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Recruitment in elite football: a network approach

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ABSTRACT

Research Question: Contemporary football (soccer) is a competitive industry. Some football clubs have enacted new roles, such as the Sporting Director, to gain a competitive advantage through effective recruitment of non-playing staff. This qualitative research examines the recruitment strategies of Sporting Directors through the lens of network theory.

Research Methods: An empirical qualitative study was conducted, involving semi-structured interviews with 25 Sporting Directors in football clubs in England (English Premier League n=12; English Championship, n=13). The qualitative data was thematically analysed.

Results and Findings: The study contributes novel evidence on recruitment in elite-level football, revealing the theoretical underpinnings and practical nature of this marketplace unique to the football industry. The evidence shows that whilst normally in recruitment weak ties are essential for getting a job, in football, trust and knowing people is the most critical aspect in recruitment, and recruiters rely on strong ties. This homophily creates several unintended implications for business and performance.

Conclusions: This study responds to a gap in our theoretical and practical understanding of recruitment in elite-level football. The findings raise important questions for those managers and leaders involved in securing talent, as the over-reliance on closed networks may constrain the flow of information and innovation and ultimately limit the potential performance of the organisation. Homophily in recruitment processes may have unintended consequences that require further research, notably for player welfare, inequalities and performance.

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Introduction

The football industry has a culture of high employer turnover, especially in relation to head coaches, management executives and backroom-staff, due to a unique industry-

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level feedback loop constructed through instant metrics on job performance, resulting in negative financial and playing consequences (Bridgewater, 2010; Kelly, 2017; Nissen, 2014; Parnell et al., 2018). Ironically, the overarching culture of the industry is primarily focused on recruitment via strong-tie relationships and trust, or what Putnam and Coleman refer to as bonding social capital (Bridgewater, 2010; Coleman, 1988; Kelly, 2017; Parnell et al., 2018; Putnam, 2000). There is a paucity of research on recruitment practices in elite football (Kelly, 2017), leaving a theoretical and empirical gap. In this research we intend to develop a better understanding of recruitment practices and ultimately how people get a job, to address this shortfall. This study will impact and inform strategies used in employment searches by employees and employers within football. Furthermore, it may render visible institutional biases by uncovering detrimental practices in employment, often explicit in a culture based on bonding capital and closed networks. It is essential that we strive to explore this structurally and empirically to understand the importance of social capital in the employment relations of football.

At present there is limited empirical understanding of the football industry's recruitment process, we aim to address this gap, using the theoretical construct of economic embeddedness (see Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1996), a tributary of network theory. This theory extends Granovetter's strength of weak ties thesis as a structural theory of economic activity. Here we apply it specifically to corporate recruitment at an executive director board level in the football industry (i.e. Sporting Directors). To that end, this study examines how the ties among actors in a social system interact and comprise the broader contexts that can affect perceptions, beliefs, emotions, attitudes, and ultimately, actions of individuals and groups, subsequently recreating the structure and culture of the industry (Knoke, 2012). Embeddedness, as a structural concept, works on the premise that connections and relationships to others matter, they have deep consequences on the actions of any given individual (Granovetter, 1985). Granovetter (2017) pinpointed four concepts that underpin his theoretical framework for embeddedness, (i) density and cohesion, (ii) strength of weak ties, (iii) structural holes (Burt, 1992) and (iv) temporal embeddedness. These inform our methodological approach and our analysis of recruitment practices in football.

Given the exponential rise in sport management as a field of academic concern, there remains a limited number of studies focused on recruitment (Bridgewater, 2010; Kelly, 2017; Parnell et al., 2018). What studies exist on recruitment practices in football are sporadic and lack a coherent collective line of work. Indeed, some studies have focused on recruiting managers (Bridgewater, 2010), including links to network theory (Kelly, 2017). Others have also examined power and trust in recruiting head coaches (Bridgewater, 2010; Kelly, 2017; Nissen, 2014). Whilst others have looked at player labour migration and recruitment in the global south (Darby et al., 2007), and networks and recruitment (Elliott & Gusterud, 2018). Furthermore, several authors have approached recruitment from talent identification perspectives (Reilly & Gilbourne, 2003; Sarmiento et al., 2018) and through using big data (McHale et al., 2012). Despite this, the majority focus on players, and there are few empirical studies been extended to the executive level, researching football leaders on the recruitment of staff. Therefore, as recruitment in the football industry is largely unknown, we are concerned with non-playing staff who assume middle-management positions, i.e. heads of departments. Our research addresses this need and expands beyond previous studies offering a qualitative perspective with executive-level practitioners from elite professional football clubs in England.

