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Professionalization and organizational problems of sports clubs: Is there a relationship?

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Abstract: Sports clubs have been reporting several organizational problems in recent decades (e.g., recruitment and retention of members and volunteers). At the same time, certain sports clubs have professionalized their strategies, structures, processes, and staff. However, previous research has not analyzed whether the professionalization of sports clubs is related to their organizational problems. Therefore, this study conducts, in the first step, a cluster analysis based on three dimensions of professionalization to identify professionalization types among sports clubs. In the second step, it examines differences in organizational problems among the identified professionalization types. The main findings are that (1) sports clubs with paid staff report fewer problems with recruiting and retaining members but more problems with finances than sports clubs that rely on voluntary work, and (2) sports clubs with increased professionalization of human resources management (HRM) and strategy have fewer problems with recruiting and retaining board members and coaches than sports clubs with low professionalization of HRM and strategy. These results show that the problem structure changes qualitatively with increased professionalization of sports clubs.

Keywords: Professionalization type, Organizational context, Cluster analysis, Non-profit organization, Sports organization.

Introduction

Sports clubs are relevant sports providers in European countries because they offer many opportunities to participate in sports activities for a broad range of the population (Hoekman et al., 2015). With an affordable offer of sport activities, they often fulfill societal functions, such as health promotion and social inclusion (Nagel et al., 2020). As non-profit organizations, sports clubs primarily serve their members. In return, many members work voluntarily for the organization (Thiel & Mayer, 2009). However, recent developments, such as the trend toward individualistic sports activities and the growing expectations of members or other

stakeholders regarding the quality of sports activities, are challenging for sports clubs (e.g., Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010; Stenling & Fahlén, 2009). Thus, they have been reporting several organizational problems in recent decades (e.g., recruitment and retention of members and volunteers and financial challenges; Breuer et al., 2017). At the same time, certain sports clubs have professionalized their strategies, structures, processes, and staff (e.g., Sharpe et al., 2018). This means that they have developed from traditional organizations with voluntary management to increasingly business-like organizations with paid staff, strategies to follow, and business management tools and concepts to apply (Nagel, Schlesinger, Bayle et al., 2015; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011). The question then arises as to whether the professionalization of sports clubs is related to their organizational problems or, in other words, whether professionalized sports clubs have a different problem structure than less professionalized sports clubs. While professionalization is commonly seen as desirable and a “problem solver”, current literature suggests that highly professionalized sports clubs may also face organizational problems. For example, while the employment of paid staff can increase the service quality of a sports club and thus reduce problems with member recruitment and retention, high salaries of employed staff may well increase financial problems (e.g., Thiel et al., 2006).

Previous research has barely investigated the relationship between the professionalization and organizational problems of sports clubs. Therefore, the present study addresses this research gap and conducts, in the first step, a cluster analysis based on three dimensions of professionalization to identify the professionalization types among Swiss sports clubs. In the second step, the study examines differences in organizational problems among the identified professionalization types. A cluster analysis enables capturing the multidimensionality of professionalization (i.e., strategies, structures and processes, and staff), which has not been done in previous research on sports clubs. This study helps sports club managers better understand which problems they may reduce or intensify with the professionalization of the club.

Theoretical background and literature review

To date, sport management research has not holistically investigated sports clubs from the perspective of various dimensions of professionalization; instead, it has mainly focused on the aspect of paid staff (e.g., Horsch & Schütte, 2009; Thiel et al., 2006). However, previous research has holistically investigated the dimensions of professionalization among national sports federations (e.g., Lang et al., 2018), which are deemed comparable to those of sports clubs because the constitutive characteristics of sports clubs and sports federations are similar (i.e., non-profit orientation, orientation toward the interests of members, a democratic decision-making structure, voluntary work, and autonomy; Heinemann, 2004). Ruoranen et al. (2016) conceptualized the professionalization of national sports federations along three

dimensions: (1) strategies and activities, (2) structures and processes, and (3) people and positions. The strategies and activities dimension refers to the definition and pursuit of a clear strategy. The structures and processes dimension refers to the creation and pursuit of formalized concepts for internal processes and the organizational structure. Regarding the people and positions dimension, whether the staff has a paid and permanent position is mainly relevant.

