



Executive Summary

Understanding Occupational Well-Being and Women Sports Coaches

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In partnership with Sports Coach UK and ORD Consultants

Background

This year has witnessed the launch of the 'Coaching Plan for England': a national plan which aims to ensure coaching meets the needs of all people playing sport, adopts a coordinated approach to coaching delivery, and ensures that coaching has a high profile within the sports sector. This plan sits alongside the UK Coaching Framework which is to ensure that by 2016, there will be more appropriately qualified and skilled coaches, a more diverse workforce, a culture of self-improvement amongst coaches, and a better supported workforce. However, current sport coaching and organisational workforces are imbalanced and lack diversity. Statistics demonstrate that the UK coaching profession remains male dominated; women only make up approximately 28% of all coaches and very few women reach senior levels. Recent figures from Sports Coach UK (ScUK) show that only 9% of senior coaches are women and that there is a significant decline in the total number of women coaching after the age of 25. Little is known as to why the career pathways are so gendered, why there appears to be a glass ceiling to prevent progression to the most senior roles, and how different women's career transitions connect with their life transitions to affect their professional development. There is also little knowledge on how such experiences of being in the minority affect the occupational health and well-being of women coaches. This is an important, timely line of enquiry because occupational health and well-being are critical factors in determining an individual's commitment to and continued participation in, a career. Occupational health has also recently been identified by Public Health England as one of the most pressing health priorities for employers and their staff.

Purpose

The aim of the research led by Leeds Beckett University in partnership with Sports Coach UK and ORD Consultants cluster was to undertake multi-stage, multidisciplinary work to advance knowledge on career transitions, professional identity, and occupational well-being for women at the various stages of their careers as sport coaches. Data from quantitative and qualitative methodologies then provided an evidence base for a well-being intervention to be implemented with a cohort of women coaches.

To achieve this aim, three sub-aims were proposed:

1. To analyse how the career and life experiences of women coaches impacted their occupational well-being, including what women perceived to be stressors within their organisational contexts; how they conceptualised and managed organisational stress, and to explore organisational well-being as a gendered concept.
2. To map the different career development pathways for women coaches in order to understand what facilitated and hindered transitions at the different stages of their careers and lives. These pathways were considered as an interplay of not only individual choices and circumstances, but were also related to organisational context, practices, and relations with others who control entry and progression to their

profession. It was also examined how gender interacts with other forms of difference, such as age, ethnicity and (dis)ability.

3. In collaboration with ORD Consultants, the final stage of the research proposed the creation of an evidence-based intervention for women coaches around enhancing occupational health, personal well-being and professional development.

Methods

The research comprised three stages:

Stage 1: A quantitative, psychological based questionnaire was utilised to measure women coaches' psychological health, psychological well-being and physical health. 218 women, from all parts of the UK, participated in the online survey. This included coaches at all stages of the coaching pathway and from a variety of sports, roles (e.g. head coaches, assistant coaches) and employment types (voluntary, part-time).

Stage 2: From stage 1, a sample of 16 women head coaches who demonstrated differences in their physical health, psychological health and psychological well-being (ranging from low to high) were interviewed to understand, in more depth, how they experience life and career transitions, how they experience their professional identity, their experiences of organisational practices and relationships, and their experiences of occupational well-being. The coaches' accounts were considered in relation to their position as head coaches as well as their different biographies.

Stage 3: The data gathered from the first two stages of the research was then used to provide the evidence base for the UK's first personal and occupational well-being intervention with coaches. Led by ORD Consultants in partnership with Leeds Beckett University and ScUK, a workshop was devised and provided to a sample of women coaches who were included at the first two stages of the research. The workshop was structured around three key themes: personal well-being, managing relationships, and influencing change.