Our research examined how Sporting Directors, senior and executive leaders in football clubs recruit middle-management-level positions in leading football institutions. Here we make several contributions theoretically and practically. Firstly, we begin to fill the gap created from the aforementioned paucity of research and understanding specifically relating to the recruitment practice of senior leaders in elite-level football. Secondly, we provide essential insight for practitioners within the football industry, who can use our evidence to change, improve and rethink recruitment strategies. Thirdly, we offer, for the first time, empirical evidence testing the network theory of embeddedness within elite football recruitment.

Literature review

In many ways, the football industry is a social world mirroring the view of Howard Becker's critique of creative industries (Becker, 2008). These worlds are socially constructed arenas with a network of individuals (including corporate entities) working together to fulfil a role within a strict division of labour. Within this broader world, each football club represents to all intent and purposes a sub-world. We can define clubs as a collective of agents working together (interacting), within a set of conventions (rules and procedures becoming habitual), under constraints of a network structure, and having a strict division of labour (Parnell et al., 2018; Parnell, Widdop, et al., 2020). From this theoretical lens, elite football and sport generally operate differently from mainstream business practice who seek to remove competition in many instances, adopting a high level of collaboration and cooperation for the industry to operate (Fort & Quirk, 2004; Bond et al., 2019). An excellent example of this relational aspect is the emergence of a Sporting Director role within football, which has a strict position in the division of labour and exercises specific structural resources such as power and trust (Nissen, 2014). The Sporting Director has been acknowledged as having recruitment responsibilities and expertise that operationalise social capital in strategic recruitment decisions in collaboration and cooperation through their social network(s) (Parnell et al., 2018).

The Sporting Director role has emerged as clubs have faced increased pressures to professionalise, protect owners' investments and develop strategies to deliver successful on-field performances. Unsurprisingly, given its relatively recent emergence, there are conceptual and operational misunderstandings around the role of the sporting director (Parnell et al., 2018). We refer to the Sporting Director for consistency within this paper, yet we accept that each club offers a unique context and varying terminology might be applied to describe this position (Parnell et al., 2018). The Sporting Director role best describes someone who has overall responsibility for the performance of various sporting departments within a club. The Sporting Director role is to deliver a strategic plan and operate as a custodian of the clubs sporting performance. They often have responsibilities for the first team, the academy, recruitment and scouting, sport science and medical departments. They are also responsible for; developing a positive working relationship with the owners and the board and developing a club-wide football philosophy to support the clubs' sporting strategy. Indeed, the Sporting Director can play an intermediate role between the strategic apex of a football club (i.e. the board) and sporting departments (Parnell et al., 2018). Finally, they are responsible for the recruitment of middle-management heads of departments within budget.

The Sporting Directors will work with a Head of Recruitment to identify the next playing talent. However, they are also concerned with the recruitment of the non-playing staff. These people often assume middle-management positions, including for example, the Head of Recruitment, Head of Academy, Head of Sport Science, Loans Manager, Club Doctor, and extends to the First Team Head Coach. These positions provide important considerations, in that they respectively influence the dynamics of recruitment. Different roles require utilising very bespoke networks, i.e. Sporting Directors may require different networks to recruit different positions. Similarly, different roles require various professional practice and governing body qualifications and accreditations which constrains the networks a Sporting Director may access. At present, the recruitment practice of Sporting Directors is unknown in football (Parnell et al., 2018), and we aim to understand recruitment in the football industry to a far greater extent than we currently do.

Gaining employment

There is an expansive body of work in economics and sociology about how individuals come to be informed of, and ultimately secure employment (Barber et al., 1999; Granovetter, 1995). Perhaps the most significant aspect, running alongside varying forms of cultural and human capital, is how recruitment is embedded in social structure, a form of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 1993). Employers ask trusted others about personal recommendations, whilst employees use their social ties as a tool in the search for new employment opportunities. This theoretical observation was most emphatically laid out by Granovetter (1973), who explored how people (men) find jobs through their social networks using friendship ties of different strengths. Perhaps the most significant contribution of Granovetter's study was demonstrating the strength of weak ties in securing employment. Specifically, Granovetter (1973) argued that the social structure of relationships could be understood through two predominant types of social ties: (1) strong ties, those with our close friends and family, and (2) weak ties built on casual acquaintances. Originally, the dominant thinking believed that strong friendship ties and next of kin were the essential ingredient in gaining employment. However, Granovetter's (1973) research evidenced that job seekers get help and employment opportunities more effectively via weak ties or acquaintances, compared to strong or close ties. A notion that has been rigorously supported globally (Brown & Konrad, 2001; Burke & Kraut, 2013; Greenberg & Fernandez, 2016; Yakubovich, 2005).

