Factors of Athletes' Work Engagement in South-East European Basketball Teams*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine how human resource management (HRM) quality and cohesion in post-transitional South-East European basketball teams influence athletes' work engagement and their contribution to their team's performance. The model was tested with structural equation modelling on a sample of 559 basketball athletes from four South-East European countries. The results show that the perceived quality of HRM directly affects the level of athletes' work engagement, but does not directly affect the perception of cohesion or the self-reported contribution to the team's performance. However, athletes' work engagement mediates the effects of the HRM and cohesion on their contribution to their team's performance. The study's main contribution is the finding that work engagement in the context of basketball teams from post-transitional South-East European countries represents a mediator through which HRM can affect an individual athlete's performance.

Keywords*:* basketball, HRM, cohesion, engagement, performance, South-East Europe
JEL Codes: M53, M12

Introduction

The analysis of team dynamics within sport clubs is a current topic in the sport psychology and sport sociology literature, especially in the context of human resource management (HRM) and coaching examination (Abrantes/Mach/ Ferreira 2020, Najafzadeh/Zarei/Azadfada/Doroudian 2020, Carron/Bray/Eys 2002, Cushion 2007, Cote/Gilbert 2009, Dirks 2000). With a short production cycle and simple measurement of results on the individual, team and organisational levels, sport provides a perfect setting for various aspects of performance analyses, with the findings often being useful in a business organisation setting (Weinberg/McDermott 2002).

One part of the mission of HRM within sport clubs is to maximise athletes' performance, seen particularly in professional organisations. In this context, one of the most challenging tasks remains identifying the behavioural constructs that mediate the effects between HR practices and performance. The degree of team cohesion is often mentioned as a crucial factor of successful teams (Abrantes et al. 2020, Carron et al. 2002, Dirks 2000), while work engagement (originally

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defined by Kahn (1990) as the harnessing of individuals' selves to their role performance on physical, cognitive and emotional levels) plays an important role in individuals' task performance and their innovative behaviour (Alfes/Truss/Soane/Rees/Gatenby 2013). Acceptance of the latter thesis led to more cohesion and work engagement studies being conducted among sport clubs (e.g. Mach/Dolan/Tzafrir 2010). Still, only a few of those studies tried to identify the antecedents of cohesion and work engagement. Those that did mostly focused on how leadership (e.g. Najafzadeh et al. 2020, Ramzaninezhad/Keshtan 2009) or coaching behaviour stimulates cohesiveness (Hackman/Wageman 2005). Some research indicated the perception of the HRM quality might influence the level of trust and hence the cohesiveness of sport teams (Abrantes et al. 2020, Mach et al. 2010). Studies in other industries provide some evidence that perceived HRM quality (defined as a set of activities used for managing organisational human resources that define the nature of work) might affect the work engagement of an employee (Alfes et al. 2013). Yet, findings seem inconsistent on the relationship between HRM perceptions and cohesiveness on one side and performance on the other, suggesting possible oversimplification in current perspectives on these constructs and their effects.

Further, although cohesiveness and trust were found to have a positive relationship with sport team performance (Najafzadeh et al. 2020, Heuze/Raimbault/Fontayne 2006) and with the individual satisfaction of athletes (Onag/Tepeci 2014), this has yet to be tested in the context of sport teams and the individual level of performance. This is also a logical step in studying the HRM–performance relationship considering there is no team performance without performances on the individual level.

Finally, not enough studies consider sport teams from post-transitional European countries. These teams operate in a specific environment characterised by: (1) the fact that (unlike in the USA and its system of "closed leagues" that clearly distinguish amateur from professional sport clubs) sports competitions in post-transitional Europe still imply a system of competition where more successful clubs advance to a higher-quality range of competitions, while the least successful drop to the lower divisions; (2) competitive/complementary relationships between sports clubs within the same sport competition; (3) their non-profit legal status; and (4) mixed personnel structures made up of professionals and amateur within a single organisation (Ivašković 2020). The different sources of athletes that non-profit sports clubs rely on to fill their teams on one hand imply separation of the HRM system, particularly the use of specific HR practices, which can trigger feelings of inequality within the team (Ivašković 2014) and might on the individual level affect work engagement while performing one's team tasks. Likewise, combining amateur and professional athletes within a team can, due to differences in motivation (Tyński/Wojtowicz/Dobroczyński

2016, Ruiz-Esteban et al. 2020), make it harder to ensure team cohesion, which might also influence work engagement.

In line with these gaps in the literature, the ambition of our research was to examine the extent to which the independent constructs of HRM quality and cohesiveness relate to work engagement on the individual level and whether such engagement in turn drives the individual's contribution to their team's performance. The purpose of the latter is to contribute to what is known in this area by going a step further and disclosing the "black box" phenomenon, which refers to the lack of understanding of the mechanisms through which different human-related factors influence team performance. More precisely, the study focuses on identifying the context-specific function of cohesion and work engagement in this HRM–performance relationship.

Theory and Hypotheses

The Motivational Roles of HRM Quality and Cohesion in Post-transitional Sport Clubs

Ever more literature in the HRM field demonstrates the causal relationship between a set of HRM activities and organisational performance (e.g. Ivašković 2020, Sun/Aryee/Law 2007, Wright/Gardner/Moynihan/Allen 2005). Many authors (e.g. Kaše 2007) state that HRM effects on the individual level are the key to unlocking the HRM–performance black box. The latter claim has its roots in the logical assumption that work-effective employees are the most important factor of organisational success.