Previous research has analyzed the relationship between the professionalization and organizational context of sports clubs. Several studies have found a relationship between paid staff and club size (i.e., number of members), as well as between paid staff and the financial resources of sports clubs (e.g., Horch & Schütte, 2009; Seippel, 2002; Thiel et al., 2006). In these studies, both large and more affluent sports clubs are likelier to have paid staff. Other studies have revealed a relationship between formalization (i.e., written policies and procedures) and club size in the sense that larger sports clubs tend to be more formalized (e.g., Nichols & James, 2008; Nichols et al., 2015). These studies indicate a clear relationship between the professionalization, club size, and financial resources of a sports club. A few studies have also provided hints on the potential relationship between professionalization and organizational problems, which are seen as another aspect of the organizational context of sports clubs. For example, the presence of paid staff is associated with higher qualifications and competencies of employees (Thiel et al., 2006), which, in turn, may increase the service quality of a sports club and thus reduce problems with member recruitment and retention. In some studies, modernization and commercialization lead to higher external and internal expectations on the work of volunteers in sports clubs but not necessarily to volunteers' lower commitment (Adams, 2011; Enjolras, 2002). In other studies, more professionalized sports clubs showed lower membership commitment compared with less professionalized sports clubs (Nagel, 2006; Stenling & Fahlén, 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2013a). According to these results, professionalization can both reduce and intensify organizational problems. As these findings are merely side results of studies with other primary aims, it can be said that previous research has not targeted the investigation of the relationship between the professionalization and organizational problems of sports clubs.

Apart from focusing on the relationships between the professionalization and organizational problems of sports clubs, research has also examined the determinants of the organizational problems of sports clubs, in general. Studies found that human resources and the existence of a strategy are relevant for organizational problems (Coates et al., 2014; Wicker & Breuer, 2010, 2013a, 2013b), which supports the assumption of a relationship between organizational problems and professionalization. The most severe organizational problems reported by sports clubs are related to the recruitment and retention of members and volunteers and to financial problems. Challenges related to regulations, infrastructure, and commercial competitors have also been mentioned in

previous literature but are considered less severe (e.g., Breuer et al., 2020; Lamprecht et al., 2017). The present study focuses on the recruitment and retention of members and volunteers and on financial challenges because these internal problems are potentially related to the professionalization of sports clubs.

To analyze the relationship between the professionalization and organizational problems of sports clubs in this study, we refer to Nagel's (2007) multilevel model of sports club development (see also Nagel, Schlesinger, Wicker et al., 2015) and Nagel's (2006) sequential model of the structural determinants of professionalization. In line with these models, we consider professionalization processes to be actions of sports clubs as corporative actors. This means that the organizational context of a sports club (e.g., club size, its financial resources, culture, and goals) may influence its decisions and actions to professionalize (meso level). Organizational problems, although not explicitly named in these models, can also be seen as constituents of the organizational context and are thus expected to influence the decisions and actions of a sports club to professionalize (see Figure 1). This assumption is supported by contingency theory, which states that an organization has to adapt to internal and external forces (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; for sports organizations, e.g., Horch & Schütte, 2009). Similarly, Kieser's (2006) situational approach regards intra-organizational factors as relevant to the strategies of organizations and, consequently, to their professionalization processes (see also Kieser & Kubicek, 1992). Here, organizational problems can be seen as internal forces (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) or intra-organizational factors (Kieser, 2006) that may urge a sports club to professionalize in order to minimize the problems it is confronted with. The individual actions of members (micro level) might also affect the decisions and actions of a sports club to professionalize, just as the organizational environment (societal, cultural, institutional, and geographic conditions; macro level; Nagel, 2007). However, this study focuses on the meso level. According to Nagel's (2006) sequential model, the professionalization of a sports club can lead to renewed organizational problems, which, in turn, might induce further processes (see multiple sequences in Figure 1).