The previous orthodoxy was to assume that weak ties might be less valuable due to infrequent communication. However, Gee et al. (2017) found the strength of weak ties paradox held across fifty-five countries. However, they noted that a single strong tie might be more valuable, especially in countries with high income inequality. Other research has demonstrated how individuals who find a job via an existing social relationship have longer tenure and higher productivity (Guimerà et al., 2005), although this differs across industries (Mayer, 2012). To that end, this paper explores how social ties are employed for recruitment in the football industry.

Embeddedness

To fully understand the function that network embeddedness plays within the recruitment by the Sporting Director, it is essential to understand what we refer to in this

structural perspective. The concept of networks is rooted within a network theory of economics, namely ‘economic sociology’, which focuses on the structure of economic action through networks (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1985, 2005). These networks, according to Knoke (2012, p. 21)

... comprises the larger contexts that affect the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and actions of individuals and groups. Social influence and collective action may be both facilitated and constrained by direct and indirect transactions among actors possessing diverse resources, such as information, money, authority, and power.

Fundamental to these concepts of influence, collective action, resource, authority and power, can be conceptualised by different parts of what Granovetter (1985) termed embeddedness. The overarching principle of embeddedness shows how economic behaviour is embedded structurally and relationally. In other words, social networks represent a meso-level connecting social action and agency at the micro-level and institutions and industry at the macro-level. Consequently, in this argument, and we see no reason to argue otherwise, all economic behaviour such as recruitment and selection is rooted and embedded in social relations.

This network perspective contradicts neo-classical frameworks dominant in economics (Dacin et al., 1999; Granovetter, 1992), where relationships are considered a frictional drag on markets, such as labour markets, and self-interest alone defines decision-making (Granovetter, 1985). We oppose the argument depicted in *homo economicus* that still underpins much of orthodox economic thinking in labour markets, especially in sports industry management. This argument centres on individual self-interest governing social and economic action, or what others might term a methodological individualism approach to social action. For us individuals do not make decisions of social action in a vacuum devoid of any influence of social networks. People make up organisations, clubs and sporting franchises, and exploring this through the lens of rational self-interest, misses the complexity that context plays in decision-making.

To unpack this further, we need to explore what underpins the theory of embeddedness and outline the theoretical framework and concepts that we use to understand recruitment in football. Granovetter (2017) offers four concepts to support this framework. Firstly, norms and conventions (for example, trust) result from density and cohesion levels within the network. The more dense and cohesive (both impacted by size) a network is, the more ‘trust’ can be developed through shared ideas, behaviour and norms. Similarly, but distinctly, Granovetter (2017) suggests trust and bonding are reinforced through strong ties; novel information and innovation come from weak ties, thus showing the strength of weak ties. As such, networks that have high closure – lack of weak ties – will not have access to new information, which can be valuable. However, there is a balance between strong ties, which instil trust and weak ties, which may provide more resources (including information and innovation).

Like the strength of ties, the position of actors in the network can also be advantageous, which Burt (1992) identifies through the ‘structural holes’ theory. For Burt, actors who connect multiple nested networks that are otherwise unconnected obtain both competitive and strategic advantages. In this situation, actors occupy a ‘structural hole’, and essentially act as brokers and leverage the resource flowing through the network. Finally, Granovetter (1985) postulated that embeddedness is temporal,

suggesting connections have a past. Therefore, transactions may also follow historic structures within the network. Indeed, time shifts the structure, removes and adds power, changes culture and ultimately impacts decision making. Additionally, since micro-transactions generate the global structure, it becomes more permanent if this global structure persists over time. It may represent an institution, which according to temporal embeddedness, will impact future transactions.

