

Football agents should not be sent off - they just need a better set of rules

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The power behind the ball. [Shutterstock](#)

The war for talent is raging across the world. From Silicon Valley to [Zhongguancun](#), organisations and institutions battle to recruit the best the world has to offer. So why is the football labour market viewed any differently to that of other industries and sectors? Surely demand for star players should be no different to the demand for product designers, data scientists and programmers.

Yet in light of the current controversies surrounding issues such as [third-party ownership \(TPO\)](#) and accusations of greed, and due to its mass market global appeal, football is different.

It seems strange then, that so little is known about the inner workings of the football machine – and in particular, those mysterious agents who grease the wheels, move the cogs and, apparently, [make vast sums of money](#) in the process.



Agent Jorge Mendes (left) on the red carpet. PA

Football agents make some of the biggest deals in football, sometimes profiting hugely from the talents of their superstar clients. Their role can be defined as “representing clubs and players within the context of contracts or transfer negotiations”.

Essentially, they are middlemen. But their role is increasingly growing to include responsibilities traditionally undertaken by the football club, such as being sold to another team. This raises the significant possibility of conflict of interest, when agents and clubs disagree about the player’s career path. Muddying the waters further is a hierarchy of power and division of labour within the role of agent so that some smaller agents work under the orders of the more powerful few.

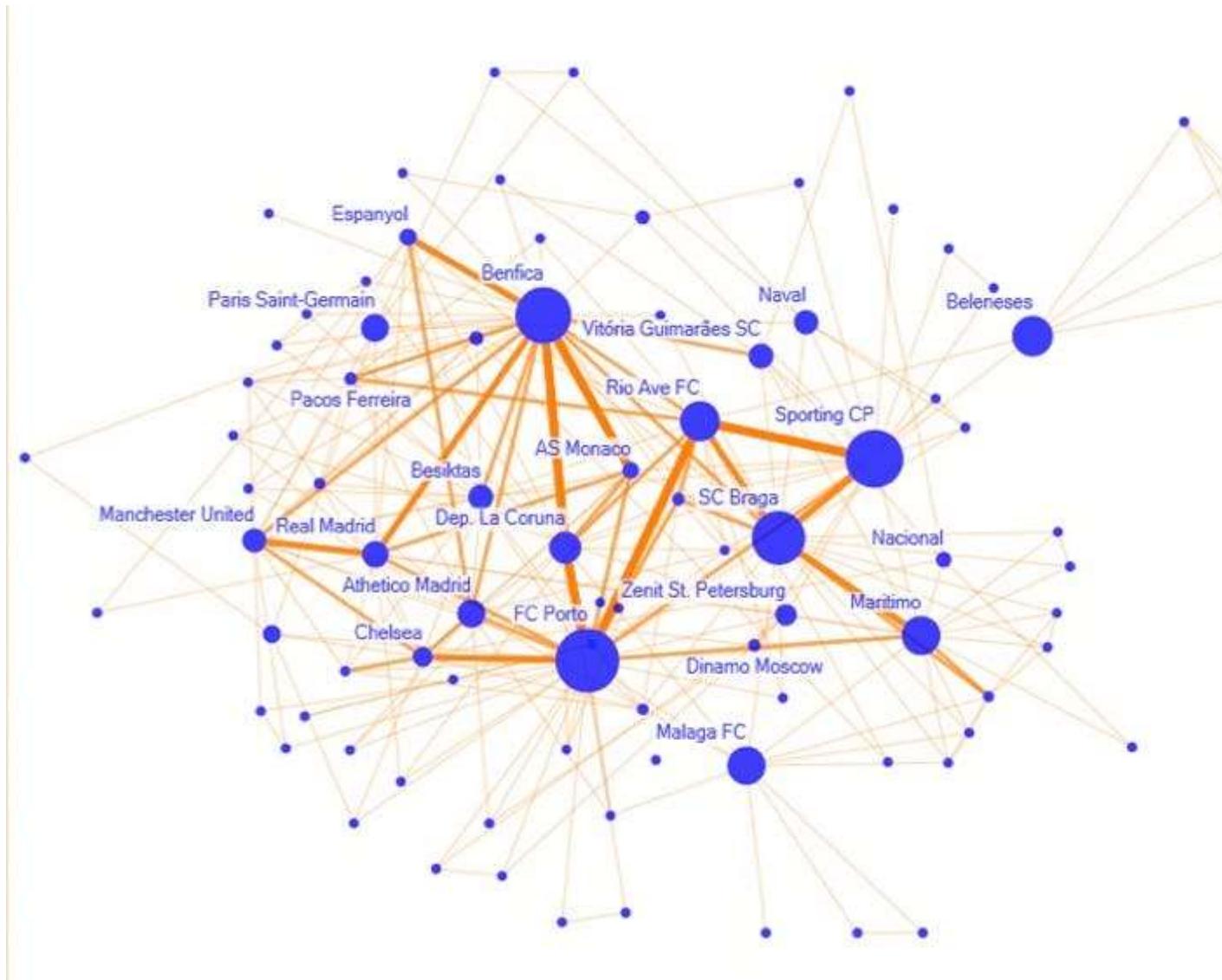
So where do these agents come from? In a report on the big five leagues, just over half of agents had already worked in the football industry. Of these, 23% had a playing career, 13% scouted for players, 7.5% worked as a football manager and, 5.5% were sporting directors.

