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University of Alberta

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Retaining Experience Coaches (2015)

Project Summary

Understanding the factors that influence coach transitions is pertinent. Six themes were identified: 1) interpersonal considerations, 2) work demands, 3) career concerns, 4) positive coaching experiences, 5) seeking opportunities to be more successful and 6) leaving a negative or challenging work environment.

Findings highlight the importance of practitioners and sports organizations providing support to enable coaches to advance their career and also provide better support and strategies to optimize coaches' working environment.

Research methods

Two studies were conducted.

Study One

Participants

Participants were purposefully sampled. In total, 21 coaches (six female and 15 male) from six provinces and various sports participated. Seven of the coaches were current or former full-time coaches, nine of the coaches worked at universities, and five coaches were volunteers. Coaches had between five and 30 years of experience.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on previous literature examining coaching stress and burnout.

Study Two

Participants

In total, 14 coaches from a variety of sports were purposefully sampled based on three criteria: (a) they were current or former full-time coaches; (b) they had experienced at least one transition in their coaching career, and; (c) worked with athletes at a provincial or national level.

Data collection

The interview guide was developed based on the findings of study one and previously reviewed work-environment and coaching literature.

Research results

Interpersonal Considerations

Relationships with supervisor and colleagues: Coaches explained that the extent to which they felt supported and appreciated by their supervisors and colleagues influenced the extent to which they chose to stay in or leave a position.

Relationships with athletes and parents: The quality of relationships with athletes and parents was identified as particularly important in influencing whether coaches remained. Positive relationships between coaches and athletes would encourage coaches to remain in a position.

Work Demands

Workload. Coaches spent considerable time discussing their workload, and for some, this discussion was focused on a perception that their workload was too large.

Work type. Coaches described two types of tasks in their jobs: performance enhancement tasks (e.g., coaching at competitions, delivering training sessions) and administrative tasks (e.g., organizing transport, fundraising). It appeared that the amount of time coaches had to commit to administrative tasks would encourage them to leave a job.

Balancing family and coaching commitments. Coaches described challenges with balancing the commitments of their family and their coaching job. If this balance became too difficult to maintain, it could result in leaving a position.

Career Concerns

Job security: Job security which resulted from having an extended contract or being employed by an organization would be a reason for moving jobs. In contrast, a lack of job security was seen to influence the commitment coaches could make to athletes, negatively influence the quality of their coaching and was subsequently a reason coaches' might look for different positions.

Compensation: Coaches indicated that they did not perceive they received sufficient compensation (either in terms of their salary or benefits) for the job they did.

Opportunities for career advancement: Coaches indicated they had left or were likely to leave a position when there were opportunities for career advancement, including having opportunities to work with higher-level athletes (e.g., provincial or national level athletes) or in more prestigious positions (e.g., working for sports organizations or at national training centers).

Positive Coaching Experiences

Enjoying the process of coaching. A number of coaches talked about the enjoyment they experienced coaching in their current position. When coaches experienced such enjoyment from their work, even if other factors might be challenging, coaches indicated they were unlikely to look for another position.

Achieving success in a position. Enjoyment of the coaching process was often related to the success in their position. Coaches defined success differently, but often included seeing athletes develop or creating a winning program.

Limitations

Some limitations to consider include the single point-of-contact interviews with participants, the retrospective nature of data collection, and the arguably small number of transitions coaches had experienced (many had only experienced one major transition).

Given the limitations in the current study, future research could consider a larger sample and a longitudinal approach to data collection, which considers coaches' experiences before, during, and after transitions.

Policy implications

Coach retention depends upon many factors that have been identified in previous research and reinforced through our studies. In general terms, the work environment of an employee has been found to be linked to job satisfaction, and job satisfaction is linked to retention. The coaches that are the focus of our research are coaches that depend on coaching for their livelihoods.

Our findings can support policy development at a few levels. At the federal level, coaches that are hired by the national sport organizations (NSOs) need to be supported in positive work environments. Coaches with NSOs influence both athletes and other coaches throughout the system and it is important to retain such coaches. Also at the federal level, the Coaching Association of Canada through its NCCP need to include modules on the work environment of coaches to ensure that coaches are as prepared as possible to deal with the challenges of a sport environment. Currently there is a major gap in the NCCP educational content in this area.

The findings from our research also inform a graduate course in the Masters in Coaching program at the University of Alberta. The graduates of this program have been employed at universities and colleges across Canada and have an opportunity to pass on to other coaches the information they receive in their graduate course. At the very least, those graduates are far more aware at the time they accept future employment of how to monitor and manage their work environment.

Finally, three peer-reviewed journal articles and one textbook chapter are now in print.

Next steps

While we are confident that our research findings reinforced the critical importance of the work environment in job satisfaction for coaches, we have yet to identify which factors are the most important. However, employers and coach educators should be aware that:

- Opportunities for career progression are important to coaches and the employer can certainly build that into their management system.
- Workload does not seem to be a major influence on job satisfaction, but the type of work does matter. Coaches like to coach.
- Supportive interpersonal relationships are very important to coaches. However, strain in personal relationships is probably a larger factor for coaches than for many professions due to the long hours, the weekend work, and the emphasis on winning.

Key stakeholders and benefits

Coaches Association of Canada would benefit from incorporating into their advanced coach education a course to assist coaches in understanding and managing their work environment.

All employers of coaches, such as national and provincial sport organizations, and clubs could ensure their employees have the skills to manage coaches effectively.

Universities and colleges with coach education programs should ensure they incorporate management content in their coach education courses.