Stemming from Granovetter's (1973) original strength-of-weak-ties proposition, attention has been abundant on informal job searching processes, which involves a job seeker engaging their web of interpersonal ties. Correspondingly, job seekers are more likely to succeed with higher levels of social capital, which refers to the resource located in and transmitted through interpersonal ties and interactions – or one social network (Lin & Erickson, 2012). Another way to think of this social capital is having a social network filled with the right relationships or knowing the right people (Lin, 2001). According to Burt (2005, p. 4) 'social capital explains how people do better because they are somehow better connected with other people. Accordingly, a rich body of literature analyses the benefits of social network-mediated job searching (Trimble & Kmec, 2011). Generally, evidence suggests informal methods using interpersonal channels are more effective than formal methods of impersonal job-searching services (Gee et al., 2017). This is important given the relational aspects of recruitment in elite football (Kelly, 2017). However, less has been written on the use of social capital within formal recruitment processes for non-playing staff in football. For example, in many ways, the Sporting Director is primarily in place to recruit and select labour within the football industry (Parnell et al., 2018). While a board member within a football club, a Sporting Directors represents a firm's formal recruitment process for the football side of the business. It is essential to examine how this is managed strategically and operationally, including understanding whether it is built on social networks, utilising informal recruitment methods to locate key roles (i.e. middle-managers or heads of departments).

Methodology

Participants

To examine recruitment in elite football, the Sporting Director appears central to this process and a key actor for a focus of research. To that end, we utilise qualitative data captured from in-depth semi-structured interviews within an English football context. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 Sporting Directors in football clubs in England (N=25; English Premier League (12); English Championship (13)).

This study aimed to examine the recruitment by Sporting Directors through the lens of network theory and embeddedness in elite football. This cohort of participants offers an important insight given the financial prominence of Europe in the global transfer market, specifically the English Premier League and English Championship (Bond et al., 2018; Bond et al., 2019). A purposive sampling approach was utilised. The sample was chosen based on the typical roles associated with the Sporting Director position (see Parnell et al., 2018) in a club in these two leagues in the past six years (2014-2020). All participants in the research had worked in some capacity with full or part-time

responsibility for recruiting middle-managers (i.e. Head of Sport Science, Head of Academy, First Team Head Coach etc.) and/or player recruitment for the first team. Each participant had an extensive length of experience in football spanning over ten years. The backgrounds of the participants can be divided into six separate pathways into the position (see [Table 1](#)), providing a wide range of experience to assist with the purpose of the research. The researchers had some relationships with several participants through their ongoing research, scholarship and executive education within the football industry. However, in most cases, there were no prior relationships with any participants. All invitations to participate were accepted. Before the interview process, ethical procedures were approved, and participants provided informed consent to take part.

Measures

Semi-structured interviews have often been used in research in sport (Lucidarme et al., 2018), with football leaders (Molan et al., 2016) and similar research contexts (Shilbury et al., 2019). A semi-structured approach offered flexibility for the researcher to ensure a conversational discussion to build rapport and address topics as they emerge (Cargan, 2007). The interviews included several key themes, which were informed by reviewing the literature, the research context, and network theory (see [Table 2](#)). The approach adopted allowed the researcher to build familiarisation with the participant and clarify roles and responsibilities during the initial two phases of the semi-structured interview. The themes that followed examined the strategic practice undertaken by senior management in football covering their roles and responsibilities, recruitment of non-playing staff through a network theory lens and the principles of embeddedness as outlined by Granovetter (2017): (i) density and cohesion, (ii) strength of weak ties, (iii) structural holes (Burt, 1992) and (iv) temporal embeddedness.

The interviews took place in person and lasted on average 71 min. Questions on their career pathway (i.e. length of service, demographics and experience) and role were informed by previous research undertaken with senior managers in football (Kelly, 2017; Parnell et al., 2018) and tied in considerations related to context, behaviour and structure related to relationships and networks (Granovetter, 1973, 1985, 1995, p. 2017). Each participant was asked about their role and responsibilities, alongside the individuals they work with and levels of trust and homophily (Coleman, 1973; Granovetter, 1995; Putman, 2000). The participants were asked about their personal recruitment experiences as players or non-playing staff throughout their careers (Kelly, 2017). Here, participants reflected on their playing or non-playing experiences on their journey towards their present football leadership experience. Alongside this, participants detailed their previous and current practice recruiting non-playing staff (Kelly, 2017). Some of the questions that surrounded this included, ‘How did you hear about that job?’, ‘Was the job opportunity promoted to public for an application process?’, ‘Who approached you

Table 1. Participant pathways into the Sporting Director position.

