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Perceptions of role ambiguity for Sporting Directors in professional football

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ABSTRACT

The Sporting Director is one strategy football clubs have adopted to protect their financial sustainability. Little to no research has been undertaken on the Sporting Director role in football. This article draws upon a qualitative methodology to examine perceptions and practices related to the role and its potential implications in football's growing global business. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with senior stakeholders in football (N = 21). The data was thematically analysed. Findings indicate that the Sporting Director role would be a strategic benefit for football clubs, however several issues related to role ambiguity. The novel empirical insight surrounds three key themes, notably the perception of the role, job description clarity and communication. The study provides novel insights into the elite football stakeholder perceptions of the Sporting Directors. This research offers decision-makers considerations for developing the Sporting Director role in football and recommendations for future research.

Introduction

Association football is the world's most popular participation and spectator sport, governed internationally by the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) with over 200 member countries. Over the past two decades, the sport of professional football has undergone dramatic change, primarily due to media rights, with most professional clubs now acting as complex business institutions.¹ Despite the business transformation of football, some English clubs have continued to favour the role of the traditional, archetypal football manager, 'the gaffer', who has overriding control over all footballing business at the club. However, an increasingly popular alternative to this traditional management model would be to utilize a Sporting Director who would sit on the club's board and oversee the sporting strategy.

The Sporting Director's role is yet to receive a clear and agreed definition, as the title is often used interchangeably with; Sporting and Technical Director, Director of Football, Technical Director and General Manager.² For consistency in this study, these roles will be conceptualized as the Sporting Director role. Although a prevalent role in other European countries, the Sporting Director role is yet to be fully adopted in England.³ The majority of clubs in the top leagues of Spain (e.g. Atletico Madrid), Italy (e.g. Juventus) and Germany (e.g. Bayern Munich) currently employ a Sporting Director. In contrast, in 2012, only a few English clubs have recently adopted this structure.⁴ The growing influence of directors and owners of professional football clubs in England has attracted considerable media attention.⁵ Similarly, the Sporting Director role is no different in

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terms of recent media attention. It is a highly debated topic, dividing opinion in men's football and slowly beginning to infiltrate women's football as the game becomes more professional (i.e. the appointment of Eni Aluko to Aston Villa and then Angel City FC, and Jade Morgan at Leicester, who operates as a General Manager). This research aims to examine the role ambiguity surrounding the Sporting Director position, examine current practice, and develop an understanding of issues concerning the role in professional football.

The emergence of the Sporting Director role in English football

During the English Premier League years, many factors have evolved. Notably, the financial rewards and consequences of success or failure have intensified. At the same time, we have seen an influx of foreign ownership. Thirteen of the twenty football clubs in the English Premier League (2021/22) are foreign-owned (i.e. Arsenal, Aston Villa, Burnley, Chelsea, Everton, Leeds United, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United, Southampton, Watford and Wolverhampton Wanderers). We have also seen how the role of the contemporary football manager has considerably expanded during this period, with many clubs now seeking strategies to minimize managers' duties to support them, favouring the adoption of a Sporting Director model.⁶

For some, the Sporting Director model is a rebrand of existing structures. One Director of Football stated:

The perception is that it's a new thing in club structures and it's just landed on the UK's shores. It's not. It's been around since the 1960s in Italy via their professional training centre and from the 1960s in England. At clubs such as Liverpool FC, they've had an early version of the DoFs [Director of Football] where Bob Paisley (became manager of Liverpool in 1974) had some of the administrative duties previously undertaken by Bill Shankly (his predecessor) given to Peter Robinson (Liverpool FC club secretary). I'm positive that he (Bob) didn't deal with players' contracts. In the past, I have met with Lawrie McMenemy (best known for being manager at Southampton FC between 1973 and 1985) and he told me of the time in the 1990s when the club asked him to take on the kind of role that we now recognise as a DoF. More recently, you could easily argue that many club CEOs have operated as quasi-DoFs. For example, Rick Parry (Liverpool FC CEO from 1998 to 2009) and David Gill (Manchester United FC CEO from 2003 to 2013) took on many of what are regarded as the perceived roles and responsibilities of a DoF.⁷