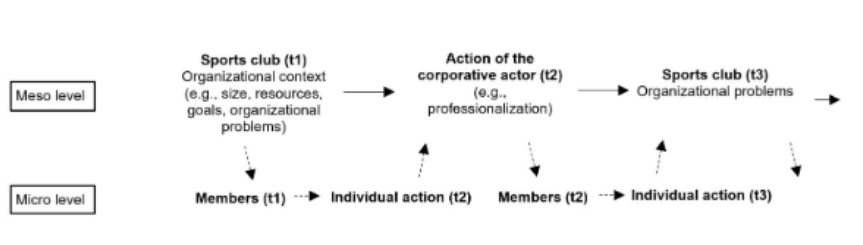


Figure 1

Sequential model for the analysis of the development of sports clubs (adapted and supplemented according to Nagel, 2006, p. 104 and Nagel, 2007, p. 194)

According to Nagel's (2006, 2007) models, professionalization and organizational problems can influence each other in two ways. (1) Sports

clubs have organizational problems (e.g., with member recruitment and retention) and decide to professionalize in order to solve specific problems (e.g., employ paid staff to increase service quality). (2) Sports clubs professionalize for whatever reason, and this professionalization leads to decreased (e.g., facilitated member recruitment and retention) or increased (e.g., financial and membership engagement problems) organizational problems. To analyze this potential relationship between professionalization and organizational problems, the present study poses two main research questions (RQs):

(RQ1) Which professionalization types can be identified, and how do they differ with regard to the dimensions of professionalization?

(RQ2) How do the identified professionalization types differ regarding organizational problems with members, volunteers, and finances?

Methods

Sample

The data used in this study were collected in the context of the Swiss sports club survey 2016 (Lamprecht et al., 2017), which is a nationwide survey on the conditions of Swiss sports clubs. There were 19,487 Swiss sports clubs, of which 15,082 were contacted by e-mail for this online survey (77% of the population). The remaining 4,405 sports clubs had missing or invalid e-mail addresses. The online questionnaire was available in German, French, and Italian and was filled out by club officials (e.g., president, secretary general). The data were collected from March 2016 to May 2016. In total, 3,134 sports clubs completed the questionnaire with respect to the study variables. The reasons for not answering or not completing the questionnaire might be the extent and complexity of the questionnaire. It took the respondents up to 60 minutes to complete the questionnaire, and they had to search for certain data in documents or databases. From the sports clubs in the sample, 94 cases were excluded because of implausible or inconsistent answers. After this data cleaning process, 3,040 sports clubs were retained for the analysis (16% of the population). The descriptive statistics of the size and financial resources in the sample are displayed in Table 1. A one-sample Wilcoxon test was performed using the *rcompanion* package in R (Mangiafico, 2021). The analysis revealed that the average size of sports clubs in the sample was significantly but not markedly different from that of sports clubs in Switzerland (i.e., 101, as given by Lamprecht et al., 2017, p. 43), pseudo-median = 127, 95% CI = 122.0–132.5, $V = 2529313$, $p < .001$; effect size $r = .20$. Small sports clubs have fewer human resources (e.g., no secretary general) to find the time for the survey, which can explain the larger size of the sports clubs in the sample than in the population. However, the effect size is relatively small and not considered problematic for the analysis.

Descriptive statistics of size and financial resources in the sample (n = 3,040)

	Sample			
	<i>n</i>	<i>Q₁</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>Q₃</i>
Club size (number of members)	2,884	52	100	206
Financial resources per year (in CHF)	2,321	9,000	22,000	60,000

Source: Own elaboration based on the data.

Measures

We selected the items to measure the professionalization of sports clubs by referring to Ruoranen et al.'s (2016) three dimensions of professionalization (i.e., strategies and activities, structures and processes, and people and positions) and a study on the professionalization of national sport federations (i.e., Lang et al., 2018). Professionalization regarding the two dimensions of strategies and activities, on the one hand, and structures and processes, on the other, was measured using 12 items. The respondents were asked to estimate the extent to which the statements pertained to their sports club on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (does not pertain) to 5 (does fully pertain). A sample item is "Our club has a clear structure for the responsibilities of functionaries" (for all items, see Table 2). Regarding the third dimension of professionalization, people and positions, the respondents were asked to state the number of paid staff earning more than CHF 2,000 per year both off the field (i.e., management board and administration staff) and on the field (i.e., training and supporting staff and referees). The respondents classified paid staff by percent by position (full-time: > 90%, part-time: 50%–90%, part-time: < 50%, and no permanent employment). The percent by position was used to estimate the number of full-time equivalents. Furthermore, the respondents stated the number of voluntary staff both off the field (i.e., club president, vice club president, actuary, treasurer, heads of departments, and other board members) and on the field (i.e., training and supporting staff and referees). These measures were used for the cluster analysis.