From the HRM aspect, post-transitional sport clubs entail a special segment of organisations. The most obvious reasons for this are that in sport clubs a single HRM system usually has two separate parts. While the first system is intended for the administration aspects, the purpose of the other is to ensure a competitive sport team is formed. They are distinct regarding the role of the head coach, which is significant in the second system and typically minor in the administrative part. Therefore, when it comes to forming a sport team, sport club managements delegate the responsibility and decision-making power to the head coach who, subject to the budget constraints, can choose between two sources of athletes. According to van der Heijeden (2012), European sport clubs' teams can acquire athletes from youth selections (mostly amateurs) or athletes obtained on the athletes' market (mostly professionals), which might lead to mixed structures. The latter are especially common in non-profit sport clubs from post-transitional European countries (Ivašković 2020). Thus, from the organisational aspect two processes are crucial in forming the team: the development of young players, and scouting. The quality of HRM from an athlete's perspective, however, is a much more complex construct that not only entails personal experiences, but also observations concerning how the organisa-

tion treats other athletes. Therefore, the measure of an athlete's HRM quality perception must include all phases of HRM.

The motivational role of HRM systems is closely related to the field of psychology, as reflected in the growing number of studies that have merged its theoretical perspectives with management. One of the best known is social exchange theory, which emphasises that employees build relationships with individuals and organisations based on experience they have gained in the past (Blau 1964). Individuals receive different signals about the organisation's strategic guidelines and policies from their immediate superiors, and the set of HRM activities is some kind of contact area that shows the extent to which employees are trusted and valued by the organisation. Thus, employees are motivated and show positive attitudes to the organisation when they feel that their employer values them. This should in turn cause a reciprocal impact on employees' feelings and behaviour, and hence also on the efficiency of their task performance (Purcell/Hutchinson 2007). Employees therefore see the HRM system as a reflection of the employer's intentions for a long-term investment in staff, which can either stimulate or discourage them from working harder (Shaw/Dineen/Fang/Vellella 2009). In line with what is mentioned above, we were interested in how HRM quality affects athletes' engagement in the process of completing their work tasks.

HRM has a wide spectrum of effects, where typically the most important is to increase the level of competencies and knowledge possessed by the organisation. The latter are usually divided into three segments: employee skills, employee motivation and empowerment (Conway 2004). This means it is reasonable to assume that specific HRM practices in post-transitional basketball clubs concerning the "environmental stimulator" role influence how athletes perceive the quality of the HRM. It establishes the work context, which affects an employee's behaviour. Indeed, the effectiveness of the flow of information from top management to other organisational members depends on the particular HRM system within the club.

In line with Tuckman's (1965) theory of team formation, following the "forming" phase come the "storming" and "norming" phases. While the aim of "forming" is to make a competitive team in terms of obtaining a variety of skills, physical capabilities and tactical knowledge, the aim of "storming" and "norming" is to achieve the highest possible degree of team cohesiveness, which produces synergetic effects and enables athletes to achieve a common goal. Therefore, this system is among others also responsible for maintaining good human relations in the organisation, which includes building trustworthy relationships among organisational members. However, this effect should not be overestimated and extended to all organisational relations, especially in the context of sport teams. Trustworthy relationships can sometimes be built on a

shared negative attitude to a certain organisational member/group. If the latter is responsible for HRM policy and/or practices, we might even expect that this shared negative perception of HRM quality makes members who share this negative perception and cherish a negative attitude to HRM decision-makers more cohesive. HRM practices that are viewed negatively are in this sense a kind of painful experience, which adds to bonding and trust among team members (Bastian/Jetten/Ferris 2014).

Cohesion is thus a complex construct, which depends on how individual members of a group are attracted to the group (due to personal characteristics of group members or group task) and how individuals are integrated into the group (Carron/Brawley 2000, Li/Harmer 1996). Both social and task attraction depend on many factors, including HRM, but this relationship is neither necessarily positive nor direct.

Work Engagement in Relation to HRM Quality and Cohesion

Work engagement is a psychological construct developed in 1990 (Kahn 1990) and integrates the physical as well as cognitive and emotional components of engagement. It combines several behavioural factors and is based on the individual's perception of feelings at work and one's quest to do their job as well as possible. Some authors (Alfes et al. 2013) compare work engagement with satisfaction in the workplace because engagement implies activation of the individual because of satisfaction. However, engagement is much more than satisfaction since the latter does not necessarily promote productivity; it only helps to retain employees. Moreover, engagement differs from the construct of organisational commitment, which simply indicates the attitude but not the activity that follows. Therefore, the latter defines a somewhat broader concept, which refers to an individual's self-identification with organisational values, and work engagement exclusively denotes an employee's attitude to formal tasks (Macey/Schneider 2008).

The relationship between HRM quality and work engagement can be placed within the perceptual model of McShane and Von Glinow (2003), which explains that every stimulator from the environment must go through the filter of the individual's perception, and only then can it affect the individual's emotions and their behaviour. HRM practices and activities represent some kind of environmental factor within the organisation, which affects employees' emotions, moods and feelings, and should also have an impact on their behaviour. Alfes et al. (2013) point out that every person is unique so the intended HRM system is not crucial from the perspective of HRM outcomes. The latter depend more on how a particular HRM system is perceived by organisational members. The employment relationship could be viewed as some kind of an external stimulator, which then affects the psychological aspect of the individual, his or

her feelings and behaviour. We can thus suppose that the emotional dimension of work engagement tackles the sphere of employees' feelings and attitudes to the organisation, which are then reflected in behavioural reactions in the task fulfilment context.