Pathway 1: Former professional football player
Pathway 2: Coaching or Development
Pathway 3: Performance specialist, including analyst
Pathway 4: Talent identification, player recruitment, or recruitment, including football intermediary / agent
Pathway 5: Legal and regulatory Pathway
6: Football operations or administration

Table 2. Semi-structured interview schedule.

Phase 1: Introduction and familiarisation, including career pathway
Phase 2: Roles and responsibilities
Phase 3: Recruitment of staff: networks and embeddedness (i) closure, (ii) strength of weak ties, (iii) structural holes and (iv) temporal embeddedness.
Phase 4: Summary and conclusion.

with the job opportunity, and how do you know this person?’, ‘Describe the process for recruitment’, ‘How did you recruit that football manager?’, ‘Who is the key person you go to when recruiting non-playing staff?’.

Procedures

The research team consisted of five members, with the first author completing all of the interviews between January 2018 – January 2020. The researchers invested time in pilot interviews with connections within the researchers’ personal networks who work within the football industry. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. After interviews with the stakeholders participating in the research were completed, recurring comments were identified using thematic analysis, and the research team judged that data saturation had been achieved.

Data analysis

The analysis was undertaken in three stages to address inductive and deductive content. The first stage involved member reflecting (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Member reflecting differs from member checking in that it is not about verifying results. It is more closely aligned with generating additional data and insight. In this instance, the researchers contacted participants to discuss their transcript to explore gaps, seek further clarifications, add examples and consider interpretations (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The second stage concerned the identification of the commentary directly related to the key findings from recruitment of non-playing and playing staff across three aspects of network theory: (i) embeddedness, (ii) strength of weak ties, (iii) structural holes and (iv) temporal embeddedness. The entire research team was involved in this process. These were pooled to provide a single account for each area of interest. The third stage involved thematic analysis of data identified in phase one (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process of thematic analysis was split into six phases: (i) familiarisation with the data; (ii) generating initial codes; (iii) searching for themes; (iv) reviewing themes; (v) defining and naming themes and finally, once there was a set of fully worked out themes; and (vi) writing-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In practice, however, analysis moved forwards and backwards between phases as required. As a result of this process, the themes reported in this research were consistent both in a single stage of the analysis and across the stages of analysis, providing a degree of triangulation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final process of the analysis involved the entire research team meeting to consolidate the data through a number of discussions. This included due consideration informed by the context and network theory. The data are represented through the presentation of contextual verbatim extracts from the interviews and analysis. Pseudonyms are used to protect the

identity of all participants, as such, the title and league will be identified to provide the context of their comment.

Results

The results from this research provide empirical insight into the recruitment of corporate and professional elite of the football industry, focusing on how Sporting Directors recruit non-playing staff. The findings provide a greater understanding of these processes by analysing this context through the lens of embeddedness and its four key concepts: (i) closure, (ii) strength of weak ties, (iii) structural holes and (iv) temporal embeddedness. Table 3 indicates the headline themes and sub-themes.

Embeddedness – closure: the importance of ‘knowing’ someone

In the recruitment of elite positions in football, embeddedness in social structure is evident:

Unless I have worked with someone before, or they have worked with someone I know, it’s highly unlikely they will be considered for a position.

English Championship Sporting Director

The evidence demonstrates that a level of mutual understanding and shared norms and values is common, built upon what Coleman describes as closed networks (1988), vital for building social capital. Granovetter (1985) claimed that all economic action is embedded in social relationships. This places emphasis on the idea that individual (or organisational) behaviour does not occur in a social vacuum (Burt, 1992, 2005; Uzzi, 1996). The study illustrated clearly that trust is a crucial component of corporate culture within the football industry and that this influences the forms of recruitment practiced by Sporting Directors. As one participant explained it:

When you join a club, you don’t know how much time you have. You need people who can hit the ground running. People you can trust. So you need people you know. This could be someone you have worked with, or someone who has worked with someone you trust. But the main thing is you trust them.

English Championship Sporting Director

Following Coleman’s (1973) version of social capital, closure is an essential aspect of social and economic life, and it relates to a network of strong ties or bonding ties (Putman, 2000). The importance of trust and existing relationships appear to be key

Table 3. Results themes and sub-themes.

