

WORK ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION IN SPORTS MANAGEMENT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN EXPERIENCED AND FUTURE MANAGERS

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Abstract: This study aimed to examine work engagement and motivation among experienced and aspiring sports managers, two groups operating at different stages of their professional development. Drawing on the Job Demands–Resources model and Self-Determination Theory, the research employed a quasi-experimental, comparative design involving 44 participants – 22 experienced managers and 22 future managers. Instruments used included the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) and an adapted version of the MPAM-R measuring intrinsic and social motivation. Descriptive analyses revealed slight differences between groups, with experienced managers scoring higher in dedication and intrinsic motivation (enjoyment and competence), while future managers showed higher levels of vigor, absorption, and social motivation. However, independent samples t-tests and Mann–Whitney U tests found no statistically significant differences between groups. These findings suggest that engagement and motivation may be less dependent on career stage and more influenced by personal values and contextual factors. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions that sustain engagement and foster intrinsic motivation across all stages of a managerial career in sports. Implications for leadership development, human resource practices, and sports management education are discussed.

Keywords: work engagement, motivation, sports management, intrinsic motivation, career development.

Introduction

In recent years, the professional environment has undergone significant changes, becoming increasingly dynamic and unpredictable. In this context, work engagement and motivation have gained importance as essential psychological resources in achieving organizational performance, particularly in the sports sector, where pressure, competition, and change are constant.

Sports managers play a critical role in shaping the organizational climate and ensuring the long-term success of sports institutions. Their ability to stay motivated and engaged directly influences their decision-making, leadership style, and the performance of those they manage. Understanding the factors that drive

motivation and work engagement among current and future sports managers is therefore a valuable endeavor for both researchers and practitioners in sports management and psychology.

In recent years, the professional sports environment has faced unique challenges and transformations, particularly exacerbated by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Sports managers have had to adapt quickly to unprecedented situations involving disrupted event schedules, financial pressures, health protocols, and significant changes in consumer behavior and fan engagement (Skinner & Smith, 2021). Additionally, digitalization and technological innovation have rapidly reshaped the managerial role in sports

organizations. The rise of digital platforms, virtual fan engagement strategies, data analytics, and remote management tools have not only created opportunities but also additional complexities, which managers must navigate skillfully (Ratten, 2020).

Moreover, the shifting landscape of professional sports has placed increased emphasis on psychological resilience, flexibility, and proactive leadership behaviors among managers (Fletcher & Arnold, 2021). Emerging research highlights the crucial role psychological resources such as intrinsic motivation and work engagement play in equipping sports professionals to cope effectively with these evolving demands and uncertainties (Wagstaff et al., 2022). Consequently, understanding the dynamics of motivation and engagement in this new context is critical for sports organizations aiming to sustain performance and foster employee well-being.

Work engagement is often described as a positive, fulfilling state of mind related to one's work, characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). It is regarded as the opposite of burnout and is positively associated with mental health, intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and job performance (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Similarly, motivation – defined as the internal or external force that drives behavior – is a multidimensional construct. Over the years, several theoretical frameworks have attempted to explain it. One of the most influential is Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), which proposes a progression from basic physiological needs to self-actualization. Other theories, such as Herzberg's two-factor theory (1987) and McClelland's theory of needs (1985), highlight the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators and the psychological needs for achievement, power, and affiliation.

Despite the growing body of literature on these topics, there is still a need for

empirical studies that explore how motivation and work engagement manifest across different career stages. This study aims to investigate these variables among experienced and aspiring sports managers, seeking to identify potential differences and commonalities that could inform future training, recruitment, and performance optimization strategies in the field of sports management. This study contributes to the existing literature by addressing a comparative perspective, focusing specifically on experienced versus future sports managers. By examining potential differences in work engagement and motivation across career stages, the findings can inform targeted professional development initiatives, human resources strategies, and educational curricula designed to support the evolving needs of sports management professionals in a complex and dynamic professional landscape.

Management and leadership in sports

Management, as a discipline, has evolved significantly over the last century, encompassing a wide range of definitions and functions. Fayol's classical perspective (1916) identified five key management functions: planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating, and controlling. These functions remain central to understanding managerial behavior and organizational performance today.