The perception of HRM quality is inextricably linked to the context in which a particular employee gains experience with the organisation. From the aspect of an individual athlete, the team represents the narrowest operating environment. Consequently, the behaviour of team members is supposed to affect that person's feelings and attitude to their tasks at work. Therefore, when considering individuals within sports teams and their perception of HRM, it is essential to examine the role of the context in which social relations take place. Due to the specifics of teamwork, team members usually all experience HRM practices at the same time. How other members of the same team accept those practices is important for the individual. Although the perceived behaviour of teammates (especially those seen as team leaders) can significantly shape an individual's perception of HRM (Alfes et al. 2013), we expect that a positive or negative HRM perception foremost reflects the relationship between an athlete and the person/group considered to be responsible for HRM policy. Given the explained complex cohesion–HRM perception relationship, where in some cases cohesion might even develop based on a shared negative attitude to the HRM policymakers, it seems reasonable to test the independent effects of cohesiveness and perceived HRM quality on work engagement in the context of sport teams.

The Hypothesised Model

In social exchange theory, work engagement can be seen as an individual's desire to provide quality work. Findings from sport industry research, particularly for the field of basketball, suggest that the perception of the whole set of HRM practices on the team level has a statistically significant impact on attitudes to colleagues with whom an employee shares tasks (Ivašković 2014) and that the coach's behaviour (which includes HR practices) affects the athletes' mental toughness (Butt/Weinberg/Culp 2010) and commitment (Jackson/Grove/Beauchamp 2010). Decuypere and Schaufeli (2019) showed that through HRM practices leaders directly influence employee engagement along three pathways: emotional contagion (affective interpersonal pathway), social exchange (cognitive interpersonal pathway) and role modelling (behavioural interpersonal pathway). Further, a positive perception of the whole set of HRM practices was shown to have a positive impact on engagement and related constructs in other industries (Alfes et al. 2013, Gould-Williams/Davies 2005). Finally, logical intuition, based on the presumption that a basic HRM aim is to improve the individual's attitude to their work tasks, leads us to posit the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The perceived HRM quality has a direct effect on an athlete's level of work engagement.

The perception of cohesiveness reflects the work experiences of an individual. A higher degree of cohesion implies a better experience and positively affects the feelings of an individual team member (Niessen/Wesler/Kostova 2016, Tims/Bakker/Derks/van Rhenen 2013). According to social exchange theory, individuals should try to return the positive signals they receive in a certain relationship (Alfes et al. 2013). A positive perception of the team's cohesion should therefore (from the aspect of an individual athlete) represent a signal that their teammates are benevolent to a particular athlete in the context of their duties and therefore willing to cooperate for the common benefit, even if sometimes this means partial damage to a certain individual within the team. Such a perception should have a reciprocal effect whereby that particular individual increases their effort and tries to complete the tasks effectively. This should be especially true in the case of sport teams where athletes must work together to achieve a common goal. Given that the assumption is also supported by certain previous findings that perceived cohesiveness stimulates an athlete to accept their role within the team and channel their energy to accomplishing alternative goals, as well as the confirmed positive relationship between the context of work and work engagement (Dirks 1999, Carron et al. 2002), we propose:

Hypothesis 2: The perceived cohesion has a direct positive effect on an athlete's level of work engagement.

Some authors claim that a higher level of work engagement enables employees to better identify with their own role in the company (Rothbard 2001). Acceptance of one's own role increases productivity due to an increase in focus on tasks and goals that are set from above for every employee. At the same time, work engagement reduces the degree of resistance to otherwise difficult tasks, and lowers the perception of effort during normal tasks (Hockey 2000). Therefore, engaged individuals invest additional time and resources in the search for new ways of doing their own work, which should not only lead to greater technical productivity, but also to improvements in work processes and a better working environment (Alfes et al. 2013). This led to the general conclusion that the key benefit of stronger engagement is employees' increased cognitive and emotional connection with their tasks (Kahn 1990), which results in higher productivity (Ho/Wong/Lee 2011, Macey/Schneider 2008) and hence also in the employee's perception of making a greater individual contribution to the organisation's performance (Alfes et al. 2013). If we try to place the above-mentioned findings in the context of basketball teams, greater work engagement may be expected to stimulate every athlete to consciously focus on making improvements in their work in order to accomplish the tasks assigned by the

head coach, which should also be reflected in their perception of personally making a greater contribution to the team. We thus propose:

Hypothesis 3: The level of an athlete's work engagement has a direct positive effect on the perception of the athlete's contribution to the team's performance.

The above argumentation logically permits the presumption that a connection exists between the perception of HRM quality and cohesion on one side, and the individual's contribution to the team's performance on the other. Since cohesion can predict collective efficacy in sports teams (Leo et al. 2015), by analogy it should also boost individual performance. Stronger cohesion should imply a better experience and thereby positively affect the feelings held by an individual team member, which should lead to a higher level of work engagement (Niessen et al. 2016, Tims et al. 2013). In other words, it should stimulate an athlete to accept their role within the team and channel their energy toward accomplishing alternative goals (Dirks 1999). This should in turn influence the individual's task participation and contribution within the team (Salanova/Agut/Peiro 2005). Similarly, the effect of the perceived HRM quality initially affects the emotional component of an athlete, which is then reflected in their desire to perform their task in line with other team members' expectations and leads to a greater contribution to the team's performance. This is also in line with McShane and Von Glinow's (2003) argument that contextual factors directly affect feelings and emotions, which then play a mediating role in the desired behaviour and better performance. The level of work engagement is therefore expected to be a mediator between perceptions of HRM quality and cohesion on one side, and the self-reported contribution to the team on the other side of the causal relationship. Similar mechanisms were discovered by Alfes et al. (2013), who also provided proof that those positive effects are transmitted in the form of a better individual performance. The mediating role of work engagement was also found between the characteristics of the work, the type of leadership, and personal characteristics on one side (as stimulators) and efficiency at work on the other as a result (Christian/Garza/Slaughter 2011). In line with this, we posit the final two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4: The level of an athlete's work engagement positively mediates the relationship between the perceived HRM quality and the athlete's contribution to the team's performance.