At present, we can try to conceptualize the current Sporting Director by comparing it to the general manager in North American professional sports organizations.⁸ In these models, the traditional manager roles have tended to shift towards a head coach. This previously continental approach would allow head coaches to focus their attention and concentrations on certain aspects of the first team environments. This initial move was for the Sporting Director to work between the board and executives and the first-team environment. Yet, each club varies in how they approach the role specific to their ownership, governance, people and needs at any specific epoch.

The Sporting Director is designed to give a club a cohesive and joined-up structure, a greater sense of stability and to facilitate a long-term strategy.⁹ The Sporting Director allows a head coach to focus on on-pitch performance by handling non-coaching roles and acting as an intermediary between the manager and the board.¹⁰ The role is linked to managing the club's owners and the manager's expectations, creating a system that recruits and retains players fitting the squad's profile, and seeking value in the transfer market.¹¹ The Sporting Director should act as a guardian for the organization's future development, be a visionary and an inspirational leader.¹² One report specifically related to the Sporting Director is a report by Phil Church.¹³ Church considered football's 'Technical Director' role in England and compared this to the same role in European clubs. The study implies the role will become more popular in English football and suggests several reasons for this. Specifically; (1) new ownership bringing in new working models; (2) a more business-like approach by clubs, meaning the link between the technical staff and the board will become increasingly compelling; (3) the Premier League's Elite Performance Plan (EPPP) is expected to cause a change to current staffing structures, and these changes will need to be developed and

managed; (4) an increase in mandatory qualifications, professionalism and accountability within clubs may also be a driver for the uptake of the role; and (5) it seems to be the modern trend for clubs to employ a Sporting Director, and the likelihood is that other clubs will replicate this model.¹⁴

Since Church's work, there seems to be a quiet revolution with an increased number of Sporting Directors utilized in leading clubs across England and Europe.¹⁵ In 2016/17, 13 out of 20 English Premier League Clubs had someone in a Sporting Director position. Presently, in the 2021/22 season, 17 out of 20 have appointed some sort of Sporting Director. Commentators have recently reaffirmed the Sporting Director role as strategic and needed in elite football's hyper-commodified nature.¹⁶ The amount of money spent by clubs on player recruitment has soared, with a world record amount of over a billion pounds spent in the transfer window of 2016, notwithstanding since the beginning of the English Premier League, the big six have spent £26bn on transfers and wages, and all clubs have spent £52bn on wages and transfers since 1992.¹⁷ As such, it is very timely for further examination and analysis of the Sporting Director role in football.

When examining the Sporting Director's role, it is important to understand key relationships within a football club. Kelly and Harris focused their work on the relationship between managers, owners, and directors of professional football clubs.¹⁸ A common feature of this relationship from the findings is hostility and distrust, which from a manager's point of view appears to stem from interference in issues traditionally seen as the manager's role and the perceived agenda of owners and directors.¹⁹ Kelly and Harris highlighted the insular world of professional football and how the traditional roles and functions are influenced by the altering disposition and status of the game. However, very little is understood about the relationship between club owners, directors, and the manager, despite being vitally important to a club's working. Kelly and Harris talk about the shift away from the traditional management structures in professional football towards a perceived more European model of governance, inclusive of a Sporting Director and believe that this, along with increased foreign ownership, has added to the anxiety felt by traditional football managers.²⁰