We assessed the contextual variables of club size (i.e., number of active and passive members) and financial resources (i.e., total income, classified into 17 categories) to enable an external validation of the cluster analysis. With regard to RQ2, we assessed the organizational problems of the sports clubs regarding the recruitment and retention of members, board members, coaches, and referees, and financial challenges using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (no problem) to 5 (very large problem; for details, see Table 5). The items measuring club size, financial resources, and organizational problems are based on former versions of the Swiss sports club survey (e.g., Lamprecht et al., 2012) and a similar investigation of German sports clubs (Breuer & Feiler, 2016).

Preliminary análisis

In preparation for the subsequent cluster analysis (RQ1), we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with the 12 items measuring the strategies and activities and the structures and processes dimensions to reduce the number of items for cluster analysis. We detected multivariate outliers regarding these items using the Mahalanobis distance (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). We eliminated 39 multivariate outliers, so the sample size for the EFA and subsequent cluster analysis was 3,001. The EFA was conducted using principal component analysis (PCA) and varimax rotation. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy indicated a satisfactory value of .84. (Field, 2009), and Bartlett’s test of sphericity indicated sufficiently large correlations between items for PCA ($\chi^2(66) = 12,617.26, p < .001$). Based on Kaiser’s criterion (eigenvalues greater than 1), we extracted three factors, which were labeled Human Resources Management (HRM), Strategy, and Quality Management, according to the content of the respective items. The reliability analysis using Cronbach’s alpha yielded values greater than .60. Although these are only marginally above the minimum requirements, this is acceptable in exploratory research (Hair et al., 2010). The results of the EFA are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2
Results of the principal component analysis with varimax rotation.

Item	Rotated factor loadings			R^2
	F1: HRM	F2: Strategy	F3: Quality Management	
Our club has a clear structure for the responsibilities of functionaries.	.54	.46	-.23	.56
The incumbents and functionaries in our club are carefully and precisely selected.	.75	.14	.15	.61
The incumbents and functionaries in our club are specifically acquainted with their work and are accompanied.	.77	.13	.21	.67
The incumbents and functionaries in our club are instated in accordance with their abilities and competencies.	.68	.05	.17	.50
Our club has a mission statement that is approved by the general assembly.	-.06	.75	.24	.64
Our club has a strategic concept.	.16	.71	.34	.65
Our club has explicit job descriptions for different commissions and functions.	.36	.61	-.06	.51
Our club pursues long-term planning.	.18	.73	.33	.68
Our club thinks of itself as a service provider in sports.	.14	.09	.71	.52
Our club follows the offers of commercial sports providers.	-.03	.15	.64	.44
Our club especially pays attention to the quality of our sports portfolio.	.23	.23	.62	.49
Incumbents are consciously supported through appropriate educational opportunities.	.38	.13	.47	.38
Eigenvalues	4.01	1.39	1.17	
Percent of variance	33.42	11.59	9.71	
Cronbach's alpha	.72	.74	.61	

The third dimension, people and positions, is represented by two additional cluster variables: paid staff off the field (i.e., the proportion of paid staff off the field in relation to all staff off the field) and paid staff on the field (i.e., the proportion of paid staff on the field in relation to all staff on the field). These two cluster variables correlate with $r = .43$.

Main analysis

We conducted a hierarchical cluster analysis (RQ1) on the five variables described above (three factor scores and two z-transformed values) using Ward's algorithm and squared Euclidian distances (see e.g., Schendera, 2010). The hierarchical procedure was used because it does not demand the number of clusters a priori. Ward's algorithm was chosen after weighting the advantages and disadvantages of the different cluster algorithms. It is a commonly used procedure (Schendera, 2010). The dendrogram and content criteria were used to determine the optimal number of clusters, and the quality of the cluster solution was examined regarding interpretability and homogeneity within clusters (using Δ -values). Moreover, the stability of the final cluster solution was investigated by conducting a series of additional cluster analyses using different cluster algorithms (i.e., Complete Linkage, Average Linkage, Centroid, Median, and k-means; see e.g., Schendera, 2010). The two contextual variables of club size and financial resources were used to validate the cluster solution externally, as previous studies expect professionalization types to differ in club size and financial resources (see Theoretical Background and Literature Review). For this aim, Kruskal–Wallis tests were applied because the two variables showed non-normal distributions within clusters. Furthermore, Mann–Whitney U tests with Bonferroni correction were used to follow up.