Hypothesis 5: The level of an athlete's work engagement positively mediates the relationship between the perceived cohesion and the athlete's contribution to the team's performance.

While analysing the relationships between the observed constructs, it is important to stress that the theory and empirical tests also provide some evidence of different causality. Therefore, we decided to take the alternative model approach where we compared our hypothesised model with other models for which we were able to find enough support in the literature. In Model 2, we added a direct causal link between the perceived HRM quality and the perceived contribution to the team's performance given some reports that HRM can sometimes directly affect efficiency (e.g. Huselid 1995). In Model 3, we added and tested a causal link between the perception of cohesiveness and a basketball athlete's perception of their own contribution to the team's performance, which is in harmony with the thesis that the construct of cohesiveness can be understood as teammates' support in the process of accomplishing tasks (Carron et al. 2002, van Vianen/De Dreu 2001). In addition, we tested Model 4 in which we combined both modifications in Models 2 and 3.

Methods

Data Collection

We performed the research among men's basketball clubs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. Despite the disintegration of Yugoslavia, cooperation among basketball clubs from these four countries has remained strong. Regardless of the somewhat differently developed legal environments in these countries, their basketball clubs share the same characteristics (they have all retained their non-profit status) and problems (mainly too small markets and thus poor competition within the national basketball leagues), which led them to form the regional Adriatic Basketball League (ABL). We invited 249 men's basketball clubs from four national leagues (regardless of the level of competition and amateur/professional status), of which 73 were willing to participate in the study, making a response rate of 29.3 % on the club level. All clubs are non-profit organisations and have mixed personnel structures. The data collection took place in each team at the end of practice, never immediately after a competition in order to avoid competition-specific biases. Athletes completed their questionnaires on their own without communicating with their teammates or their coach.

Sample Size and Structure

The questionnaire was fully completed by 559 out of 876 basketball players in 73 clubs that participated in the study (a response rate of 63.8 %) or out of the 2,988 basketball players in the 249 clubs invited to participate in the study (a response rate of 18.7 %), which according to Kline (2011) is a sufficiently large sample size for structural equation modelling (SEM). The participants were on average 22.2 years old (standard deviation = 4.7 years) and on average had

4.8 years of experience playing for their current club in senior competitions (standard deviation = 4.6 years). Further, 32.7 % of athletes in the sample were playing for Croatian clubs, 29.9 % for Slovenian clubs, 22.3 % for Serbian clubs and 15.0 % for clubs from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Measures

HRM quality. We agree with authors who stress the importance of a holistic approach, which implies the measurement of HRM bundles rather than individual practices (Gould-Williams/Mohamed 2010). Therefore, the term "HRM quality" refers to the quality perception of the whole set of activities included in that part of the management process. Since there is no consensus on the measurement of perceived HRM quality (Gould-Williams/Davies 2005, Gonçalves/Neves 2012) and to reflect the specifics of post-transitional South-East European basketball clubs, the perception of HRM quality was measured using a scale developed and tested for conducting HRM quality studies in sport teams (Ivašković 2014). A discussion involving 11 basketball players and 11 experts from the HRM field in sports clubs (5 head coaches, 5 sports directors and 1 sports psychologist) was organised. Every member of the work group was given Gould-Williams and Davies' (2005) and Goncalves and Neves' (2012) scale, and then had to reconsider their statements and modify them if necessary. Every member eventually came up with a proposition for the measurement scale. The final list of ten distinct HRM phases was the result of combining similar phases, namely: (1) scouting (activities within the process of identifying potential athletes among young teams and on the athletes' market for the first team of the club); (2) negotiating (activities related with the processes of attracting and contracting athletes); (3) selection (activities related to the process of the final structuring of the first team); (4) training (club activities associated with obtaining basketball skills and knowledge); (5) game strategy (activities within the process of preparing for the competitive season, which includes general playing characteristics and tactics); (6) game leadership (game-specific activities like psychological preparation and modification of playing tactics for a particular opponent); (7) performance evaluation (post-game and post-season activities of evaluating individual and team effectiveness); (8) financial compensation (the system of financial stimulations for team and individual effectiveness); (9) non-financial compensation (the system of non-financial stimulations; e.g. free days, family members' use of the club's infrastructure etc.); and (10) the way of leaving the club (activities related with premature termination of a contract between the club and an athlete). The basketball players had to evaluate the quality of practices in each phase. They provided responses on a 7-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicated a more positive response. The scale was anchored at the extremes by "the practices in this HRM phase are extremely poorly implemented" (1) and "the practices in this HRM phase are extremely well implemented" (7). In order

to assure the measurement of different constructs, we conducted a bivariate correlation analysis between the perceived qualities of the ten HRM phases (Table 1). The results showed that high correlations (correlation coefficient > .7) existed in the triangle of trainings, game strategy, and game leadership. Moreover, only among those three variables did the variation inflation factor (VIF) calculation indicate the potential for a multicollinearity problem (VIF > 3). This indicated the possibility that from the athletes' perspective phases 4, 5 and 6 in fact form a single HRM phase and thus we conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and three confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) in order to test which structure of the HRM construct best fits our data. According to Hu and Bentler's (1999) recommendations, the results of EFA (Barlett's test: χ^2 (45) = 1510.046, p = 0.000, KMO = 0.883) and CFA (CFI = .99, NNFI = .95, NFI = .98, RMSEA = .07) indicated and supported an eight-phase structure, where the phases trainings, game strategy and game leadership formed one phase (the new phase was named training and game leadership – TGL). Conversely, single- and 10-phase structures were found not to fit the data well due to the low fit indexes (CFI, NNFI and NFI < 0.9) and high RMSEA (> .10). In addition, Cronbach's alpha (.92) confirmed the reliability of the TGL phase, and the overall HRM scale alpha for the whole sample (n = 559) scored .85.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables representing the HRM quality construct

