

Do Athletic Experiences Lead to Desirable Workplace Motivation? A Proposed Exploratory Framework

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Abstract

With an increasing level of attention given to the concept of motivation in the workforce, anecdotal evidence suggests that many employers have a preference towards hiring individuals with athletic backgrounds. While only limited research, at best, has studied this phenomenon to demonstrate any empirically supported framework of why former high school or college athletes may be perceived as more ideal employees, the following proposes a logical path forward to begin to empirically test the accuracy of the belief that sport participants and athletes could make better employees by specifically studying the transfer of a person's motivational outlook from the athletic experience to the workplace.

Keywords: Motivational outlook, Transfer, Context, Self-determination theory, Athletics, Work

1. Introduction

As a former college athlete, I have found myself in a unique position. For many years, in my positions as a manager and as a faculty member, I have heard about the importance of hiring athletes because they bring certain motivational orientations and outlooks to the workplace. This assumption, while it has intuitive appeal, has received very limited empirical attention.

A few years back I was preparing for my first ultramarathon trail run. Ultramarathon trail runs are generally 35 km+ trail running races that include a significant amount of elevation change. This race, like many marathons, required almost a years' worth of dedicated training. Being a former athlete this seemed entirely reasonable. At some point during that year I concluded that if anyone can complete a 35 km+ race at 7,000 feet above sea level with

5000+ feet of vertical gain (some 100 km races will exceed 12,000 feet of vertical gain), it may be reasonable to assume that the same person can persevere and easily overcome workplace challenges. From a hiring manager's point of view, I would certainly want to add someone capable of working through the mental and physical challenges of completing such a run to my staff. Wouldn't you?

In recent years there has been a renaissance of interest among scholars concerning the impact of various work related constructs (behaviors, intentions, attitudes, etc.) in an attempt to more closely anticipate or predict desirable work outcomes (Lion & Bolinger, 2016). Of my own particular interest is the persistent gap that exists between scholarship and practice. The belief in the value of the skills and behaviors obtained through sport experiences is particularly popular among practitioners. A quick internet search reveals many of these propositions, such as "Why You Should Hire Athletes" (Frankel, 2015) and "3 Reasons You Should Hire an Athlete Today" (Fliegel, 2015). Additionally, casual conversations with organizational leaders and hiring managers reflect a bias towards hiring people with athletic backgrounds. When I share with them that I study motivational outlooks and that I am curious about the athlete-to-organization transition, their bias and preference for athletes and sport participants often emerges with "I will always hire an athlete over a non-athlete" or, in the case of www.athletenetwork.com's website "by nature, athletes are driven, motivated, and competitive. The same traits that make you successful as an athlete are the same traits that translate to success in the professional world" (n.d.). Yet, when you look to the research literature of the benefits of athletic experience on workplace preparation, the findings are sparse and inconsistent.

A 2011 study of higher education employees engaging in a university-sponsored sport competition program was not able to substantiate a relationship between sport participation and work performance (Hashim, Ahmad, Baharud-din, & Mazuki, 2011). However, a study by Wattles and Harris (2003) did demonstrate very interesting corollaries between fitness levels and perceived productivity, job satisfaction, and absenteeism. They found that job satisfaction was influenced by one's level of cardiovascular endurance, productivity was related to level of muscular strength, and absenteeism trended when assessed against an employee's level of muscular flexibility (2003). While correlation does not always lead to causation, the latter study presents some interesting findings and is one of only a very few studies that have attempted to study the relationships between athletics and work.

While still limited, more research has focused on elite athlete's (i.e., Olympic level) ability to transition into the workplace. Barker, Barker-Ruchti, Rynne, and Lee discovered that certain behaviors and practices necessary to be high achieving athletes actually presented problems when transitioning to the workplace, such as the constant need for feedback and the requiring of a highly structured and controlled environment (2014). This is the exact opposite of what most hiring managers desire in new employees. Stepping further away from the work domain we find an abundance of research that attempts to demonstrate the benefits of exercise on affect and depression (Yan, Jin, Oh, & Choi, 2015), anxiety (Anderson & Shivakumar, 2013), cognitive viability (Prakash, Voss, Erickson, & Kramer, 2015), etc.