In sports management, leadership is inseparable from effective management. Leadership is often defined as the ability to influence others toward achieving common goals by mobilizing both emotional and operational commitment (Zlate, 2004). According to Mallory (2012), leadership is "the art of serving others by equipping them with the training, tools, and support necessary to reach their full potential." From a transformational perspective, leadership entails not only managing tasks but also inspiring and empowering individuals to grow personally and professionally (Bass, 1997).

Different leadership styles have been explored extensively in literature. Tejeda (2001) proposed a comprehensive framework including styles based on idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and laissez-faire, among others. These styles are particularly relevant in sports, where managers are expected to lead dynamic teams, foster motivation, and navigate constant performance pressure (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016).

Effective sports leadership requires traits such as extraversion, courage, risk-taking, emotional intelligence, and empathy. These attributes enable managers to adapt their strategies, connect with their teams, and create a supportive yet high-performance culture. Investigating the characteristics of sports managers, specialists emphasized the importance of the relationship-oriented leadership style, experienced managers showing more support for employees, compared to early career managers (Predoiu et al., 2023).

Recent advancements in sports management literature emphasize the relevance of contemporary leadership approaches such as distributed leadership, agile leadership, and emotional intelligence-based leadership. Distributed leadership involves delegating leadership roles throughout an organization rather than centralizing decision-making in a single authority. This approach is particularly effective in sports, where diverse expertise and rapid adaptation to change are crucial for performance and organizational resilience (Jones & Spamer, 2022). Agile leadership complements this perspective by focusing on flexibility, continuous learning, and responsiveness to environmental uncertainty, qualities increasingly necessary in sports organizations facing rapid digital transformation and fluctuating market demands (Ryan & Tipu, 2022). In this context, it is worth mentioning Predoiu et al. (2024a) findings, experienced managers

in sports organizations needing significantly less emotional support (as a coping strategy) in stressful conditions at the workplace.

Moreover, the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in sports management has gained considerable attention. EI, defined as the ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions effectively, has been linked to higher levels of team cohesion, better conflict resolution, and improved managerial effectiveness in sports environments (Laborde et al., 2021). Leaders demonstrating high EI can better navigate interpersonal relationships, motivate team members, and foster an inclusive and supportive organizational culture, significantly enhancing team and organizational performance (Chan & Mallett, 2021). It seems that experienced managers in sports field control significantly better their own emotions (compared to novice sports managers), are more sociable, rely less on intuition and more on concrete and direct experiences, when interpreting information (Predoiu et al., 2021).

Not least, gender-related differences were explored in sports managers, for example in terms of sleep quality and burnout (exhaustion and work disengagement factors, see Predoiu et al., 2024b). The findings asserted that female successful managers show higher daytime sleepiness, poorer sleep quality and a higher level of exhaustion, compared to male managers, maybe due to “the responsibilities a woman has, in general, in raising children, in addition to her career”.

Work Engagement

Work engagement has become a central topic in organizational psychology, particularly due to its strong relationship with employee well-being and performance. Defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, engagement is seen as the opposite of burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

- Vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, along with persistence in the face of difficulties.

- Dedication reflects being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and inspiration.

- Absorption describes being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in work, where time passes quickly and detachment becomes difficult.

Studies have shown that engaged employees are more productive, resilient, and psychologically healthy (Lok & Crawford, 2004). Current research underscores the critical role of work engagement in driving sustainable organizational performance and enhancing employee well-being in sports management. Recent studies indicate that highly engaged sports managers contribute significantly to their organizations' effectiveness by exhibiting greater resilience to stress, higher creativity, and enhanced decision-making capabilities under pressure (Knight et al., 2022). Moreover, engaged employees demonstrate higher loyalty and lower turnover intentions, crucial for the stability of sports organizations dealing with constant industry pressures and transitions (De Clercq et al., 2021). Thus, strategies aimed at increasing work engagement can provide tangible organizational benefits, particularly within the context of sports, where demands and performance expectations are continuously elevated.

Motivation

Motivation is a foundational concept in understanding human behavior in the workplace. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) presents motivation as a progression from basic survival needs to the pursuit of self-actualization. Complementary to this, Herzberg's two-factor theory (1987) distinguishes between intrinsic motivators (e.g., achievement, recognition) and extrinsic factors (e.g., salary, job security).