Variables	*M*	*SD*	*Correlations*								
			1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*
1. Scouting	4.5	1.63									
2. Negotiating	4.2	1.76	.57**								
3. Selection	4.8	1.43	.66**	.61**							
4. Training	5.4	1.42	.51**	.41**	.55**						
5. Game strategy	5.4	1.37	.55**	.42**	.54**	.81**					
6. Game leadership	5.4	1.36	.46**	.33**	.50**	.78**	.78**				
7. Performance evaluation	5.1	1.29	.45**	.38**	.50**	.61**	.67**	.69**			
8. Financial compensation	3.5	1.98	.39**	.58**	.44**	.33**	.36**	.32**	.40**		
9. Nonfinancial compensation	3.9	1.91	.35**	.45**	.35**	.31**	.38**	.32**	.36**	.56**	
10. Way of leaving the club	3.9	1.78	.29**	.38**	.32**	.14**	.19**	.13**	.16**	.41**	.39**

Notes. * p < .05; ** p < .01; M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Cohesion. For the purpose of this study, Carron, Widmeyer and Brawley's (1985) Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) was used to measure cohesion. They divided the construct based on how individual members of a group are attracted to the group and how individuals are integrated into it, resulting in four aspects of cohesion, namely: Individual Attractions to the Group-Task (IAGT), Individual Attractions to the Group-Social (IAGS), Group Integration-Task

(GIT), and Group Integration-Social (GIS). Previous studies (Carron/Brawley 2000, Li/Harmer 1996) provided evidence of the scale validity and its usefulness in the sport team context. However, when analysing sport teams scholars suggest the use of only two task components (IAGT and GIT) (Li/Harmer 1996) because previous studies among basketball and other sport clubs repeatedly showed that the other two social components of cohesion have a significantly smaller impact on team performance (Carron/Brawley 2000, Carron et al. 2002). We therefore measured cohesion only with the IAGT and GIT dimensions, using the questionnaire items shown in Table 2. Responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale anchored at the extremes by "strongly disagree" (1) and "strongly agree" (7). Six items were reverse-coded. The cohesion scale had a sufficient level of reliability; Cronbach's alpha was .77 (IAGT = .81, GIT = .83).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation between two dimensions of the cohesion construct

Dimension 1: Individual attractions to the group-task (IAGT)	*M*	*SD*	*Dimension 2: Group integration-task (GIT)*	*M*	*SD*
I'm not happy with the amount of playing time I get (R)	4.46	2.17	Our team is united in trying to achieve its performance goals	5.57	1.31
I'm unhappy with my team's level of desire to win (R)	4.60	1.90	We all take responsibility for any loss or poor performance by the team	5.41	1.36
The team does not give me enough opportunity to improve my personal performance (R)	4.69	2.05	Our team members have conflicting aspirations for the team's performance (R)	4.57	1.45
I do not like the style of play in this team (R)	4.78	2.03	If members of our team have problems in practice, everyone wants to help them so that we can get back together again	5.38	1.15
			Our team members do not communicate freely about each athlete's responsibilities during a competition or practice (R)	4.33	1.51
Average for dimension 1 (IAGT)	*4.63*	*1.82*	*Average for dimension 2 (GIT)*	*5.05*	*1.13*
Correlation between individual attractions to the group-task (IAGT) and group integration-task (GIT): .53**					

Notes. * p < .05; ** p < .01; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; (R) = reverse-coded item (reverse scoring was used for reverse-coded items).

Work engagement. The level of basketball players' work engagement was measured using a shortened 9-item Utrecht scale (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale – UWES) designed by Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova (2006), which is recognised as reliable and valid for different types of social studies. It measures three components of work engagement: vigour, dedication and absorption, using the questionnaire items shown in Table 3. Responses were measured on a 7-point

Likert scale (1 = "never" and 7 = "always"). The three-factor structure suggested by Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova (2006) proved to be suitable for the data collected in this study (CFI = .97, NNFI = .95, NFI = .97, RMSEA = .08). The alpha for work engagement was .90.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations between three dimensions of the work engagement construct

Dimension 1: Vigour	*M*	*SD*	*Dimension 2: Dedication*	*M*	*SD*	*Dimension 3: Absorption*	*M*	*SD*
At my work, I feel I am bursting with energy	5.88	1.00	I am enthusiastic about my job	5.59	1.30	I feel happy when I am working intensely	5.61	1.16
In my job, I feel strong and vigorous	6.11	0.97	My job inspires me	5.45	1.32	I am immersed in my work	5.41	1.12
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work	6.00	0.92	I am proud about the work I do	5.47	1.15	I get carried away while I'm working	5.55	1.32
Average for dim. 1 (Vigour)	*5.99*	*0.86*	*Average for dim. 2 (Dedication)*	*5.50*	*1.08*	*Average for dim. 3 (Absorption)*	*5.49*	*0.97*
Correlation between vigour and dedication: .71**								
Correlation between vigour and absorption: .64**								
Correlation between dedication and absorption: .65**								