While the conversation concerning the relationship between sport and workplace can be quite broad and include aspects of sport spectatorship's (professional sports) impact on the work environment and work relations, this paper will aim to narrow its focus to proposing a framework that could be used to test the practitioners' assumptions of the inherent value and impact non-elite athletic experiences have on the workplace. I encourage a research path with the goal of better understanding the relationship between athletic experiences and desired workplace behaviors. My overarching research question is: To what extent, and in what forms, do working professionals draw upon behaviors learned/developed during their concurrent/recent extracurricular athletic/sport experiences?

While not explicitly stated, and purposefully left rather vague, this research question is crafted in a way to serve as a starting point that lends itself to exploring many research constructs beyond motivational outlooks, such as job satisfaction, persistence, and behavioral intentions. It is important to acknowledge that this research question, as presented, gives little attention to the recency or timing of the athletic endeavor(s). The larger the gap in time between activities and the current work state, the more difficult it is going to be to accurately capture the relationship between athletic experience and work motivation. Nonetheless, the purpose of this paper is a call to action with a proposed path forward where researchers can individually more narrowly define their research study variables.

2. Self-Determination Theory, A Motivational Framework

The anecdotal evidence of hiring managers and the popular press's infatuation with athletes as employees is often rooted in the concept of motivation. Despite often being a catchall term for practitioners, motivation is a crucial component in defining how people deal with others, as well as what enables them to achieve goals, find energy to complete tasks, and persist in the face of setbacks and failure (Grant, 2008). Motivation can be influenced from outside sources such as bosses, grades, or opinions that others might hold, but it is also frequently based on internal factors (Barbuto & Scholl, 1998). These intrinsic motivational factors can be viewed as fulfilling certain psychological needs, or according the self-determination theory (SDT) literature *basic* psychological needs or BPNs (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2012).

SDT has appreciated a lively and rich evolution over the past 40 years as it examines the interplay between needs, specifically autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and how those needs are subject to the influence of social contexts and individual differences (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT research has been central to "other personality-relevant frameworks" (Ryan, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2019, p. 117), such as motivational interviewing (Markland, Ryan, Tobin, & Rollnick, 2005), achievement goal theory (Vansteenkiste, Lens, Elliot, Soenens, & Mouratidis, 2014), and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2009). These are all relevant as they may also be used to understand behavior in the workplace.

SDT posits that the extent to which these three psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) are supported and nourished directly correlates to the optimal functioning and development of individuals in both social and internal contexts (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The

term, autonomy, refers to the self-directed or volitional act (Ryan, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2019) of charting a path to accomplish something, whether that is at work or home, as opposed to the external influences or demands of, say, a manager. Whereas competence refers to a person possessing the ability to successfully and accurately complete a task, such as completing a work order in a service position. Finally, relatedness refers to the belonging and connection with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

This has consistently been empirically supported across numerous domains such as sports and athletics (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2007), health and wellness (Ng, Ntoumanis, Thogersen-Ntoumani, Deci, Ryan, Duda, & Williams, 2012), and business (Sweeney, Webb, Mazzarol, & Soutar, 2014). However, despite the robust empirical findings, much of what constitutes motivational pressure in an organizational context originates external to an individual (Barbuto & Scholl, 1998) and functions in a manner that actively undermines the three basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000), such as pay for performance or incentivized work models—consider the carrot and stick notion of motivation where the carrot is considered an extrinsic (reward) motivator. The concern with the traditional carrot framework is that while it may result in an immediate, or near future positive response, research has demonstrated (Ryan & Deci, 2017) that over time, or when the carrot is removed, the employee fails to live up to the expectation. Instead, the authors have found by focusing on the employee's basic psychological needs, as opposed to material interests, the conditions are prime for them to more effectively demonstrate higher levels of intrinsic motivation, than any carrot or stick approach.