Overarching themes	Thematic sub themes
Recruiting staff	Closure: The importance of ‘knowing’ someone Strength of weak ties: Using your network to your advantage Structural holes: Winning by filling Temporal embeddedness: the dynamic fluidity of football networks

influences in recruitment decision-making, supporting the case that social relationships influence decision making (Burt, 1992; Uzzi, 1996).

Given the prospective high turnover of staff associated with football (Kelly, 2017) and the need for immediate returns, high levels of trust are desired, which often means working closely with known others (often they are recruited) and developing closed networks of individuals. Often, which is a source of inequality, these high trust networks have a network process termed homophily, where people cluster with people with whom they share similar characteristics. Ultimately, trust appears key for delivery under high demanding environments and often limited periods. In the world of football, where time is limited in terms of job security and longevity, closed networks are often the default position.

I have recruited someone I trust, who I know can do the job, even if they have never done the role before. I need to know that if I say do X, it gets done. You need that quick trust to get things going.

English Premier League Sporting Director

It is evident from the data that people operating within football clubs are not necessarily recruited based on meritocracy. Instead, there appears to be a significant lack of it, and in its place, social capital becomes the dominant factor. This has on-field performance and off-field financial consequences for roles such as Head of Recruitment [responsible for player recruitment]. It raises player welfare, safety, and performance questions concerning the recruitment of Head of Sport Science and Medicine or support staff around the playing squads.

This research focused on the recruitment process rather than the consequence of recruitment. However, these findings allow us to bring the negative aspects of closure into sharp context. Suppose recruitment is in part a product of social capital. In that case, the issue of homophily can be hazardous and damaging to an organisation, a toxic culture can breed in closed groups, and an outlook that is fearful of those deemed ‘outsiders’, or not like us. Indeed, under certain circumstances, homophily can generate highly un-diverse organisations, exemplifying structural issues such as gender and racial inequalities, even when this was absolutely not intentional at the individual level. In addition, as demonstrated in other industries, closure can have detrimental effects on creativity and innovation (Uzzi, 1996). Whilst, evaluating candidates based upon other factors rather than human capital and meritocracy may create a dangerous precedent from player welfare, financial and football performance perspective.

Strength of weak ties: using your network to your advantage

The high turnover of First Team Head Coaches / Managers and back-room staff is systemic of football within England (Bryson et al., 2021). One Sporting Director outlines a different approach to closure, which involves reaching out to people outside their closest network to gather information on potential candidates:

My background is in [player] recruitment, so when it comes to stuff outside my direct expertise, such as medicine, periodisation or coaching, I know I need to be clever. Of course, I know a lot of be topics and know a lot of people who can do the job[s], but I know people who might be ahead of [learning] curve. If I am looking for Head of Performance, I will speak with people I know, who will know who the next best thing is. I would speak

to colleagues universities and people who are the heads of performance even if they are in other sports. This will give me a start.

English Championship Sporting Director

This shows engagement with weak ties both within and outside the football industry to develop a list of potential candidates. It is worthwhile noting that the inner sanctum is significantly based on trust through processes of closure, often an essential ingredient for some sensitive and pressurized working practices and culture. It could be the weak ties that provide a competitive edge. Therefore, it is not necessarily the 'strong ties' within professional networks (i.e. the closest, most trusted connection) but the 'weak ties' (i.e. more removed connections) that lead to success in job searches and recruitment.

An English Premier League Sporting Director noted: 'There is a tricky balance between the most qualified person for the job and the right person for the job. People talk up innovative practices, like taking XX from cricket or YY from cycling, but I am not having it. They need to get football and I prefer people who have been in the game. You have to speak to people in the game and make a decision and stand by it'. These thoughts demonstrate a clear rationale for the strength of weak ties and, in some ways, mirror the findings of Granovetter's 1975 study. To reduce large recruitment costs and also expensive mistakes on the job, employers search for employees through their social network (Lin, 2001).

We have a number of strategies for finding backroom staff [i.e. Heads of Departments]. We usually have a few names that we know could fit in and hit the ground running. Then we speak to other execs (executives), agents, consultants, existing staff and when applicable, players. To get a better understanding of the quality of the candidate.

