



Why we need more women in sport analytics

BY LIZ WANLESS

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I stand up, walk to the front of the room, and introduce myself and my presentation. While I discuss utilizing a discrete version of the Bass model to predict the diffusion of natural language processing in professional sport business, I connect with the sea of faces attending the sport track of an annual analytics conference. The realization hits me: I am one of the only women in this room ... again.

It is a simple awareness, but I know how this minority status has affected my career. Sport analytics is the overlap of two male-dominated fields: sport management and analytics. Women in such fields face a series of hurdles: overcoming imposter syndrome, circumventing societal stereotypes, negotiating their authenticity to seem appealing for professional advancement, spending more energy to prove themselves, and the additional stress and anxiety associated with any and all of the above.

No matter the performance level, and no matter the support from male colleagues — and I have experienced a lot of it — women in male-dominated fields will doubt themselves more severely than their male counterparts. In a Harvard survey issued to computer science students in 2015, women with up to eight years of programming experience reported confidence levels similar to men with up to only one year of experience.

In the industry and in higher education, I am glad to have powerful female leaders in sport analytics and tech (including Jessica Gelman, CEO of Kraft Analytics Group, and Marilou McFarlane, founder of Women in Sports Tech Inc. and adjunct professor at the University of San Francisco, as examples) but finding women throughout the profession working at various levels can feel like the needle in the haystack scenario. Female sport analytics representation ranges from 15% to 24% across the Big Four North American professional sport leagues. Many teams within these leagues have zero representation.

We need more women in sport analytics. Supporting inclusion simultaneously encourages innovation. But most importantly: with women's sports growing as a business and as a fandom (a Nielsen report revealed that average monetary size of women's sport sponsorship deals increased by 49% from 2013 to 2017; 84% of fans from major global markets show interest in women's sports; and 150 million viewers tuned in for the 2017 Union of European Football Associations Women's Euro), our challenge is to ensure that the professionals measuring the changing dynamic of sport are reflective of the people engaging with sports.

To reinforce why this is vital, here are the business opportunities we enjoy when we increase the ratio of women to men.

Better Product. For sport organizations targeting female customers, women are vital to creating comprehensive analytic solutions. When Fitbit released the high-in-demand period tracker for its female customers, the company experienced blowback for a short-sided approach. Women could only track up to 10 days for their periods (not enough for many women) and could only choose from a limited list of menstrual cycle symptoms to record. The need for more of the female perspective was glaring.

From data collection to solution deployment, as female customers are increasingly important to sport business, customer analytics designed to create insights for women warrant the female perspective. Customer retention models, just one example of foundational customer analytics, need be designed comprehensively to retain women as well as men.

Better Performance. Sport organizations optimizing analytic solutions to business problems rely on the performance of analytic teams. Women demonstrate strong functioning in emotional intelligence, collaboration, and problem solving, among other important traits for successful teamwork. It makes sense that the National Center for Women and Information Technology reported that an increased number of women on teams contributed to a higher overall team intelligence. In addition, teams of equal men and women were "more likely to experiment, be creative, share knowledge, and fulfill tasks."

Better Outcomes. Given the advantages associated with women and high-performance teams, it is no surprise that evidence supports gender diversity as an advantage for performance metric achievement. MassChallenge, a global network in startup support, investigated the role of women in startup success for over 1,500 businesses. Female-led startups accrued 10% more revenue over time despite less initial investment. Additionally, in

a field experiment conducted within the Department of International Business Studies at the Amsterdam College of Applied Sciences, 45 student teams with varying levels of gender representation were tasked with establishing and organizing a small business for one calendar year. Equal-gender teams outperformed male-dominated teams in both sales and profits.

The development of comprehensive analytic solutions, high-performance analytic teams, and metric achievement will all benefit sport business — and women contribute uniquely to these outcomes.

This is a call to all women interested in sport analytics: Raise your hand even when it feels uncomfortable. And to sport organization managers: Recruiting and retaining female applicants for sport analytics roles provides numerous benefits. Having access and a sense of belonging are integral to women continuing in technical fields. Fostering inclusive culture in sport analytics makes good business sense. And while change will take action from both male and female colleagues, the impact on the culture and bottom line will reflect the new realities and opportunities of sports.

Liz Wanless is assistant director of analytics at Ohio University. This piece is crafted in partnership with The Collective Think Tank, a global consortium of academic minds and industry leaders focused on gender parity and improving diversity. The collaboration is led by The Collective, Wasserman's women-focused division.

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