In consideration of the SDT research on health and psychology, relating to lifestyle and behavior changes maintained over time, this represents a cross context transfer of behavior. In these specific domains, in order for people to sustain changes or accomplish specific health related goals, they must work through them whether they are at home, at work, or in some other environment. Examples of this are possessing autonomous and intrinsic exercise motivation (Santos, Ball, Crawford, & Teixeira, 2016) or self-regulatory “values-based goal pursuit” behaviors (Teixeira et al., 2015, p. 11), in order to change one's own body composition. This is in alignment with the belief that motivational outlooks do not start and stop respective to domains. They can cross domains, and must cross them if the basic psychological needs are to be fulfilled and optimal functioning is to occur (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

However, the attention to social contexts as an integral part of SDT increases the complexity and care needed to research the practitioners' assumption of motivation spillover as motivational outlooks may not cleanly and consistently track across domains without consideration of the environment and social contexts. In recognition of this it is reasonable to attempt to better understand the transfer of motivational outlooks from athletics to the workplace by utilizing other research completed to date, which utilizes the SDT framework (i.e., trans-contextual model (TCM); Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2015). By studying the motivation transfer from athletics to the workplace, this research stands to further improve the understanding of tracking motivational outlooks over time, as well as its limitations.

3. In Consideration of the Research Question

There is a preponderance of personal development research that attempts to demonstrate the value of adults engaging in athletic and fitness related activities. The research includes group oriented activities like team sports, as well as individual activities like running. A skeptical assessment of the literature reviewed may call to question an overabundance of positive or confirmatory research, with far fewer studies calling attention to the gaps in the research, whether that being small effect sizes, heterogeneous samples, or the risks associated with self-reporting (e.g., Spector, 1992).

A number of studies provide some demonstrable value and promise to the task of attempting to better understand athletic experience on desirable workplace behavior. In a study of 75 wheelchair basketball athletes it was found that athletes whom reported the “highest levels of grit and resilience tended to also be the most engaged in their sport, and athletes with high levels of hardiness and resilience reported the highest quality of life” (Martin, Byrd, Watts, & Dent, 2015, p. 345). Whereas in a study that examined motivational orientations, it was found that participants who used exercise and recreation activities as their primary form of physical activity are motivated by more extrinsic constructs (i.e., weight management) than those who engage in sports. Those that used sport as their primary form of physical activity reported more intrinsically motivated orientations, like competition and enjoyment (Ball, Bice, & Parry, 2014). These studies begin to portray a complex picture of how individual identity could be tied to the type of athletic endeavors.

From a slightly different vantage point a study of marathon runners found that participating fulfilled a wide range of needs including sense of achievement and personal satisfaction (Summers, Machin, & Sargent, 1983). However, for the most committed runners they found a lower level of satisfaction with their work. This is an interesting finding as it appears to suggest that there may be a threshold for the relationship between the involvement in sports and its impact on work experiences. The finding also demonstrates that the overarching research question may not identify a clear answer of whether all athletic experiences result in desirable motivational outlooks, because there may be any number of situational factors the researcher must be mindful of.

A study, by Dionigi, Baker, and Horton (2011), on masters level sport participants found that such events can have a transformational impact on a person’s identity, sense of volition as well as mental framework towards motivation. This along with other findings that relate to competition (Choi, Johnson, & Kim, 2014), personal growth and improved health outcomes (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013), and moral development (Rudd & Stoll, 2004) demonstrate a propensity to support the practitioners’ assumptions of athletes making better employees.

Despite the amount of research examining the impact of exercise or athletics on adults, there are still only a limited number of studies that attempt to demonstrate the relationship between athletics and workplace behaviors. While not central to the topic, but something to definitely be mindful of, is the workplace wellness boon of the early 2000s. It was propped up to be the health-work-balance model of the future but has not amounted to much. Even today there is

little data on the impact of the proposed beneficial outcomes from these initiatives. The findings have been rather isolated to the individual health benefits of the wellness initiatives. Little is known of any actual impact on the work environment or the organization. This may be a result of much of the evolution of the wellness development ideology failing to make connections between the benefits of such programs and actual, desirable, and relevant organizational outcomes (Calderwood, Gabriel, Rosen, Simon, & Koopman, 2015).