English Championship Sporting Director

Knowing someone you trust and who, in return, trusts another to do a required role reduces uncertainty and risk in the marketplace. Importantly, it is the weak ties here rather than the strong ties found in closed networks that are important. Weak ties bring new ways of working, innovation, access to new markets and technology whilst reducing inequality in the group. However, they will ultimately change the organisation's culture, which has dangers and advantages.

Structural holes: winning by filling

One English Championship Sporting Director stated: 'I may find the most appropriate Head Coach, however if I don't know their agent, or if it's someone I can't work with for whatever reason, the deal won't happen [and they won't sign the coach]'. This is an example of a broker. Within a structure, this broker fills a structural hole in the system (Burt, 1992), which is a key element in the theoretical framework of embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985). The broker can act as a facilitator or enabler of two parties to engage, or he can also keep them apart and disrupt the true information flow. This hole in the structure appears in many situations where there is a break in the structure between two components (for example people or clubs). It acts as an entrepreneurial opportunity for those who can fill it.

It's very tricky for me, or us as a club to speak to other staff in other clubs or really see [observe] what a sport science, analysts, or first team manager is like. However, we have a good loans programme [initiative to transfer a player from one club to another for a fixed period of time] which means our loans manager has to work with other teams. He feeds information on good practice and people into me directly, and if we like someone, then we have a route to get a sense of whether they are interested in joining us.

English Premier League Sporting Director

Indeed, this is emphasised by the English Premier League Sporting Director who's 'loan manager' acts as a conduit for new information from sources that he/she is not part of. This links to the work of Burt (1992), who suggested that rather than weak ties generating social capital and competitive advantage, it was instead positions in a network that was essential, not simply ties or connections.

Structural holes work on the premise that an actor (i.e. agent or loan manager) bridging a structural hole can broker between two parties; that is, they can introduce people or organisations together, share and direct information (such as opportunities). However, they can also conversely leverage their position, create tension between two parties or control the information and message – either way, structural holes give those who fill it a competitive advantage. One English Premier League Sporting Director noted: 'I am fortunate to have an incredible relationship with XX [Premier League Manager], I know him inside out and he trusts me. So when he gets a job, he makes sure I am interviewed for a role too.'

As noted, actors who fill structural holes are network entrepreneurs (Burt, 1992). The person in the hole has individual social capital, and studies have shown that those who sit in this position have more success and rewards (Burt, 1992; Lin, 2001). They can manipulate information flows and are the first to hear about new ideas. In the world of football, where sport performance (from a science perspective) and business (economic perspective) often talk a different language and have different cultures, the broker in the hole can act as a translator or controller (Burt, 1992; 2005).

Temporal embeddedness: the dynamic fluidity of football networks

Recruitment can be viewed as a stand-alone activity, which takes place in isolation from broader organisational and environmental factors. However, football is a dynamic network of relationships that continual change over time.

We have to account for things like the seasons start and finish, the transfer window, manager and player contracts. We have succession planning, however when someone leaves, like the manager, we have to consider a number of factors, such as, why they left, compensation if relevant, the consequence of this with the board, the players, fans, finance and media. Then we need to consider our league position and time in the season. Sometimes the best laid plans are stretched and challenged, our situation is like an ongoing fluid context, we have to be prepared as best we can, but sometimes recruitment is undertaken at the best of our ability, but under very challenging situations.

English Premier League Sporting Director

Our data highlight that timings such as pre-season, in season play, and transfer windows all influence recruitment decisions. One Premier League Sporting Director outlined: 'We

need to consider how much it will cost to get XX out of the door [i.e. out of the club and contract paid up], alongside how much we will have to pay for the replacement, and what we might need to pay their club to cover their current contract'. Factors such as current and potential staff contracts (i.e. time left on staff contracts and prospective remuneration) significantly influence decision-making. More than that, the timing of one dismissal decision creates temporal considerations for the next [recruitment] decision: 'Of course, if you are removing a key figure like a head coach, it's because something typically isn't going well on or off the field, that influencing the performance of the team. You're likely to already be under pressure from the board, fans and media. At this point, your power in the club is under threat, and you're under the largest amount of pressure to solve the problem and get the right solution – bloody quickly', Premier League Sporting Director.

