

Challenging football's old boys' network

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*FOOTBALL clubs need to start using fair, transparent recruitment processes instead of relying on existing social relationships, argue **Dr Dan Parnell** and **Dr Paul Widdop**. Otherwise they risk missing out on new ideas, insights and information and holding back their businesses.*

RECRUITMENT in football often seems to be based more on social relationships than on making the best rational economic decisions.

By social relationships we mean friends, family, past colleagues and historical trusted connections. Every season many football appointments are made in which there is a social relationship between the recruiter and the recruited.

Often there hasn't been what we would consider a proper and transparent recruitment process - with a clear job description advertised, applications invited and interviews held.

These are some recent appointments in which there was a social relationship between a powerbroker and the person recruited. The recruitment process was not clear:

- Dougie Freedman appointed Sporting Director at Crystal Palace. Was this based on a transparent process or his relationship with CEO Steve Parish? Freedman had not held this type of role before.
- Daniel Talbot's appointment as senior/ European Scout at Fulham. Was this based on merit or the fact his father Brian Talbot is the Assistant Head of Football Operations at the club? Talbot has no previous experience of scouting in an official capacity. [Head of Football Operations Tony Khan told TGG this was a “straightforward hire”, but the process behind it still remains unclear].
- The double appointment of Chris Badlan, Head of European Scouting, and Kieran Scott, Head of Domestic Scouting, at Norwich. Were they the best talent identified through a clear process, or was the fact they had worked with Sporting Director Stuart Webber at Wolves before key?
- Recruitment of Nuno Espirito Santo as manager at Wolves. What role did super agent Jorge Mendes play in the appointment?

This is not to question the merits of individuals involved - it is to question the process that led to their appointments. This approach, of surrounding yourself with trusted and like-minded people, might appear prudent, but research suggests more diverse connections can be more beneficial to football clubs.

The work of Economic Sociologist Mark Granovetter can help us explain why. Firstly, Granovetter put forward the principle of the quite contradictory idea of the **strength of weak ties**, arguing that connections with diverse groups of people are more beneficial than strong bonds with a few in many business scenarios.

Whilst strong bonds with people create a culture of trust and shared behaviours, it is the weak ties that bridge across a network allowing access to information or resources people may not otherwise have had access to.



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Secondly, and relatedly, he put forward the notion of **embeddedness**, arguing that all economic action was rooted in social relationships. The Embeddedness framework has many implications for the general traditional economic view of football business, one being that the market doesn't operate as a free market with perfect competition, and all people (buyers, sellers, recruiters etc) don't have access to all the same information.

This is an excerpt of a piece of research from another prominent academic, Charles Tilly, in which you can easily substitute the word 'society' with the words 'the football business':

"It is through personal networks that society is structured and individuals integrated into society. Daily life proceeds through personal ties: workers recruit in-laws and cousins for jobs on a new construction site; parents choose their children's paediatricians on the basis of personal recommendation; and investors get tips from their tennis partners. All through life, the facts, fictions, and arguments we hear from kin and friends are the ones that influence our actions most. Reciprocally, most people affect their society only through personal influences on those around them."

Individuals who share strong connections to one another tend to be very similar in nature (which is termed homology). While some may argue this is important, especially for trust and shared culture, the downside is it can also create the dreaded 'yes man', or at least a blinkered view of the world, which may not see dangers looming or innovations happening elsewhere.

The network can become one of people who see the same things, think the same way and share the same information. If a group shares strong relationships and all the individuals are relatively similar, there will be many redundant connections regurgitating the same information, which stifles creativity and innovation.

Many leaders in football are overlooking a (perhaps better) wealth of talent that could be identified through a transparent and professional recruitment and due diligence process. Instead, they are turning to their closest network to make appointments.

To tackle this natural bias, leaders in football must develop and utilise a broader network of connections and undertake a transparent recruitment process. More diverse connections bridge networks of people and in turn introduce new ideas, insights and information that would otherwise be unknown.

Only then can football clubs be confident they've got the best man, or woman, for the job.

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