4. The Transfer of Desirable Characteristics from One Environment to Another

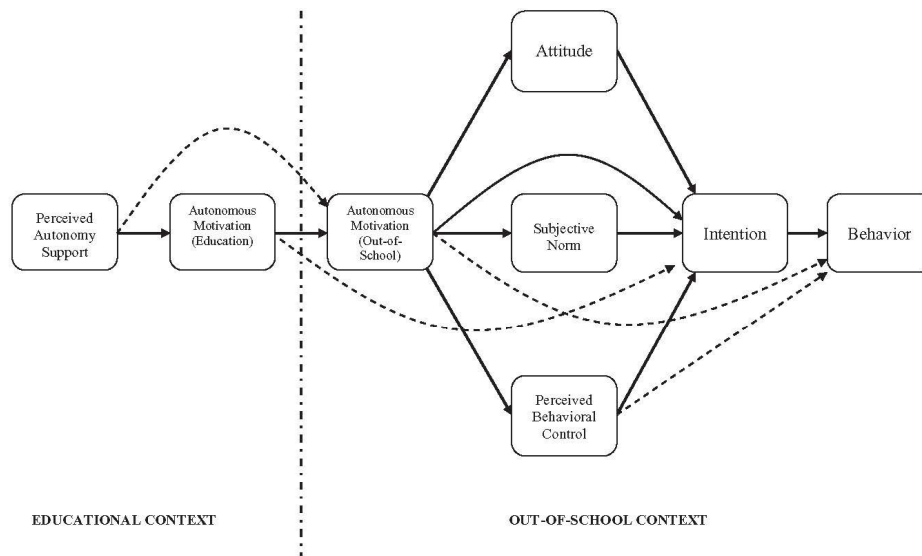
In much of the research on the topic of transfer the term motivation is used as a bridge or scaffolding to help understand how transfer can occur and why it might be thwarted (Grohmann, Beller, & Kauffeld, 2014). The basic view of “transfer” presented earlier helps to set up the following sections and reinforces the assumption that, context aside, humans have the ability to consistently call upon and apply learning from one situation and apply it to another. The question central to this proposal is to what extent can the transfer be accurately and appropriately tracked?

The question of the tracking of transfer, or the following of human attributes across domains, is not unique to this paper. Much of the research on personality dimensions acknowledges a relatively stable set of attributes over shorter time spans and domains, as observed by Rotter’s (1966) work on Locus of Control, which has since been evolved into a work environment specific scale by Spector (1988) called the Work Locus of Control Scale. This is consistent with Gagné et al.’s (2015) work to arrive at a work domain specific, SDT based scale called the Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale.

While there are several theoretical paths and approaches one may consider in attempting to link the benefits from athletic experiences to the workplace, one seemingly appropriate route, which finds its roots in the physical activity and education domains, is the trans-contextual model (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2015).

4.1 Trans-Contextual Model

The TCM, used in an increasing number of studies and applications (e.g. Barkoukis, Hagger, Lambropoulos, & Tsorbatzoudis, 2010; Ntovolis, Barkoukis, Michelinakis, & Tsorbatzoudis, 2015; Wallhead & Hagger, 2010), is likely to be able to serve as a viable framework to attempt to better understand or study the transfer from the athletic environment to the workplace. According to Hagger and Chatzisarantis, it was “originally developed and tested in the PE context and focused on the transfer of students’ autonomous motivation toward activities in PE lessons to motivation to engage in related activities” (2015, p. 3), the TCM is a multi-theory that attempts to explain or demonstrate how motivation in one context (i.e., classroom) leads to, or transfers, to a different environment (i.e., experiences out of school). The TCM “represents a generalizable framework” based upon three different theories (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2015, p. 3) based on the “tenets” of Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory (2000), Ajzen’s work on the theory of planned behavior (1991), and Vallerand’s hierarchical model of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (1997). Together, these contribute to a multi-theory model (see Figure 1).



Note. Solid unidirectional arrowed paths represent the hypothesized relations among the model variables. Broken unidirectional arrowed paths represent direct, unmediated effects that are not hypothesized in the model. Empirical confirmation that the nonhypothesized direct effects are of a size that is relatively trivial, or not statistically significant, will provide further support for the hypothesized indirect effects.

Figure 1. *The Trans-Contextual Model (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2015)*

Due to the collective three theory/model nature of the TCM, it creates the opportunity for the researcher to formulate a minimum of 3 testable hypotheses (one per theory/model) to test each of the tenets. These hypotheses “must be empirically supported for the model to be accepted” (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2015, p. 4). Failure to support even just one hypothesis constitutes a rejection of the model (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2015).

While the scope/range of application of the TCM has not been subjected to the work environment, there is promise due to its generalizable framework. It appears to be a good fit for testing the assumption that athletes’ levels of motivation spillover to the workplace

4.2 Consideration for Automaticity

Given the nature of the research question, in spite of the already lofty undertaking, I believe it is important to consider another theoretical perspective, alongside the TCM. The three theories/models’ framework is based upon both the conscious awareness of one’s own actions and the decision to regulate such actions (behavioral intentions), as well as the unconscious, which are actions that occur essentially automatically (snap judgments) (Bargh, 2014).