Temporal embeddedness is often neglected in empirical research but remains an essential element to the framework. There are several ways time impacts economic behaviour and social relationships. First, every transaction or interaction has a time dimension; we never start relationships from a new position every time we meet. We have a history that impacts future transactions. Secondly, networks and social structures are constantly in flux; they have a dynamic element that brings about emergent properties, changes in positions of power, and access to specific resources. Thirdly, the environment in which actors operate is bounded by time. Unlike other industries, government and legislative restrictions dictate when economic transactions can occur (transfer windows). Furthermore, performance is bound in a competitive league system that runs from September to May. These temporal dimensions have huge implications for the management strategy of football clubs, including the recruitment of corporate actors. Time shares a correlation to power; as time shifts, so too does network power; this is demonstrated in the transfer market.

Conclusions

The study contributes novel evidence on recruitment of non-playing staff in elite-level football, specifically in relation to the recruitment of middle-managers or heads of departments. Football is a challenging and often inaccessible environment for researchers; however, we directly access significant football leaders in England in this study. The study reveals the theoretical underpinnings and practical nature of recruitment in football. Recruitment is possibly one of the most guarded aspects of the football industry, and many people involved refuse to share their approaches due to a need to maintain their intellectual property. Our access is somewhat unprecedented and provides managers with a unique insight into the thinking and decision-making around football recruitment.

Theoretically, the evidence shows that whilst typically weak ties are essential for getting a job, in football, trust and knowing people is the most critical aspect in recruitment. It is the strong ties that recruiters rely on most. Sporting Directors draw upon several strategies, which are housed with network theory, that we have made links to, including (i) closure, (ii) strength of weak ties, (iii) structural holes and (iv) temporal embeddedness. We identify homophily in recruitment is a particular area of interest. In this respect, we identify a tendency for individuals to share social ties with others exhibiting similar characteristics, as preferential in recruitment. Whilst our research focused

on recruitment, the consequence of this approach may offer a better understanding of other factors that impact the football industry, such as gender and racial inequalities. More broadly, our research adds to the sparse literature on recruiting non-playing staff in football (Nissen, 2014; Kelly, 2017).

This study responds to these identified gaps born out of a lack of access, empirical papers, theoretical analysis, and practical understanding of recruitment of non-playing staff in elite-level football. The findings raise important questions for managers and leaders involved in recruitment, alongside senior executives, and owners responsible for achieving a Club's or organisations goals. Importantly, decision-makers in football must understand and consider an overreliance on closed networks, which may constrain the flow of information and innovation and ultimately limit the potential performance of the organisation. It is pertinent for them to utilise and endorse transparent, thorough and professional recruitment processes in decision-making positions.

In summary, it could be argued that decisions, such as recruitment are based on self-interest and the context shaping those decisions rarely interferes with the decision-making process. People are hired and fired based on the performance and stock of human capital, and financial decisions are made selfishly in pursuit of profit (performance). Yet, as we have identified, whilst this may be true in certain circumstances, the recruitment of staff and core business decisions as social actions are embedded in social relationships. Indeed, these relationships frame social action within the context of the institution, in this case football clubs. We have identified that structure can facilitate and constrain action, that gaps in the structure offer opportunities, and that types of ties impact homophily and creativity. Interactions always has a history; the micro-episodes of organisational life generate a culture that ultimately impact back upon future and present micro-episodes. Indeed, to talk of culture is to talk of structure, and structure always informs social action.

Limitations and future research

As with any research, there are inherent limitations. Firstly, the sample of Sporting Directors are entirely working within the English system. Therefore, our research can be viewed as English centric, however, we believe our work covers a European perspective in some respects, given that many of our leaders operate across European contexts in the recruitment of players and non-playing staff. Yet, there is an opportunity for future work to capture a more diverse sample to focus specifically on cultural comparisons of recruitment strategies and the role of social networks within football. There is also an opportunity to deepen our understanding by conducting parallel investigations into established sports industries – i.e. North America – as well as emerging nations such as the Middle East North Africa Region, and China. The role of the Sporting Director is developing, therefore, there is high heterogeneity in terms of roles and responsibilities relating to recruitment, and since this research was conducted, the role may have also evolved for those involved. To capture the changing dynamics, and the temporal embeddedness of recruitment decisions, future work should focus on longitudinal work. This type of work may suit more quantitative approaches, which would allow the dynamic structures inherent in recruitment decisions to be mapped and modelled to quantify the implications of tie strength, and recruitment

and employment success. Finally, our research into the process raised questions into the consequences of these decisions. More work is needed to examine the consequence of recruitment decisions on topics such as culture, player welfare, performance and creativity and innovation.

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