McClelland's theory (1985) introduces three core motivational drivers:

- Need for achievement – the drive to excel and succeed according to internal standards.

- Need for power – the desire to influence and control others.

- Need for affiliation – the need to form close and friendly relationships.

In the context of sports management, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators play a role. Intrinsic motivation, often driven by enjoyment, personal growth, and the challenge of mastering new skills, is critical for sustained engagement and performance (Ryan et al., 1997; Bakar, 2014). Extrinsic motivators such as financial rewards or recognition may reinforce desired behaviors but tend to be less effective in the long term if not supported by intrinsic values. Understanding how motivation interacts with work engagement provides valuable insights into how sports managers can be supported to achieve high performance and personal fulfillment in their careers.

Recent studies have highlighted the complex relationship between motivation and stress factors in sports management contexts, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic's ongoing impacts. Pandemic-induced disruptions significantly affected managers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivational profiles, with factors such as increased job insecurity, financial instability, and changing work dynamics potentially undermining intrinsic motivation while intensifying extrinsic pressures (Filo et al., 2021). However, research also indicates that intrinsic motivation and autonomous motivation regulation remain critical buffers against burnout and psychological distress, reinforcing the importance of cultivating meaningful and personally rewarding managerial roles in sports organizations (Legg et al., 2022). Addressing these motivational dynamics proactively can enable sports organizations to better support managerial staff, optimize

performance, and foster greater individual and organizational resilience.

Materials and method

Research questions

- 1) What are the differences between experienced and future sports managers in terms of motivation and work engagement?
- 2) Which factors of work engagement and motivation are specific to experienced and successful sport managers, according to gender?

Research design

This study employed a quasi-experimental, comparative design aimed at assessing and comparing levels of work engagement and motivation among two distinct groups: experienced sports managers and future sports managers (students preparing for managerial roles). The primary goal was to explore differences across career stages and examine whether certain psychological dimensions vary as a function of experience. The dependent variables were work engagement and work-related motivation, measured quantitatively through standardized psychological scales. The independent variable was the group type (experienced vs. future managers).

Participants

A total of 44 participants were recruited for the study. They were divided equally into two groups:

- 22 experienced sports managers (15 males, 7 females), currently active in various professional sport settings (hold management positions in school sports clubs, sports federations or private sports clubs).
- 22 future sports managers (6 males, 16 females), enrolled in graduate programs in sports management.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 69 years. The sample was selected based on voluntary participation, and ethical standards were ensured throughout the data collection process, including informed consent and anonymity.

Instruments

a) Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9)

Work engagement was measured using the short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). The instrument consists of 9 items, equally divided among the three core dimensions:

- Vigor (e.g., "At my work, I feel bursting with energy"),
- Dedication (e.g., "I am enthusiastic about my job"),
- Absorption (e.g., "I get carried away when I am working").

Participants rated items on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 ("Never") to 6 ("Always/Every day").

b) Work Motivation Questionnaire (adapted MPAM-R)

Motivation was assessed using a version adapted from the Motivational Physical Activity Measure – Revised (MPAM-R) developed by Ryan et al. (1997). For this study, 18 items were selected to represent three motivational dimensions relevant to professional settings:

- Social Motivation (e.g., "I like being with others who are involved in this activity"),
- Enjoyment/Pleasure (e.g., "This activity is fun"),
- Competence/Challenge (e.g., "I want to get better at what I do").

Items were rated on a 7-point scale, from 1 ("Not at all true for me") to 7 ("Very true for me").

Procedure

The data collection process was carried out between November 2023 and June 2024, using *Google Forms* as the primary tool for distributing the questionnaires. Participants completed the surveys online at their convenience.

All ethical considerations were addressed: written informed consent was obtained; participation was voluntary and individuals could withdraw at any time; responses were anonymous and treated confidentially.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, medians, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis), as well as inferential statistical methods:

- Independent samples *t*-tests were used to compare group means (experienced vs. future managers) regarding work engagement and motivation dimensions.
- Levene's test was applied to assess homogeneity of variances.
- For gender-based comparisons, the non-parametric Mann–Whitney *U* test was used due to unequal and reduced group sizes and potential deviations from normality.

All analyses were performed using SPSS software, with $p < .05$ considered the threshold for statistical significance.