Notes. * p < .05; ** p < .01; M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Contribution to the team's performance. The most commonly used objective measure of athletes' efficiency is the indicator of individual statistical efficiency. Despite its transparency and objectivity, it also has some disadvantages. It does not take the number of minutes played by a certain athlete or their role in the team into account etc. We thus decided to measure the contribution of an individual basketball athlete to the team's performance on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "I do not contribute to the team performance at all" and 7 = "my contribution to the team performance is enormous"). The relevance of this indicator was verified by comparing it with a statistical indicator of the statistical efficiency of 172 athletes for whom we could obtain data from their clubs' websites. It showed a relatively high and significant correlation with the self-reported evaluation of the contribution to the team performance ($r = .63$, $p < .01$), allowing the conclusion that this subjective measure is appropriate for the purpose of this study.

Data Analysis

Since data for all observed variables were collected from a single source, we had to consider the potential problems of common method variance bias (CMV) and discriminant validity. In order to control the CMV influence, we performed a set of CFA following recommendations given in previous studies (Alfes et al. 2013,

Hu/Bentler 1999). In the next step, we conducted the common latent factor test (known as Harman's single-factor test) recommended by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003). A discriminant validity test according to Fornell and Larcker (1981) was then performed in order to determine whether our constructs from the proposed model are distinct from each other. Following the aim of providing a clear overview of the relationships between the observed variables, we performed SEM using maximum-likelihood estimation in AMOS 21, and adhered to the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999) for evaluating the model fit. Finally, in order to verify the mediating role of the work engagement construct, we conducted additional mediation tests according to the instructions of MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West and Sheets (2002). The potential mediation paths were checked with Sobel's test.

Results

The CFA results confirmed that the initial model exhibited a good fit (CFI, NFI and NNFI > .9, and RMSEA < .08). All standardised regression coefficients in the model were significant at the .001 level. On the other hand, Harman's test performed on the hypothesised model had a poor fit, indicating that a single factor does not account for the majority of variance in our data (CFI < 0.6; RMSEA > 0.1). Further, the first eigenvalue accounts for 26.6 % of all the data variance. Since that is below the threshold of 40 %, there seems to be no concern regarding bias due to common methods (Babin/Griffin/Hair 2016). With AVE (average variance extracted) analysis, we tested whether the square root of every AVE value belonging to each latent construct is larger than any correlation among any pair of latent constructs. Comparing AVE with the correlation coefficient enables one to see if the items of the construct explain more variance than do the items of the other constructs (Fornell/Larcker 1981, Zait/Bertea 2011). The discriminant validity tests shown in Table 4 confirm that all scales were distinct from each other. The perception of HRM quality and the perception of cohesion show a relatively small correlation ($r = .23$, $p < .01$), which is unsurprising considering the nature of both constructs. The perception of cohesion indeed reflects relationships among the athletes, while the perception of HRM reflects the relationship between an athlete and their organisation and/or head coach.

Table 4. Means, standard deviations, correlation coefficients, and AVE for the constructs in the SEM model

Variables	*M*	*SD*	*AVE (on the diagonal) and correlations (below the diagonal)*		
			Perceived HRM quality	*Perceived task cohesiveness*	*Work engagement*
HRM quality	4.43	1.20	AVE = .59		
Cohesion	4.75	1.02	.23**	AVE = .69	
Work engagement	5.66	0.85	.40**	.42**	AVE = .55
Contribution to the team performance	4.56	1.09	.20**	.30**	.51**

Notes. * p < .05; ** p < .01; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; AVE = average variance extracted (AVE is not reported for the variable Contribution to the team performance because it was measured with only one questionnaire item).

The SEM of the initial model proved to fit the data well (CFI, NFI, NNFI > .9; RMSEA < .1). In the next phase, we tested the suitability of alternative models in order to discover whether there is any composition of relationships between the observed variables that reflects the actual situation better (Anderson/Gerbing 1988). In Model 2, despite the previously confirmed significant correlation between the two variables, the perceived HRM quality did not show a direct impact on the perception of an athlete's contribution to the team performance. Moreover, Model 3 with a causal link between the perception of cohesion and an athlete's perception of their contribution to the team performance did not show improvements and the causal link was not statistically significant. Consequently, Model 4, in which we combined both modifications in Models 2 and 3, also did not improve the fit results.

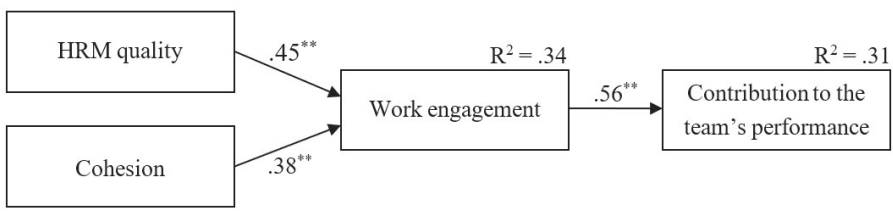
The findings presented in Table 5 suggest the initial model is the best reflection of the relationship between the observed variables for this data set. Figure 1 shows the results of the SEM tests. The perceived HRM quality and the perceived cohesion affect an athlete's work engagement, which then leads to an improved contribution to the team performance (31 % of the dependent variable's variance is explained).