The identified clusters, which represent professionalization types, allowed for the investigation of differences in organizational problems among the professionalization types (RQ2). In the first step, we detected multivariate outliers regarding the items measuring organizational problems using the Mahalanobis distance (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). We eliminated 257 multivariate outliers. In the second step, we checked the assumptions for a MANOVA and follow-up ANOVAs. However, the assumptions of the normal distribution of variables within groups, homogeneity of variances between groups, and homogeneity of covariance matrices between groups were not given throughout. Therefore, we applied, in the final step, the WRS package for robust statistics in R (version 0.37.2; Wilcox & Schönbrodt, 2020) to conduct a robust MANOVA (i.e., the `cmanova` function, an extension of the Kruskal–Wallis test) and robust ANOVAs (i.e., the `t1waybt` function, the bootstrap version of the trimmed mean ANOVA) with post hoc tests (i.e., the `mcppb20` function). Effect sizes were calculated using the `btrim` function

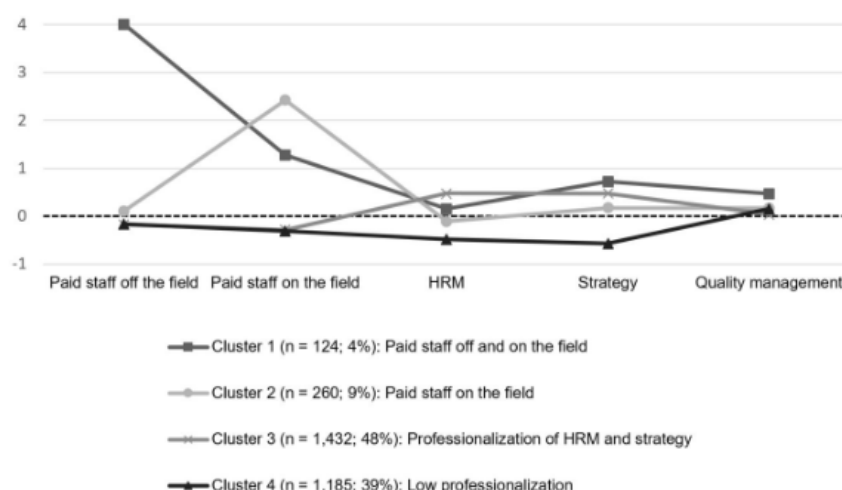


Figure 2
Cluster means of the four professionalization types (z-values)

Results

The cluster analysis, which focuses on RQ1, revealed four well-interpretable professionalization types (for a graphical rendering, see Figure 2; for the numerical results, see Table 3). For the means of interpretation, we added the raw values (i.e., M and SD) of paid staff by cluster to Table 3. For the other cluster variables, which were based on factor scores, this was not meaningful. The stability of the cluster solution was acceptable because different cluster algorithms did not produce different interpretations of the clusters. The F-values measuring the homogeneity of the clusters were mostly below the critical value of 1 (Schendera, 2010). Only clusters 1 and 2 showed relatively high F-values regarding paid staff. This is because relatively few clubs employed paid staff and were thus assigned to one and the same cluster if they had paid staff both off and on the field (cluster 1) and one and the same cluster if they had paid staff only on the field (cluster 2), even if the number of paid staff was quite heterogeneous.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics of cluster variables by cluster (z-values, F-values, M, SD)

