

Essential HR upgrades are needed for workplace diversity, accountability

BY JANELLE WELLS AND SHANNON KERWIN
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Gallup shared that 50% of U.S. workers engaged in quiet quitting in 2022 — and certainly the sports world was no exception. In 2022, there were professional teams that had limited to no performance metrics, no onboarding, no management training.

How are multimillion-dollar sports companies still operating human resource management (HRM) like startup mom-and-pop stores?

We repeatedly encounter stories of employee maltreatment, hiring inequities, and egregious acts of racism, misogyny, and homophobia defining sports experiences. Imbalance stems from how we bring people into sports organizations. Ideally, through our HRM practices, we'd recruit people into our boardrooms, hire individuals into our clubs as coaches and managers, and evaluate performance based on success benchmarks. This process should be equitable, but often goes unactualized and unmanaged.

One of our studies revealed sport sales hiring managers hired from their insulated networks — telling HR who they wanted to hire, with limited concern for experience or diversity. Other scholars revealed that while an entire pool of candidates were perceived to have similar success potential, female candidates were less likely to be offered the position.

Once hired we should constantly be evaluating talent — that is, if half the organization takes performance evaluations seriously. Yet we then promote the highest individual contributors while we've not prepared them with the tools to manage people. We cannot ask industry talent to change if we lack the very structure to provide the guidance and feedforward that one requires to change.

If we want to blow up the sports system to forge a safer, more equitable space for all, we need to acknowledge a current inability in our industry to manage our most valuable asset — our people — and move toward accountable workplaces.

Our biggest HRM problems illustrate the greatest opportunities at each step of major talent processes.

We Can Upgrade Recruiting

Seventy four percent of millennials and Gen Z are planning to quit their jobs because of a lack of skills-building opportunity, according to a study by Amazon and Workplace Intelligence. Turnover in sports personnel has become so commonplace that we expect personnel to leave in a few months, maybe even burning out and leaving the industry altogether. If we spent time recruiting, hiring, developing, and retaining employees, would they stay?

Although hiring managers consider themselves rational decision-makers, they often make hiring decisions based on feelings rather than facts within the first five minutes of the interview. Further complicating the overconfidence in personnel selection, most interviewers hold a stereotype of the ideal candidate, which is inconsistent across interviewers.

Move beyond archaic, biased hiring practices to create structured recruitment plans grounded in organizational priorities — not individual goals. Go beyond your personal networks. Train hiring managers with evidence-based tactics. Partner HRM with groups who acknowledge and connect with underrepresented populations who want to work in sports, but have been historically shut out (e.g., WRK. letsdownrk.com; Black Sport Business Academy; Latinx in Sports; Sports & Entertainment Equity Network, SEEN; Athlete Ally).

We Should Reinvent Onboarding

Orienting and onboarding new staff and new managers is nonexistent or outdated in sport organizations. Describing the organizational structure, process, and culture takes more than half-day training, computer access, and some continental breakfast. Orientation can be a place for equitable practices, but oftentimes results in rushed introductions; sport leaders fail to reflect on the inequitable practices that are embedded and reproduced during these initiations. However, very little is done to recognize and embrace the complexity of the talent we need to advance and innovate sports.

To ensure an equitable welcome in sports, reinvent the onboarding process by engaging talent throughout their career journey. Per Gallup, in 2022 only 15% of employees (33% in the U.S.) were actively engaged at work. If sports provides some of the most amazing fan experiences, why do we flatline on the employee experience? Actively identify outdated processes and construct onboarding processes with dynamic interactions and communication. Reassess employee needs and blow up traditional notions of hierarchy. Establishing employee experience from the moment you begin recruiting talent to providing a welcoming gift, introducing a 30-60-90 plan, connecting a first-year ambassador, and providing a senior-leader reverse mentor program.

We Must Reevaluate How We Evaluate

Employees demand to be developed and invested in — not just overworked and underpaid for the love of the game or team. While that worked 20 years ago, today is a new ballgame and the next generation wants to reskill and upskill their way through their career ladder. Effective companies are providing the rungs for them.

To evolve and adapt to a changing workforce, sports leaders must reevaluate performance reviews, encourage regular professional development discussions, and provide upskilling opportunities that focus on individual growth. Reward structures and evaluations must be person-centric and respect the needs of employees.

Our industry is one that people gravitate toward because humanity and personal achievement are on the surface of all that we do and share; it's a major problem if, beneath that surface, support for that achievement is lacking. Reassessing, reinventing and sharing upgraded HRM practices as organizations will build a better foundation for our industry's future. The antidote to quiet quitting is loud consideration.

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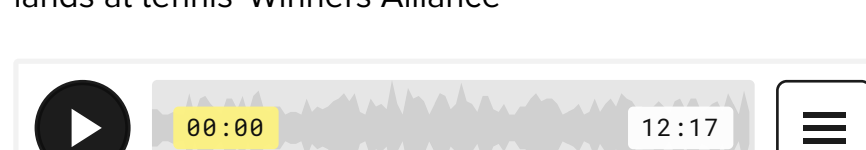
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