Table 5. Structural equation model comparisons

Model	*χ2 (df)*	*p*	*CFI*	*NFI*	*NNFI*	*RMSEA*
Initial model	395.630 (317)	.190	.97	.92	.95	.07
Model 2	415.502 (316)	.161	.95	.89	.93	.09
Model 3	451.041 (316)	.125	.93	.88	.92	.12
Model 4	429.250 (313)	.152	.93	.88	.91	.12

Notes. Initial model = hypothesised model; Model 2 = the model where a direct path from the perceived HRM quality to the self-reported contribution to the team performance was added; Model 3 = the model where a direct path from cohesion to the self-reported contribution to the team performance was added; Model 4 = the model where both modifications in Model 2 and Model 3 were added.

Figure 1. SEM test of the hypothesised model



Notes. * p < .05. ** p < .01.

Testing the mediation hypothesis requires that X (where X is a predictor) has a significant effect on M (where M is a mediator) and on Y (where Y is a dependent variable) as well. If the direct effect of X on Y becomes smaller when M is added to the outcomes equation, there might be a mediation effect between X and Y through M (Mach et al. 2010, MacKinnon et al. 2002). After analysing each potential mediation relationship in the hypothesised model, we checked the potential mediation paths with Sobel's test. The results reveal that in both cases the link between X and Y became non-significant when M was added into the equation, while Sobel's tests confirmed mediation. We may thus confirm that the perception of HRM quality indirectly affects the contribution made by an athlete to the team's performance through the athlete's work engagement ($z = 2.89$, $p = .004$), while the perception of cohesion also influences the same outcome through the mediating variable of an athlete's work engagement ($z = 4.43$, $p = .001$).

Discussion

The results confirm that perceptions of the HRM quality and cohesiveness are predictors for an athlete's work engagement, which then mediates those positive effects on an individual's contribution to the team's performance. In line with some previous findings on post-transitional sport clubs and team dynamics

(Ivašković 2014), this study confirms the importance of cohesion, which seems to be a crucial factor in such sport teams' success, even though it does not directly affect the individual's contribution to the team. From the aspect of an individual athlete, the task dimension of cohesion can be understood as the support of an athlete's co-workers (teammates) within the team during his work. The study results are also in harmony with previous findings of athletes in a non-transitional environment showing that the perceived behaviour of superiors holds a key role in motivating individuals in their tasks (Alfes et al. 2013, Butt et al. 2010). Yet, in our case, the impact of cohesion was found to be at least as strong as the impact of the perceived HRM quality. This may be explained by the fact that post-transitional sport clubs have mixed teams consisting of amateurs and professionals, which makes cohesion harder to achieve than in purely professional or amateur clubs in non-transitional countries. As a rare good, in the context of mixed teams cohesion is relatively more important for the performance of an individual athlete. In line with the fundaments of social exchange theory, individual athletes try to return the positive signals they receive in the relationship with their superior (the HRM quality perception) and co-workers (cohesion perception), especially those signals which are linked to their work tasks. A positive perception of the cohesion's task dimension within an individual athlete is therefore a sign that team members want that particular individual good in the context of their tasks, which makes them willing to cooperate for the common benefit, even if this is not always in line with their individual aspirations. The results in this case confirmed that this perception has reciprocal effects, meaning individual athletes invest effort to optimise and effectively carry out their own tasks. However, the individual's HRM quality perception and the perception of task cohesiveness are weakly correlated, which is unsurprising given the nature of both constructs. The individual perception of cohesion reflects the relationships between athletes, while the perception of HRM reflects the relationship between an athlete and their organisation and/or head coach. Accordingly, it is easy to imagine that in some cases these constructs hold the potential to be in a negative correlation, e.g. when cohesion among athletes is built on their shared negative attitude to the organisation.

Our findings show the impact of the HRM quality does not have a weaker impact on work engagement than the cohesiveness effect. In this case, those two predictors explain about one-third of the variance in the level of an individual's work engagement. In line with some previous findings (Bowen/Ostroff 2004), the behaviour of superiors, which is reflected through the HRM processes, as well as the behaviour of teammates (reflected through the perceived group cohesion) significantly affect the work engagement of individuals in relation to their tasks. A positive perception of the HRM quality therefore directly affects, together with the perceived task cohesion, the level of work engagement and indirectly contributes positively to athletes' perceptions of their contribution to

the team performance. Thus, basketball athletes with a higher perception of HRM quality usually perceive they personally contribute more to their team's success. This is in line with the argument that those employees who feel that the organisation invests in them and values their work put greater energy into their work, are not reluctant to accomplish their tasks and thereby contribute more to the performance on the organisational level. Therefore, in terms of increasing the level of work engagement both are important: the HRM system of an organisation but also the narrower work environment, especially if the individual employee must rely on cooperation with others, as occurs in basketball teams.

Still, there seems to be no direct influence of either perceived HRM quality or perceived task cohesion on the perception of an athlete's contribution to the team's performance. This means that the simple enhancement of cohesion and HRM quality perceptions will not necessarily lead to better individual performances. Both of these perceptions must be channelled through actual work engagement which, however, is just one factor of performance. The fact is that the perception of one's personal contribution to the team depends on many more factors that are not influenced by the individual. For example, an athlete often does not have total control over the number of minutes they complete in a match or competition in their playing position. The number of matches in a season is typically also completely beyond the sphere of their influence, especially in dynamic contact sports like basketball where missed matches due to injuries play an important role. Work engagement might therefore be a crucial factor of an individual athlete's contribution to their team's performance, although it still explains less than one-third of its variance. At the same time, work engagement also depends on numerous factors while perceived task cohesion and perceived HRM quality, while important, are only two of many. Moreover, the latter are not necessarily in a positive correlation and might even have opposite trends within a single team or within the perception held by an individual athlete. This raises the question of whether work engagement can simply be increased with the enhancement of a single perception or whether the individual must hold a set of appropriate perceptions to increase their work engagement. This research suggests that the perception of team cohesion generally increases work engagement on the individual level. Yet, we must be careful not to oversimplify these relationships due to the many structural factors that have an important role in team performance. For example, even if a high level of conscientiousness generally implies greater work engagement and a better performance among individual athletes, adding a highly conscientious athlete to a team with a lower level of conscientiousness might erode the intra-team trust and perceived cohesion from their teammates' perspective (Zheng/Wang 2021). This means perceived cohesion and individual performance do not always have a direct causal relationship, as was confirmed in this study.

