

Pro soccer management: A game of two halves



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Professional soccer is about much more than the playing field. Clubs have developed subsystems to deal with their commercial

imperatives.

Once upon a time, sporting success was the sole measure of a soccer club's performance. But with increasing professionalism and intense commercialization, clubs have had to design new strategies and objectives to adapt to this change - a change that has turned major sporting organizations into important business concerns, with all the range of vested interests that implies.

In their paper, [IESE Prof. Sandalio Gómez](#), Carlos Martí and Magdalena Opazo aim to uncover the principal structural characteristics of elite Spanish soccer clubs in the light of the challenges that have arisen as a result of professionalization and commercialization - processes which demand a rationalization of operations internally and an adequate management of relations with the external environment.

Their paper, "[The Structural Characteristics of Sports Organizations: Differentiation within Elite Spanish Professional Football Clubs](#)," aims to answer the questions: What functional areas do these organizations consider relevant? How have these areas developed over the past 10 years? Is it possible to define organizational patterns among these elite clubs?

The most important subsystems distinguished by a club within Spanish professional soccer are: sport, communication, external relations, commerce, finance, wealth management, marketing, facilities and legal and social affairs. The structure of an organization responds to its core task, which in the case of soccer means forming a competitive team.

But organizations are systems of interrelated individual behaviors. Differentiation has internal implications, in terms of the way people work together, and external ones regarding the definition of subunits with the responsibility of managing external challenges in order for the organization to adjust to its relevant environments.

As the audience has multiplied and professionals command higher remuneration, sporting organizations have been pushed into developing commercial strategies: the selling of television rights, image licenses, and the development of various commercial activities associated with media exposure for teams and players.

Sport and finance surprisingly absent

The authors studied between 14 and 18 clubs per season during the period 1996-2006, examining what subsystems the top clubs have developed. This period represents an important time in Spanish soccer, when TV revenues were on the rise and investment in

player signings soared.

The authors based their approach on the concept of differentiation, which refers to the differences, both cognitive and emotional, between directors operating in different functional departments, as well as the difference in the formal structure between those departments.

Despite the fundamental role of the sport task, not all clubs differentiate a sports subsystem within their management, and the number of clubs with a sport subsystem only began to increase from the 2002-03 season onward.

Surprisingly, even though there are vast budgets involved, barely half the clubs distinguish an economic-financial subsystem, represented by a treasurer or financial director.

A third subsystem relates to communications. This is relatively well represented among the clubs in the sample. The mean number of clubs that distinguish a communication subsystem during the given 10 seasons is 8.7, much higher than for sport or finance, which show a mean of 3.7 and 5 respectively.

Finally, the development of subsystems that distinguish commerce and marketing is 2.1 and 2.9 respectively. These low means are explained by the fact that these subsystems were practically non-existent during the first five seasons considered.

The data shows that the organizational structure of the clubs often seems to be designed around certain positions rather than around defined functional areas. The structure typically revolves around the figure of the president or CEO. The clubs then distinguish a few of the tasks associated with some of the above subsystems.

However, there are still clubs that do not distinguish any subsystem within their management team, not even in regard to sport and finance.

The data also indicates that the clubs define the specific tasks in relation to their internal characteristics, rather than looking towards what their competitors are doing when confronted with the same challenges.

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