Criticism usually arises when the power structure is not clear and working collaboratively. Some English managers have previously voiced concerns about the role, as they perceived the role to be a threat to their position and a loss of power.²¹ Experienced Premier League Manager Harry Redknapp the role of director of football as 'a joke' and 'a system he could never tolerate'.²² His opposition stems from the fact that the structure in some managers perspectives undermines their role, allowing another to buy and select players. Due to sustained success, many in football believed Sir Alex Ferguson and Manchester United FC had an effective model and strategy. Ferguson made the 'manager top to bottom' structure successful, not the other way around. Manchester United's way of working now appears outdated given the increased demands placed on managers in the modern game compared to the organizational structures employed by Barcelona, Real Madrid, and even Manchester City with some long-term sustainability problems as they have sought financial gains in the European Super League. The first team manager/head coach position at a professional football club has been described as the de-facto leadership role.²³ The manager's role can be viewed as the most important position due to the relationships between themselves and various stakeholders.²⁴

It could be proposed that a Sporting Directors most important relationship is between themselves and the manager.²⁵ In some respects, the Sporting Director's role has been designed to make life easier for the manager/head coach.²⁶ Ironically it appears the relationship between the two has halted the progression of the role in England. Due to incorporating a more democratic structure of decision-making, communication and shared leadership, the Sporting Director is seen to be reducing the power of the old-style autocratic managers, or the 'gaffer', which is synonymous with footballing fabric in England. However, many have argued that this should not be the case.²⁷ Much of this discontent and mistrust is underpinned by a lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of those tasked with leading football clubs.

The apparent lack of clarity in the football manager and Sporting Director positions and the move towards a more collaborative approach to decision-making allow us to consider a dual leadership structure.²⁸ Dual leadership concerns two leaders sharing the highest position in the hierarchy. One risk or problem of this kind of distributed leadership over multiple individuals is that it creates the risk of conflict between the leaders themselves,²⁹ arguably something evident between managers and Sporting Directors. Moreover, there is a cognate risk that other organization members may get involved in and contribute to these leadership conflicts. Within an organization, conflict can be described as task and relationship conflict.

Task conflict can be associated with a difference among the organization members about the content of the task being performed by one or more of them (i.e. player recruitment). Alternatively, relationship conflict symbolizes interpersonal irreconcilability between the staff, expressed by tensions, hostility, or annoyance.³⁰ Despite this, task conflict can be associated with positive outcomes resulting from discussion and debate, leading to creativity and better decision-making. In contrast, relationship conflict is generally considered detrimental to performance and satisfaction.³¹

Task conflict is related to role boundaries between staff, which appears to be an issue for tensions between the manager and Sporting Director (see Harry Redknapp's comments earlier).³² This can create role stress for the leaders and other staff. Role stress can be divided into both role conflict and role ambiguity. Role ambiguity refers to doubt about which responsibilities are part of the role,³³ whereas role stress is when individuals are faced with conflicting or incompatible demands.³⁴ Role conflict and ambiguity can have several negative consequences, including anxiety, lower commitment, effort, and performance.³⁵ Role ambiguity is defined as the lack of clarity in understanding the actions to be taken to achieve proposed individual goals.³⁶ Ultimately, the existence of ambiguity concerning objectives affects employees' understanding of what they are expected to do. It can generate doubt about achieving their performance objectives and creates uncertainty as to how their performance will be assessed and the consequences for completing or failing to complete their objectives, which can hamper performance.³⁷

Decision-making structures such as the executive boards of football clubs are essential for developing behaviours, priorities, relationships, communication, and goals.³⁸ Total commitment, shared values and goals must be clearly communicated and accepted by stakeholders,³⁹ and to ensure they are clear on their expectations for their contribution towards the organization's goals. Ambiguity and role clarity in competing dual roles such as the manager and Sporting Director are concerns. While some football clubs across Europe have demonstrated different organizational structures that are utilized, issues concerning role clarity appear to remain and can significantly hamper the football organization's effectiveness.⁴⁰ This research aims to examine the Sporting Director role, current practice, and issues of the position in professional football to help clubs address issues that may impact the organization's effectiveness.