The results of this study could be explained with some previous indications that more engaged employees might be easier to identify with their own role in the organisation (Rothbard 2001) and with the tasks assigned to them (Ho et al. 2011, Macey/Schneider 2008). Along these lines, accepting one's own role within a team increases productivity as a result of an increased focus on the tasks and goals that are set for a particular employee. At the same time, this can reduce the degree of an individual's resistance to otherwise difficult tasks and lowers the perception of the extent of effort during normal tasks (Hockey 2000). In the context of sport teams, a higher level of work engagement manifests as acceptance and better performance of the tasks assigned to them by their head coach. This does not necessarily imply an increase in individual statistical efficiency; it simply means acceptance of the specific role that should help the team boost its performance.

Theoretical Implications

The results imply that the perception of a positive attitude of teammates has a positive effect on an employee's work engagement. In other words, as long as individuals feel that the majority of the team accepts the tasks and is ready to work cohesively, they are stimulated to accept their tasks and accomplish them better. In that way, athletes try to return the help they obtain from the teammates. This is consistent with the perceptual model of McShane and Von Glinow (2003), who argued that contextual HRM factors affect individual employees directly by influencing their feelings and emotions, which then play a mediating role in their performance. This mediating role is at least partially played by the construct of work engagement, which reflects an individual's task adoption and their desire to perform as well as possible in order to help the team. The results demonstrate multiple positive HRM effects on the performance of sport teams and provide empirical evidence of a causal relationship between factors on the individual and group levels. This time, contrary to what Ivašković (2014) found, it was demonstrated the effect is in the opposite direction, namely from cohesion to the individual athlete's engagement. The results also indicate that social interaction between two subjects (perceived as a higher level of team cohesiveness in the eyes of a third party) within a team sports club from a post-transitional country, where teams include both professionals and amateurs, not only has reciprocal effects, but externalities for other relationships. This is especially important within mixed organisational units (like in post-transitional sport teams) where unit members, despite differences in their status, share responsibility for the organisation's success.

Practical Implications

The study shows that the relationships between teammates may be crucial for creating an appropriate working environment in basketball clubs from post-transitional South-East European countries, which mainly operate as non-profit organisations. Together with an effective set of HRM practices, it can stimulate an individual athlete to increase their level of work engagement. In this context, it is necessary to highlight the importance of the combined impact of the perceptions of the HRM quality and the task dimension of cohesion within the team. A particular task represents the point of contact between an individual employee and their co-workers, and the HRM system represents the same in the employee–superior relationship. Therefore, perceived HRM usually reflects the attitude to one's superior (coach), and task cohesiveness, beside the already mentioned individual and group dimensions, could (in a given case) reflect the perception held by an individual about the attitude of their teammates and their willingness to work together despite differences between amateurs and professionals. It should be noted that this study analysed a specific type of organisation in which teammates are not simply co-workers because (apart from their different status, which brings huge income inequalities) they are also in a competitive-complementary relationship (since they are constantly competing for limited playing time). Therefore, the degree of task cohesiveness is understandably an important direct predictor of work engagement and an indirect predictor of an individual's contribution to their team's performance. Still, it is important to stress that the effect of the HRM quality perception from an individual perspective does not contribute less than the perceived cohesion to their willingness to accomplish the delegated duties. This shows that coaches in post-transitional sport clubs strongly influence the nature and quality of the experience. Further, the role played by the coach is at least dual; they are partly responsible for developing the team's cohesion, and at the same time they directly affect the athletes' work engagement with their day-to-day HRM practices. This is in line with the finding that successful coaches pursue multiple-goal coaching strategies with at least two dimensions; general coaching (focused on team) and player development strategies (focused on individual athletes) (Gould/Collins/Lauer/Chung 2007). Coaches in clubs in similar contexts should therefore keep in mind the importance of the impression they give on a daily basis through the training process.

Limitations and Suggestions

The use of subjective data is often regarded as a limitation because it raises concerns about CMV. Yet, in this case it was impossible to avoid. Further, the additional analysis helped minimise the CMV problem. In addition, some authors (e.g. Alfes et al. 2013) argued that self-report measures are actually the most valid for examining HRM effects because the intended HRM is typically

different from what is implemented, and individuals are best placed to report their own perception of HRM quality, their level of work engagement, and their perception of the team's cohesion. Second, our data were collected only at one point in time, which might limit the conclusions regarding the causal order in the examined relationships. However, the particular hypothesised causal relationships were derived from the theory and results of previous studies. Third, the data were collected from basketball clubs in four countries with a similar historical background, which may hamper generalisation of the results due to the potential cultural differences established in other sport branches (Cresswell/Eklund 2005), which may also exist in our case. Therefore, further research on sport clubs over a longer period, in different post-transitional environments, and from different sport branches is recommended. From a substantive point of view, we also suggest further research into the exact nature of HRM practices in sport teams and their influence on the team's game performance, principally by considering the questions of how much the choice and composition of individual HRM practices actually matter, and to what extent work engagement depends on athletes' need to feel that they are being cared for.

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