	Cluster 1 Paid staff off and on the field (n = 124)		Cluster 2 Paid staff on the field (n = 260)		Cluster 3 Voluntary work and professionalization of HRM and strategy (n = 1,432)		Cluster 4 Low professionalization (n = 1,185)	
	z	F	z	F	z	F	z	F
Paid staff off the field	4.00	7.20	0.11	0.98	-0.17	0.00	-0.16	0.02
Paid staff on the field	1.28	2.75	2.42	2.96	-0.28	0.04	-0.31	0.02
HRM	0.15	0.74	-0.11	0.83	0.47	0.47	-0.48	1.04
Strategy	0.73	0.72	0.17	0.99	0.48	0.57	-0.57	0.85
Quality management	0.47	0.77	0.17	0.76	0.04	0.86	0.15	0.97
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Paid staff off the field (%)	28.02	18.02	1.89	6.63	0.00	0.16	0.05	0.82
Paid staff on the field (%)	29.80	30.80	50.98	30.46	0.76			

The identified professionalization types were characterized by paid staff off and on the field (cluster 1), paid staff on the field (cluster 2), professionalization of HRM and strategy (cluster 3), and low professionalization (cluster 4). The sports clubs with paid staff off and on the field (cluster 1) were highly professionalized throughout. The sports clubs in cluster 3 relied on voluntary work but showed relatively high professionalization of HRM and strategy compared with those in the other clusters. The sports clubs in cluster 2 showed lower professionalization of HRM and strategy than those in cluster 3, although they had paid staff on the field. The sports clubs in cluster 4 relied on voluntary work and showed professionalization below the average throughout. Clusters 1 and 2, whose sports clubs had paid staff, comprised only a small number of clubs (n = 124 and 260, respectively), whereas clusters 3 and 4, whose sports clubs relied on voluntary work, comprised a large number of clubs (n = 1,432 and 1,185, respectively). The high z-value in cluster 1 regarding paid staff off the field reflects the fact that only a small number of sports clubs reported paid staff off the field and were mostly assigned to cluster 1, whereas most sports clubs reported no paid staff off the field and were assigned to clusters 2, 3, and 4.

The clusters differed significantly in club size ($H(3) = 323.11, p < .001$) and financial resources of the sports clubs ($H(3) = 453.93, p < .001$). The effect sizes of the pairwise tests ranged from $.17 < r < .39$ for the case of club size and $.20 < r < .48$ for the case of financial resources. The sports clubs of cluster 1 (labeled paid staff off and on the field) were the largest in terms of club size and the most affluent ones compared with those in the other clusters, followed by the sports clubs of cluster 2 (paid staff on the field), which were the second largest and second most affluent ones. The sports clubs of clusters 3 and 4, which relied on voluntary work, were smaller and less affluent than those of clusters 1 and 2. When the other two clusters were compared, the sports clubs of cluster 3 (professionalization of HRM and strategy) were larger and more affluent than those of cluster 4 (low professionalization; see Table 4).

The results of the robust MANOVA and ANOVAs refer to RQ2. The MANOVA showed a significant main effect of professionalization type on organizational problems ($H(15) = 63.94, p < .001$). The ANOVAs were significant for all organizational problems (see Table 5). However, the effect sizes were small or, at best, medium. Recruiting and retaining members were least problematic for sports clubs with paid staff off and on the field (cluster 1) and most problematic for sports clubs with low professionalization (cluster 4). Clusters 1 and 2, whose sports clubs had paid staff, had more financial problems than clusters 3 and 4, whose sports clubs relied on voluntary work. In addition, the sports clubs with paid staff on the field (cluster 2) showed more problems in recruiting referees and judges than those with voluntary workers on the field. The recruitment and retention of board members and coaches were less problematic in clusters 1 and 3, whose sports clubs had a more professionalized HRM and strategy than those in clusters 2 and 4. However, not all pairs of clusters showed significant differences regarding the two latter items.

Table 4
Descriptive statistics of size and financial resources by cluster (raw scores)

	Cluster 1			Cluster 2			Cluster 3			Cluster 4		
	Paid staff off and on the field			Paid staff on the field			Voluntary work and professionalization of HRM and strategy			Low professionalization		
	(95 ≤ n ≤ 118)			(212 ≤ n ≤ 245)			(1,098 ≤ n ≤ 1,388)			(916 ≤ n ≤ 1,133)		
	Q ₁	Med	Q ₃	Q ₁	Med	Q ₃	Q ₁	Med	Q ₃	Q ₁	Med	Q ₃
Club size (number of members)	219	363	527	105	186	283	55	100	213	41	80	144
Financial resources per year (in CHF)	125,000	240,000	464,691	38,500	81,004	170,000	10,000	23,900	57,476	6,043	14,000	31,656

Note. CHF 1 ≈ USD 1.04 (2016, April).

