

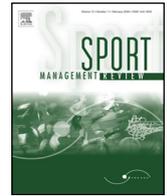


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Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Sport Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/smr



Coworker knowledge sharing and peer learning among elite footballers: Insights from German Bundesliga players

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 April 2017

Received in revised form 30 January 2018

Accepted 2 February 2018

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Athlete management

Player performance

High performance sport

Elite athletes

Peer learning

ABSTRACT

This research focuses on coworker learning and knowledge sharing amongst elite footballers. The authors provide an in-depth understanding on how elite footballers learn from their peers and which channels are used to share their knowledge. The authors also analyze how peer learning impacts an elite footballer's development and performance and to what extent elite football clubs actively support peer learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 elite footballers from first and second division German Bundesliga clubs. The findings demonstrate that peers are very important sources of knowledge for elite footballers. There are four main knowledge sharing channels: observing/imitating, peer exchange/peer communication, labor mobility and knowledge brokers. The findings highlight the positive impact of knowledge sharing on elite players' development and performance and call for future (knowledge) management tactics to specifically use this untapped potential.

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1. Introduction

Learning from others at work is important. Informal interactions with peers are a predominant means of workplace learning (e.g., [Boud & Middleton, 2003](#)). Peer learning is the “acquisition of knowledge and skills through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions” ([Topping, 2007, p. 631](#)). Previous researchers have focused on formal learning opportunities among employees, such as organized learning events in the presence of a designated teacher or trainer ([Eraut, 2000](#)). While informal learning is regarded as a very effective way of learning ([Boud, 1999](#); [Garrick, 1998](#)), only few scholars address informal workplace learning (e.g., [Manuti, Pastore, Scardigno, Giancaspro, & Morciano, 2015](#); [Marsick & Volpe, 1999](#)). However, both informal and formal learning are complementary and contribute to efficient workplace learning of individuals ([Poell, 2013](#)).

Learning enhances not only each individual's knowledge base and expertise, but also that of the organization ([Senge, 1990](#)). Through organizational routines, individual knowledge is converted into organizational knowledge ([Eisenhardt & Santos, 2002](#)). An organization's capacity to create and use this knowledge is key to acquiring a sustainable competitive advantage ([Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995](#)). Advanced organizations manage knowledge, meaning that they strategically build, transform, organize, deploy,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2018.02.001>

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use and transfer knowledge (Wiig, 1993). However, when it comes to learning and knowledge sharing, sport management scholars focus mainly on the role of the coach (e.g., Cassidy, Potrac, & McKenzie, 2006; Coté & Gilbert, 2009; Kellett, 1999).

In contrast, athlete learning and knowledge sharing between athletes on the same team has received limited attention (Nelson & Colquhoun, 2013). The notable exception is Berman, Down, and Hill's (2002) study of tacit knowledge and competitive advantage in the National Basketball Association.

Effective management of high performance athletes and teams to build a competitive advantage is receiving increased practitioner interest (Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2013). However, empirical research is relatively scarce and further studies would help to better understand the complexity of managing high performance athletes and the underlying processes to nurture and develop these athletes (Sotiriadou & de Bosscher, 2013).

This research is set within the context of the Funnel of High Performance Sport Management (HPSM; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2013). This framework categorizes the factors contributing to international sporting success into three layers. The macro level refers to the broader environment and elite policies around high performance sport. The meso level examines factors at the organizational and sport policy level. The micro level examines the management of individual athletes and their close environment, in particular the processes which affect the attraction, retention, transition, and nurturing of athletes (also referred to as the "ARTN framework"; see Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008). The current research studies the elite footballer, and thus belongs to the micro level dimension of the Funnel of HPSM. The study intends to contribute to the high performance sports literature by exploring the micro level properties of the Funnel in an empirical study. While research on elite athlete development and the underlying processes and stakeholders involved is growing within the sport management literature (e.g., Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2013; Sotiriadou, Brouwers, de Bosscher, & Cuskelly, 2017), peers or teammates and their role for learning, development and performance of elite athletes has received little attention. Given the importance of peer learning and knowledge sharing in other business contexts (e.g., Boud & Middleton, 2003), understanding the role and impact of peers on individual's athlete's development and performance may further improve the management of elite athletes and enhance their development and performance.

The following research questions guide this study:

Research Question 1: How do elite football players learn from their peers (i.e., teammates)?

Research Question 2: What channels are used to share knowledge between and amongst elite footballers?

Research Question 3: How does peer learning impact an elite footballer's development and performance?

Research Question 4: To what extent do elite football clubs actively support peer learning?

These research questions are answered from the athlete's perspective, using semi-structured interviews with 12 elite footballers from the first and second division of the German Bundesliga, Germany's professional association football league. Conceptually, the study focuses on peer learning and knowledge sharing between and amongst elite athletes. In doing so, we bring together the fields of athlete learning and development, individual and organizational learning, HPSM and knowledge management.

2. Literature review

2.1. Knowledge

Knowledge is arguably a company's most valuable resource and a source of lasting competitive advantage (Nonaka, 1991). Beesley and Chalip (2011) define knowledge as "information with meaning that exists within the individual" (p. 328) which "occurs either as a result of experience, or is generated through thinking or reasoning; otherwise it remains mere data or information" (pp. 327–328). Knowledge is either explicit or tacit (Roth, 2003). Explicit knowledge is codifiable, formal, and systematic (Scott & Laws, 2006). It can be translated into words or symbols, and thus transformed into tangible forms (e.g., manuals, books; Inkpen, 1996). In contrast, tacit knowledge is difficult to translate and explain to outsiders, and often can only be learned through practice and direct immersion (Lei, Slocum, & Pitts, 1997).

2.2. Individual learning and organizational learning

Knowledge in organizations resides within individuals (Ipe, 2003). Senge (1990) notes, "Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs" (p. 139). Organizational routines convert the learned individual knowledge into organizational knowledge. Hence, these organizational routines form the basis of collective learning within an organization (Eisenhardt & Santos, 2002). However, a learning culture must be embedded within the organization to achieve successful learning. This culture encourages learning as a way to grow the organization's capacity (Senge, 1990).

2.3. Workplace learning

Jacobs and Park (2009) define workplace learning as "the multiple ways through which employees learn in organizations" (p. 134). Individual employees are engaged in training programs, education, and development courses but also experiential learning to acquire competences essential to meet organizational demands (Manuti et al., 2015). Boud and Garrick (1999) highlight that the workplace is a site of learning for two distinct purposes. The first is developing the organization because of

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