Organizational psychology has a history of attempting to understand human behavior and thought processes by approaching the individual as a conscious agent in behavior (Bandura 1986); however, “modern social psychology has repeatedly shown that people are not aware of many situational cues and stimuli that can influence behavior” (Baumeister & Bargh, 2014, p. 36). In fact, considerable evidence demonstrates that people manage quite well without actively (consciously) guiding every action (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2004). This is known as automaticity. Two foundational automaticity studies by Chartrand and Bargh (1996)

demonstrated that by using embedded and subliminal priming (the purposeful activation or introduction of stimuli), the non-conscious study participants were equally, and in some cases, better able to complete goal related tasks as those that approached the task consciously (see Hamilton, Katz, & Leirer, 1980). Both priming and automaticity are concerned with how internal mental states mediate the social environment on psychological processes and responses (Chartrand & Bargh, 1996).

Automaticity of cognitive processes is based upon the belief that people behave, unknowingly, by relying on events in the immediate environment and external stimuli (Baumeister & Bargh, 2014). In the effort to attempt to track motivational transfer and better understand how athletic experience may influence desirable work behaviors, automaticity potentially undergirds this process. This is an important consideration whenever attempting to demonstrate relationships between variables. Consider goal pursuit, whether it is in the education or sports domain, it is often an active and conscious process athletes go through. However, research shows that goal pursuit can also happen automatically, entirely nonconsciously (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2004).

The work on automaticity helps further enrich the understanding of aspects of self-determination theory. A significant amount of research has been completed on the priming effects (e.g. Levesque & Pelletier, 2003) on motivational orientations. The research by Levesque and Pelletier demonstrated “that autonomous and heteronomous motivation can be regulated automatically as well as consciously” (2003, p. 1570). Further research (e.g. Hassin, Bargh, & Zimerman, 2009) demonstrates the significance of priming as it relates to emotional regulation, motivation, and goal orientation. One of the reasons why priming is an important consideration in this attempt to study the research question is that it represents a variable or consideration that must be accounted for as in an attempt to study the relationships between athletic and sport experiences and workplace behaviors. The concepts of priming and automaticity add a dimensionality to the pursuit of understanding how athletic behaviors and motivational constructs might transfer to the workplace.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to bring attention to a readily accepted workplace assumption that an athlete’s motivational outlook (among other attributes) transfers or follows from the athletic domain to the work domain. My intention is to invite a cross-discipline dialogue concerning the belief that working professionals draw upon behaviors learned/developed during their concurrent/recent extracurricular athletic/sport experiences. The robust history and literature on the motivational framework of self-determination theory, popular among both organizational and health science scholars, is an optimal framework to guide the study of the athletic experience-to-work transfer.

Despite an extremely limited body of knowledge examining the relationships between athletic pursuits and desirable workplace characteristics, there is an abundance of one-off research that can be drawn upon to help begin to build a conceptual framework. Our love and admiration for athletics and sports is an international phenomenon. Amid all the conflict around the world, sports and athletics seem to be one of only a few things that connects us.

Persico, Postlewaite, and Silverman's study of teens is a reminder of how our perceptions of sports and athletics can, both consciously and unconsciously, impact other areas of our lives. In their 2004 study the researchers found that taller teens earn a wage premium and that the height premium is mediated through participation in high school athletics (2004). Our automatic functioning and bias towards sports is fascinating.

The irony of this is that much like many popular culture and mainstream beliefs there may be some element of truth to it, but these opinions are most certainly not informed by any science or research. If I think about the extent to which one might articulate this from my field work, it would be "intrinsic motivation is important to success in the workplace and athletes possess a lot of intrinsic motivation"... something that could be very much true, but also be very much false.

In conclusion, I must remind myself to temper my enthusiasm and optimism for the potential benefits athletics, sports, and exercise can have on the body and mind. I must also remember to remain humble and remind myself that while athletics is special, the reality is that it may be only one of any number of extracurricular activities that youth, young adults, and working professionals engage in that enrich their lives and help them be more productive citizens.

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