CHF 1
≈ USD 1.04

Table 5
Trimmed means (Mt) and standard deviations (SDt) of
organizational problems by cluster and results of robust ANOVAs

Organizational problem	Cluster 1		Cluster 2		Cluster 3		Cluster 4		Robust ANOVA F_t	p	ξ	Post hoc test: significant pairs ($\alpha = .05$)
	Paid staff off and on the field		Paid staff on the field		Voluntary work and professionalization of HRM and strategy		Low professionalization					
	(108 $\leq n \leq$ 110)		(216 $\leq n \leq$ 223)		(1,239 $\leq n \leq$ 1,324)		(1,014 $\leq n \leq$ 1,082)					
	M_t	SD_t	M_t	SD_t	M_t	SD_t	M_t	SD_t				
Recruitment and retention of members	2.28	0.45	2.53	0.54	2.68	0.56	3.01	0.58	34.84	<.001	0.30	1-2, 1-3, 1-4, 2-4, 3-4
Recruitment and retention of board members	2.92	0.78	3.31	0.61	2.91	0.71	3.14	0.73	10.16	<.001	0.17	1-2, 2-3, 3-4
Recruitment and retention of coaches	3.07	0.60	3.23	0.74	3.01	0.71	3.20	0.68	4.75	.010	0.10	2-3, 3-4
Recruitment and retention of referees	3.12	0.78	3.53	0.87	2.92	0.84	2.87	0.92	8.67	<.001	0.19	1-2, 2-3, 2-4
Financial situation	2.25	0.61	2.04	0.76	1.53	0.57	1.70	0.67	18.99	<.001	0.26	1-3, 1-4, 2-3, 2-4, 3-4

Note. All items were scored on a five-point scale from 1 (no problem) to 5 (very large problem). Values of ξ = 0.10, 0.30, and 0.50 correspond to small, medium, and

1 (no problem)

5 (very large problem)

Values ξ = 0.10, 0.30, and 0.50 correspond to small, medium, and

Discussion

Because of this study's multidimensional approach, the analysis regarding RQ1 revealed more differentiated professionalization types than those in previous studies on the professionalization of sports clubs, which mostly focused on paid staff. One main finding of our analysis of professionalization types (RQ1) is that the professionalization of HRM and strategy is also realizable in sports clubs relying on voluntary work. Accordingly, sports clubs with paid staff are not necessarily more professionalized in terms of strategies, activities, structures, and processes than sports clubs with voluntary work (see cluster 3). Furthermore, sports clubs with paid staff on the field do not necessarily have paid staff off the field, as cluster 2 showed. Therefore, these two categories seem worth differentiating, which has not been done in previous studies on paid staff of sports clubs. These results are in accordance with a recent study on the professionalization of national sports federations (Lang et al., 2018).

The analysis regarding RQ1 further showed that the employment of paid staff is not common among Swiss sports clubs, which the small

cluster sizes of clusters 1 and 2 demonstrate. Professionalization and the prevalence of paid staff, in particular, are country specific (see macro level; Nagel, 2007) and more common in other European countries (see Breuer et al., 2017; Stamm et al., 2015). One reason might be that most Swiss sports clubs follow the principle of volunteering and are relatively small compared to other European sports clubs (Stamm et al., 2015). Another reason could be country-specific differences in financial subsidies for sports clubs (e.g., Feiler et al., 2019; Vos et al., 2011).

The results on club size and financial resources of the sports clubs are in line with the findings of previous research on the professionalization of sports clubs; they showed that larger and more affluent sports clubs were more professionalized than smaller and less affluent sports clubs (e.g., Horch & Schütte, 2009; Seippel, 2002; Thiel et al., 2006) because the sports clubs in cluster 1 (paid staff off and on the field) are the largest and most affluent ones, whereas those in cluster 4 (low professionalization) are the smallest and least affluent ones. When clusters 2 and 3 are compared, the larger and more affluent ones (cluster 2) have more paid staff on the field, whereas the smaller and less affluent ones (cluster 3) have a higher professionalization of HRM and strategy. Thus, we conclude that the professionalization of HRM and strategy is also realizable for smaller and less affluent sports clubs because it is not necessarily costly. The employment of paid staff, in turn, is expensive and therefore appropriate for larger and more affluent sports clubs. As these findings meet our expectations based on previous literature, they serve as an external validation of the cluster solution.

