retention initiatives, but their utility will be a function of the data and the quality of the interpretations. In sport, the ethical risks of HR algorithms are more pronounced with small workforces where privacy can be a concern, and where subjective performance ratings are used as training data (Köchling & Wehner, 2020; Vrontis et al., 2022). Excellent governance will incorporate stated data use purposes, proportional data gathering, audits for data and algorithmic bias, data governance, and processes for employees to contest data about them.

Digital learning platforms can further employee development by providing the same learning pathways, irrespective of employee location. However, relationships and difficult conversations with employees cannot be removed from the process. The goal of the strategy is to use data to support augmentation by providing emphasis and consistency while keeping the dominant role of human judgment for context-based decisions.

Table 2. Major HR challenges in the sports industry and strategic responses

HR domain	Major challenge	Underlying mechanism	Organizational consequence	Strategic response
Recruitment	Scarce technical and commercial talent	Competition across sport and adjacent sectors	Vacancies, wage pressure, weak capability fit	Workforce planning, skills-based selection, credible employer branding
Inclusion	Network-driven access and gendered cultures	Informal selection and unequal opportunity structures	Narrow talent pool, reputational and retention risk	Structured selection, diverse panels, transparent promotion criteria
Retention	Overwork, insecurity and irregular schedules	Calling orientation plus event/performance demands	Burnout, turnover and knowledge loss	Workload controls, predictable recovery, manager support, fair contracts
Talent development	Unclear pathways and limited hierarchy	Small structures and reactive training	Stagnation and external mobility	Mentoring, lateral pathways, succession planning, continuous learning
Well-being	Scrutiny, abuse and	High public visibility and	Distress, absence and exit	Psychological safety,

	emotional demand	competitive pressure	intentions	confidential support, anti-abuse protocols
Digital HR	AI bias, privacy and opaque decisions	Historical data and automated scoring	Discrimination, mistrust and governance risk	Human oversight, bias testing, data minimization and explainability

10. Strategic HRM Responses

All workforce strategies in the sports and entertainment industry should begin with workforce planning. First, critical workforce roles along with turnover and capability gaps should be identified alongside the need for flexible workforce planning to meet spikes in demand based on the shift in seasons. Efforts to attract talent should align with clearly defined competencies alongside the use of and reliance on formal structures to mitigate the impact of information asymmetry on workload and career mobility. Connection to sport and the formal and relational aspects of the employment system should be the focus of the socialization and integration of new staff. Longitudinal assessments of retention should focus on the various indicators and patterns of employee workload, engagement, and turnover in place of traditional turnover notification.

Work development systems should include the integration of all the domains of training, leadership, mentoring, and rotations. The objective and documented identification of high-potential talent should be performed periodically to disrupt legacy systems of informal power. Well-being should be assessed and valued as an indicator of the organization's overall health, particularly in high-stakes areas of sport and event management. Digital provisions in people management should be grounded in justice and fairness. Evidence, fairness, the voice of the employee, and the operational context of sport will strengthen the management of people most.

11. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Sport HRM studies are still very much underdeveloped and unbalanced by country, profession, and organizational type. More longitudinal studies are necessary to capture the distinction between event-related strain and burnout, as well as

the role of work design in employee retention. Research into recruitment should consider if formalized methods of personnel selection increase recruitment opportunities outside the traditional applicant pool. Comparative studies are needed in relation to women, disabled people, ethnic minorities, officials, sport-science personnel, and the new esports workforce. Evaluating the use of Artificial Intelligence in recruitment and retention in sport environments should be a central focus, as should the assessment of equity, privacy, and trust in the use of these systems. Finally, the manipulation of work systems, manager learning, and the implementation of mentoring and career programs to positively influence retention and well-being should be the focus of research. This should be prioritized over the extensive use of cross-sectional intention to leave studies.

12. CONCLUSION

The interconnectedness of recruitment, retention, and talent development in the sports industry is evident. With the unique characteristics of the sports industry, including high public visibility, high-performance demands, and the existence of informal career networks, organizations are competing with each other for specialized personnel. While these unique features may result in motivation and a sense of purpose, they may also increase the likelihood of burnout or resignations. The current research calls for a change to a more strategic approach to workforce management. Sports organizations that view interest, enthusiasm, and passion for sports as a complement to fair employment, rather than a substitute, are in a better position to successfully recruit and retain talented workers. The HR challenge for sports organizations is to make fair and reasonable employment systems that allow individuals to develop their skills, and contribute and remain in the same position.

Figure 1. Integrative framework for strategic human resource management in the sports industry



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