Results

This section presents the statistical findings derived from the comparison between experienced sports managers and future sports managers, based on their scores in work engagement and work motivation.

Work Engagement

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) measured three dimensions of engagement: Vigor, Dedication, and Absorption. The descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Work Engagement

Engagement Dimension	Group	Mean	SD
Dedication	Experienced Managers	13.3	3.55
	Future Managers	12.3	5.55
Vigor	Experienced Managers	10.4	4.75
	Future Managers	11.4	5.67
Absorption	Experienced Managers	10.4	4.22
	Future Managers	11.0	5.33

Results indicated that experienced managers scored slightly higher on Dedication, while future managers scored marginally higher on Vigor and Absorption.

To test for significant differences between the two groups, independent samples *t*-tests were performed. As shown in Table 2, none of the differences reached statistical significance ($p > .05$).

Table 2. Independent Samples *t*-Test – Work Engagement

Dimension	<i>t</i> (df = 42)	<i>p</i> -value
Dedication	0.712	.480
Vigor	-0.663	.511
Absorption	-0.439	.663

These results suggest that both experienced and aspiring sports managers report comparable levels of work engagement, with no statistically significant differences in any of the three measured dimensions.

Work Motivation

Work motivation was assessed across three factors: Enjoyment/Pleasure, Social Motivation, and Competence/Challenge. Descriptive results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Work Motivation

Motivation Factor	Group	Mean	SD
Enjoyment/Pleasure	Experienced Managers	39.4	6.67
	Future Managers	34.8	12.6
Social Motivation	Experienced Managers	22.3	7.66
	Future Managers	22.7	7.24
Competence/Challenge	Experienced Managers	34.5	6.34
	Future Managers	33.6	10.1

While experienced managers reported slightly higher motivation based on enjoyment and competence, future managers scored marginally higher on social motivation. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

Table 4. Independent Samples t-Test – Work Motivation

Motivation Factor	t(df = 42)	p-value
Enjoyment/Pleasure	1.522	.136
Social Motivation	-0.182	.856
Competence/Challenge	0.375	.710

As with engagement, no significant differences were found in motivation scores between the two groups ($p > .05$).

Gender-based analysis

To further explore the impact of gender within the experienced and future manager groups, the Mann–Whitney U test was used. Results showed:

- Among male managers, those with more experience reported higher enjoyment motivation ($U = 38$, $p > 0.05$), while novices showed slightly higher competence motivation ($U = 33.5$, $p > 0.05$).
- Among female managers, experienced participants showed higher scores in enjoyment and dedication ($U = 55.5$, $p > 0.05$, respectively $U = 51.5$, $p > 0.05$), but the sample size limits generalizability (and the differences between groups were not significant, the same as for men).

Discussion

This study investigated the levels of work engagement and motivation among experienced and aspiring sports managers. While descriptive data suggested small

variations across groups – particularly in dedication, vigor, and intrinsic motivation, the results revealed no statistically significant differences between them. Slight trends indicate that experienced managers may be more dedicated and motivated by personal achievement, while future managers are slightly more energized and socially motivated. Gender appears to play a minor role (though further research is needed with larger samples to confirm these patterns). The comparable engagement scores between groups suggest that career stage may not be a decisive factor in determining how invested individuals are in their professional development, at least within the context of sports. This finding aligns with the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model proposed by Bakker and Demerouti (2008), which posits that personal and job resources (e.g., autonomy, competence, goal clarity) play a more substantial role in engagement than demographic or structural variables alone.

Experienced managers scored marginally higher on dedication, which could be attributed to their long-term commitment to their roles and alignment with organizational values. On the other hand, future managers showed slightly higher levels of vigor and absorption, possibly reflecting the enthusiasm and novelty of being at the start of a meaningful career path. These patterns are consistent with the findings of Schaufeli and Bakker (2003), who observed that engagement is fueled by both emotional investment and a sense of challenge, which can be high in both newcomers and veterans for different reasons.