Key findings

The most pertinent themes identified across the three stages of the study included:

1. Many women coaches reported low levels of physical activity which will negatively impact their sense of psychological health and well-being and physical health.
2. Many women coaches have a disproportionate work-life balance. The coaches did not always have space and time for a fulfilling social and family life due to the demands of their profession and found it challenging to maintain personal commitments and relationships outside of coaching.
3. Younger women coaches expressed less satisfaction with their career than older women coaches. However, there was evidence of ageism as well as sexism in the experiences and treatment of older coaches. Fewer opportunities to develop and practice were available in conjunction with less acceptance and more marginalisation by their organisation and coaching colleagues. Working conditions were therefore poorer for older women coaches.
4. Many women did not feel trusted by their organisation / governing bodies (NGBs) to be competent and effective coaches. Reciprocally, they did not feel secure in their roles and relationships within their organisations nor do they report much trust in the decisions taken by those who lead their sport.
5. The processes through which coaches are appointed and promoted are often opaque and exclusionary, which can impact women coaches who are often outside of the informal, elite networks through which new opportunities are made available. There was evidence of unconscious and conscious bias in the appointment of coaches.
6. There are few opportunities for women to network and meet regularly with other women coaches, to share experiences and expertise across sports. With women being under-represented within the profession, the role of coach can often be isolating and lonely.

7. Many women coaches report low job security and perception of less job resources. Combined with high job demands, this can lead to coaches working above and beyond their job requirements. Ultimately, this will lead to burnout in and high turnover of coaches. Many of the coaches included in the study are close to 'burn-out'.
8. The influence of work relationships is vital in retaining or losing women coaches.
9. Coaches' sense of commitment to their NGB will impact their engagement while at work.
10. The women coaches included in the research represent an engaged, motivated, and valuable part of the UK's coaching workforce. The intrinsic value of the role as coach is the key in retaining women coaches.
11. Difference amongst women coaches remains low. When gender was considered alongside other social categories, it is evident that most coaches are White and able-bodied.

Recommendations

As a result of the research, the following strategies are recommended in recruiting and retaining women coaches:

1. More needs to be done to raise the profile of women coaches. More women should be made visible by clubs, organisations and NGBS, for example by inviting women to be coach educators, tutors, formal mentors and to be speakers at events and conferences.
2. Fix the system not the women: Significant attention and work needs to be directed towards addressing the organisational processes and systems that deal with the appointment and advancement of coaches. The aim should be to ensure greater transparency and reach of new opportunities.
3. The occupational health and well-being of coaches urgently needs to be included as a strategic priority within NGBs and sporting organisations. Psychologically 'well' coaches mean psychologically 'well' athletes and participants. As part of a coach's education, more needs to be included that focuses purely on the health and well-being of coaches.
4. Strategies should be in place to ensure positive relationships and opportunities for coaches to connect within NGBs as well as across sports. Positive relationships can be achieved through implementing codes of conducts and 'value' statements for organisational members and coaches. This will go towards changing organisational culture and values to ensure that all individuals are nurtured and to establish expectations of staff and of the organisation. In addition, formal and informal networks as well as other regular opportunities to meet with other coaches needs to be integrated as an organisational practice for many NGBs.
5. More knowledge and action is needed to increase the representation of different women within coaching, for example more Black and Minority Ethnic coaches and/or coaches with a disability and/or older coaches. For example, the sample of coaches included in the present study mostly self-defined as White British. More action is required to target, attract, recruit and retain a diversity of coaches. However, before this can occur, greater knowledge and understanding is needed about what are the issues that may either facilitate or constrain different groups of women within the profession. This should begin with comparative data within sports that considers other social categories such as ethnicity, alongside gender in order to profile the coaching workforce.
6. The boundaries around a coach's role and responsibilities need to be reduced and enforced. The role can often include tasks outside of the remit of what a coach should be responsible for which puts a burden on the individual and contributes to unequal expectations of the workforce.
7. More knowledge is needed not just on the occupational well-being of women coaches, but also men in order not to 'special case' women. The study highlighted a significant number of concerns related to the well-being of coaches and some of these concerns relate to the role of the coach per se. It is the judgement of the research team that these will impact male coaches too and therefore it is recommended that wider work is undertaken to understand well-being and coaches as a whole.

Any questions regarding any part of the research can be directed towards the Principal Investigator of the study: Dr Leanne Norman, senior research fellow, Leeds Beckett University, L.J. Norman@leedsbeckett.ac.uk