The results on organizational problems (RQ2) reveal that professionalization goes not only hand in hand with reduced organizational problems, as commonly expected, but also with increased organizational problems (i.e., the problem structure changes qualitatively). On the one hand, sports clubs with paid staff report fewer problems with recruiting and retaining members, which might be explained by the many time resources and high qualifications of paid staff compared with non-paid staff to fulfill the growing expectations of sports club members (i.e., service quality). Furthermore, sports clubs with higher professionalization of HRM and strategy show fewer problems with the recruitment and retention of board members and coaches than sports clubs with lower professionalization of HRM and strategy. This might be because the professionalization of HRM and strategy implies long-term strategic planning and elaborate personnel placement, which can facilitate volunteer recruitment and retention (Schlesinger et al., 2015). On the other hand, sports clubs with paid staff have more financial problems. For sports clubs, paying salaries for their staff is often a great financial burden. The relationship between paid staff and problems with the recruitment and retention of volunteers (e.g., board members) is not clear in this study, just as in previous research, which sometimes found a relationship (e.g., Breuer & Wicker, 2010) and sometimes not (e.g., Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013). The ambivalent results in this regard can also be explained by factors at the member level (see the multi

level model of Nagel, 2007), which have not been considered in this study. From these results, we conclude that the relationship between professionalization and organizational problems is complex because of the different dimensions of professionalization, and which problems are more or less severe for sports clubs depends on the constellation of professionalization factors among these dimensions.

From the results of this study, we derive the managerial implications that professionalization is not recommended to all sports clubs, nor is it the solution to all organizational problems. If sports clubs aim to employ paid staff, they must carefully check and plan their finances, as professionalization seems related to financial problems. The existing literature recommends using sustainable financial resources (e.g., membership fees rather than sponsorship fees) to employ paid staff (Lang et al., 2020). However, this is hardly feasible for smaller sports clubs. For these sports clubs, the professionalization of HRM and strategy is accompanied by less risk and may help decrease problems with recruiting and retaining board members and coaches.

As a contribution to theory, we conclude that Nagel's (2006, 2007) models and other theories of organizational development (e.g., Kieser, 2006; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) should incorporate organizational problems as part of the organizational context of sports clubs because organizational problems are related to professionalization (i.e., organizational development) in the present study. Sports clubs as corporative actors, however, may react differently to organizational problems because of, first, other aspects of the organizational context (e.g., financial and human resources for development processes; meso level); second, the interests and values of members (e.g., motivation of individuals to initiate development processes; micro level); and, last, environmental factors (e.g., support from regional and national federations; macro level; Nagel, 2007).

This study has certain limitations that need to be considered. First, the analyses do not allow conclusions about causalities between professionalization and organizational problems. Second, the answers to the questionnaires rely on the judgment of a single person within a club (i.e., president or secretary general). Particularly, regarding organizational problems, the answers display this person's subjective perceptions of the problems within the club. Finally, the differences in professionalization among Swiss sports clubs are relatively small compared with those of other European countries (Breuer et al., 2017; Stamm et al., 2015). Therefore, the results regarding the different professionalization types and the relationship between the professionalization and organizational problems of sports clubs could be different in other European countries (e.g., Germany). Nevertheless, the results of this study are considered carry over to other member organizations of the third sector (e.g., cultural organizations) that show similar professionalization profiles.

Future studies should analyze the causalities between the professionalization and organizational problems of sports clubs using a longitudinal or a qualitative case study design. This would reveal in which

cases the professionalization of sports clubs influences the nature and extent of their organizational problems and in which cases organizational problems influence the nature and extent of professionalization of sports clubs. A series of these two processes is also possible: organizational problems can cause a professionalization process, which, in turn, leads to other organizational problems. These renewed organizational problems are met by further professionalization and so on. Future studies should also simultaneously analyze factors at the sports club level (i.e., organizational context, including organizational problems) and at the member and environment levels.

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