At the top of the profession, are the powerful few described by the media as “super agents”. Jorge Mendes is considered by many to be top of the pile, with clients including Cristiano Ronaldo, Diego Costa and Jose Mourinho among the £625m worth of contracts he has secured.

But given the current lack of transparency and regulation, all the agents and their dealings are difficult to identify, although they are viewed as the most powerful men in football.

Despite the significant number of people registered as agents in professional football, their presence is not evenly spread. A recent report highlights that representation in Europe’s five big leagues (England, Spain, France, Germany and Italy) is so highly concentrated that half of those leagues’ footballers are managed by only 83 football agents or agencies.

These increasingly powerful upper hierarchy of agents operate globally across divisions, leagues and continents.



Agent Jorge Mendes and the number of his transfers (thickness of lines) between clubs (circles), up until June 2016. Widdop, Parnell and Asghar, Author provided

Public and industry opinion towards football agents remains hostile – Napoli’s owner, Aurelio de Laurentis, has described them as the “cancer of our world”. The media frenzy often directed at agents is adding pressure across the football industry to better regulate them. But football intermediary Jonathan Booker claims that it is those in football leadership, not the agents themselves, who have stood by and let this status quo continue.

And what about the agents themselves? Despite the fact that they should have a key voice in the debate about their role, you rarely hear from them. As part of our research we have interviewed football agents and intermediaries operating across the UK, Europe and beyond.

One of them explained that TPO has become common practice as a direct result of the economic recession, which led to financial institutions withholding loans,

overdrafts and other financial benefits to clubs. He also argued that “the advantages [of TPO] can be multilateral”, explaining:

The buying club can obtain a player who will make their team better without having to pay the full amount the selling club is asking for. And the investor, whether that is an agent or consultant or company, will look for a return on that investment.

Addressing concerns about the impact of agent deregulation by FIFA in April 2015, he continued: “What does football expect? To become a coach in a professional club you need a relevant, often nationally accepted qualification. To become an agent you need to simply pay a small [£500] fee. This has created a context whereby a huge influx of agents have appeared, lacking due knowledge of regulation and impacting upon the system by continually approaching players with misplaced promises whilst trying to gain a living.

“It has opened the gate to the rogue agents that give all agents a bad name.”

FA as agents of change?

In the UK, the picture appears bleak, contradictory and dominated by big money. While we have strong calls by the [FA for tighter local regulation](#), the [Premier League is pushing for an easing](#) in youth (aged 14-15) player regulation. This will no doubt heat up the chase for younger and cheaper players and will open up the disturbing reality of [child trafficking and exploitation](#), when agents arrange ownership of very young players from developing countries. There’s no suggestion that the Premier League condones trafficking or exploitation of young players.

While agents call for global leadership and governance from FIFA to get rid of the rogue elements from their industry, many observers (and insiders) are treating this as a long-term aspiration ([given they have enough to deal with already!](#)). In the interim, the FA has an opportunity to lead and demonstrate a gold standard of practice, by heading up a coalition of stakeholders including the Association of Football Agents, the Premier League, English Football Championship and leagues, Players Football Association and government.

Complete transparency on all transfer and financial sensitivities, a formal and enhanced accreditation process and a national programme of education and training would allow the FA to protect its assets, repair its integrity, and position itself as a leader in football regulation.