In terms of motivation, both groups exhibited high levels, but with subtle differences. Experienced managers appeared to be more driven by intrinsic motivators such as enjoyment and personal growth, while aspiring managers leaned slightly toward social motivation, perhaps reflecting their academic environments where collaboration is emphasized. These findings are in line with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which distinguishes between autonomous motivation (intrinsic and identified regulation) and controlled motivation (external and introjected regulation) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When individuals engage in activities because they find them enjoyable or personally meaningful, they tend to demonstrate greater persistence and well-being. It is likely that experienced managers have developed greater autonomous motivation, while aspiring managers are still forming their motivational orientations. Furthermore, Salas-Vallina et al. (2020) emphasize that work engagement and intrinsic motivation reinforce each other, creating a positive feedback loop that enhances performance, creativity, and job satisfaction. The results of this study reflect such a loop among both groups of participants, albeit through slightly different motivational pathways.

Practical implications

The findings have meaningful implications for human resources practices in sports organizations and educational institutions:

- Recruitment and development programs should focus on fostering intrinsic motivation across all experience levels by encouraging autonomy, mastery, and purpose.
- Training curricula for students and early-career professionals could benefit from emphasizing emotional resilience, goal-setting, and reflective practice to deepen their engagement.

This study offers practical insights that can directly inform management practices and educational programs in the sports sector (beyond the theoretical contributions). Organizations aiming to enhance employee engagement and intrinsic motivation should emphasize the creation of work environments that support autonomy, provide clear feedback, and facilitate meaningful professional development opportunities (De Clercq et al., 2021). For experienced sports managers, leadership training emphasizing emotional intelligence, and recognition systems highlighting long-term contributions could further deepen their sense of dedication and intrinsic motivation, fostering retention and sustained performance (Chan & Mallett, 2021). For future sports managers (students and early-career professionals) institutions should integrate practical training modules focusing on resilience, adaptability, and proactive coping skills. Such programs could leverage simulation-based learning, role-playing scenarios, and interactive case studies to better prepare aspiring professionals for the complexity and dynamic nature of contemporary sports management roles (Fletcher & Arnold, 2021). Additionally, considering the significant impact of digital transformation, sports organizations and educational institutions should prioritize digital literacy and technological competencies as integral components of professional training and development.

Skills in data analytics, digital communication platforms, and virtual team management have become essential for successful leadership in sports. Providing targeted training in these areas will not only enhance managerial efficiency but also contribute to higher levels of engagement by reducing "*technostress*" and increasing self-efficacy among managers (Ratten, 2020; Filo et al., 2021). Ultimately, acknowledging these practical dimensions and proactively addressing them in professional development strategies can help sports organizations attract, develop, and retain talented individuals, ensuring both individual well-being and long-term organizational performance.

Limitations and future directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size ($N = 44$) limits generalizability and statistical power. Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which may introduce biases such as social desirability or response consistency (Predoiu et al., 2022). Third, the design was cross-sectional, preventing any conclusions about causality or changes over time.

Future research should consider: longitudinal designs to examine how motivation and engagement evolve over a manager's career; larger and more diverse samples, including participants from different sports disciplines or organizational contexts; mixed methods approaches, integrating qualitative interviews to better understand the subjective experiences behind engagement and motivation metrics.

Conclusion

The present study explored work engagement and motivation among experienced and future sports managers, contributing to a growing body of literature examining psychological resources within the field of sports management. Despite the absence of statistically significant differences between the two groups, the results offer valuable

insights into the nature of engagement and motivation across career stages. One of the key takeaways is that both groups demonstrated high levels of engagement and motivation, suggesting that these psychological states are not exclusive to seasoned professionals. Rather, they seem to reflect an internalized commitment to the sports domain – a field often driven by personal interest, competitive spirit, and intrinsic satisfaction.

The observed trends, such as higher dedication in experienced managers and elevated vigor in aspiring managers, point to the developmental dynamics of engagement, which may shift in expression over time without diminishing in intensity. In terms of motivation, both intrinsic and social motives were evident, albeit in varying degrees across groups. These observations are consistent with Gagné and Deci's (2005) perspective that work motivation is best understood through a continuum ranging from extrinsic regulation to intrinsic self-determination, shaped by the social context and perceived autonomy. From a practical standpoint, organizations and academic institutions should focus not only on sustaining motivation and engagement in seasoned professionals but also on nurturing these attributes in early-career individuals through environments that support autonomy, mastery, purpose, and meaningful relationships.

This study encourages a shift from experience-based assumptions toward a more nuanced understanding of psychological engagement, one that recognizes the importance of both personal drivers and contextual support in shaping high-performing individuals in sports management.

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