Executive managers in the private sports market sector

Research led in partnership with the French Job Centre for Managers (APEC) and directed by Nathalie LEROUX in collaboration with Yan DALLA PRIA (MCF, University Université Paris Nanterre, CeRSM).

The aim of this research project, started in 2008, is to study the joint construction of the private sector selling sport and its executive managers in France since the 1990s. Considering the change in the private sports market sector in the last twenty years or so, administrative and sales executive managers are key actors and, at the same time, their professionalization seems to reflect the changes in this sector. The main issue in this research is the impact of the structuring of a business sector (sport) on its executive managers and reciprocally on the influence of the profiles of these executives on the changes in the sector. First of all, in order to show that sport is really an emerging sector, we bring to light the structuring processes of an “organisational field” according to the studies of P.J. DiMaggio and W.W. Powell (1). Then, unlike approaches in social science (2), which studied the various processes segmenting the executive category (diplomas, hierarchy or gender…) we study the impact of the specificities of a business sector on the profiles and career paths of its executives transposing the analysis approach constructed by M. Maurice, F. Sellier and J.J. Silvestre (3) to reflect on the societal effect related to salaries in the industrial sector in France and Germany. According to this research, a sector is characterised by a specific system of interdependences between an educational link (training / experience / position), an organisational link (power structure and modes of HRM) and a system of professional relationships (called “industrial link” by the authors of this approach, corresponding to social relationships related to the valuation principle concerning individuals), which would define a certain type of qualification – in this case, executive managers.

From an empirical viewpoint, this programme has been set up in six subsectors of sport: mass-market retailing of sport articles, businesses specialised in sport events, professional clubs, sports equipment manufacturers, sponsors and sport media. 117 interviews were carried out with key company executive managers of these subsectors, union representatives, members of professional associations and people in charge of training in sport management.

From the confrontation between the three links presented above, two specific logics for the construction of the management category appear in the private sports market sector: executives we call “enchanters” and others we call “rationalizers”.

- The executives called “enchanters” are in an intermediation position between the world of sport and/or its image, on one side and, on the other, their company or clients. They portray sport in order to convert it into an economic value for the company they work for. These executives are prominent in mass-market retailing of sports articles, sports equipment manufacturers, communication agencies through sport and the sponsoring services of advertisers.
- The executives called “rationalizers” can be found more specifically in the areas of sports media and professional football clubs. They work in organizations endowed with the strong operational mainstay of a professional group. They represent vectors of rationalization of these subsectors: their role is to inoculate an economic logic into the core of the profession. In these subsectors, close to the core of the sector and generator of a passion for sport, one of the major problems is to rationalize the activity in order to make it more successful and profitable without however killing the passion for sport which feeds it.

The highlighting of these two images of executive managers clearly accounts for the two complementary forces crossing the sports market sector. On the one hand, this sector is submitted to a process of commodification or “economicization” of sport (putting it on the market) which results in particular in the rationalization of its modes of management and which turns sport into just another economic good. On the other, the sport sector is also moved by a vast process of exploitation and exaltation of this passion for sport which, at times, is instrumented in order to enchant or euphemize the underlying economic logics.


(2) Cf. notamment le Groupement De Recherches « Cadres » dirigé par P. Bouffartigue.

• DALLA PRIA Y., LEROUX N., « Limitation comme stratégie économique : l’exemple de la refonte de la politique de gestion des ressources humaines de Go Sport », Revue Européenne de Management du Sport, numéro spécial L’univers des articles de sports et de loisirs, de la conception à la consommation : quelles innovations ?, n° 27, août 2010, pp. 5-17. (preprint on line)