Methodology

Participants

This research utilizes qualitative data captured from in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior stakeholders in football (N = 21). Given that the role of Sporting Director in football appears to be at different stages in different contexts (i.e. leagues, continents, women, and men's games), as such participants from both men's and women's football were included in the sample. The sample comprised 21 participants, with 17 males and 4 females aged between 30 and 60 years, with various backgrounds and experience. Representatives from the key, active stakeholders in

Table 1. A summary of participant background information.

Participant background information
(1) FIFA council member
(2) English FA Director and Member of FA Women's Football Board
(3) Professional Football Association representation (i.e. involved in the management of professional male and female English footballers)
(4) Owner of an English Premier League Club
(5) Owner of a USA National Women's Soccer League Club
(6) Director of Football at an English Premier League Club
(7) Director of Football and former Manager/Head Coach at a Professional Women's Club
(8) General Manager of a Professional Women's Club in the USA National Women's Soccer League
(9) Manager/Head Coach of a Football Club in the USA National Women's Soccer League and Former Manager/Head Coach of a English FA Women's Super League Club
(10) Manager/Head Coach of an English FA Women's Super League Club
(11) Women's football media representative
(12) Director of Football of an English Premier League Club
(13) Sporting Director of an English Championship Club
(14) Head of Recruitment of an English Championship League Club
(15) Vice Chairman of Football of an English Premier League Club
(16) Head of Football Operations of an English Championship Club
(17) Sporting Director of an English Premier League Club
(18) Director of Football of a Scottish Premier League Club
(19) Sporting Director of a German Bundesliga Club
(20) Director of Football of an English Premier League Club
(21) Director of Football of an English Championship Club

football were chosen, all having a background in professional football and working with senior leadership personnel at football clubs. The participants had been involved in football for between 3 and 28 years. Given the lack of clarity in roles and titles associated with the Sporting Director position, the specific inclusion sampling criteria were that participants had to have professional football experience under a variety of titles and positions, with experience of the Sporting Director's role. See [Table 1](#) for a summary of participant background information and the job role. Participants were recruited through the first and second authors personal football industry network.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews have often been used to research football contexts and similar research contexts in research with leaders.⁴¹ A semi-structured approach offered flexibility for the researchers to ensure a conversational discussion to build rapport and address topics as they emerge.⁴² The semi-structured interviews included five phases ([Table 2](#)). The first two phases focused on the purpose, ethics, and consent of the research. The introduction and familiarization phase followed this. The two key themes that followed examined the Sporting Director role within football and the challenges to the role and future considerations for football before clarifying any statements and bringing the interview to an end.

Procedures

The data was collected by two research team members, with the first author completed $n = 11$ interviews and the second author completed $n = 10$ interviews between June 2016 and June 2018. The researchers invested time in pilot interviews with personal connections to the researchers who work within elite football contexts. This supported reflection and discussion within the research team to ensure each researcher was consistent with the semi-structured interview process. Twelve

Table 2. Semi-structured interview schedule.

Description of sections	Example questions
Phase 1 – Purpose, ethics, queries, and consent <i>Aim:</i> Detail the purpose of the study and the process of the interview (expected duration, interview schedule and aims). Explain the participant's right to remain anonymous and withdraw at any time. Also invited to voluntarily provide informed consent and proceed with the interview.	'Now you have had the purpose of the interview explained, are you happy to continue?' 'Do you understand that you have the right to withdraw at any time?'
Phase 2 – Introduction and familiarization <i>Aim:</i> To explore the participant's background and experiences in order to obtain an insight into the participant's involvement in his or her sport and enable rapport to develop between the interviewer and participant.	'Can you please tell me about your background and how you got to where you are today?' 'How would you describe the current state of football, successes, and challenges?'
Section 3 – The Sporting Director role. <i>Aim:</i> Significant and/or critical experiences. Focused on questions relating to current structures in place; roles and responsibilities, capabilities for a Sporting Director; exploring participant experiences and thoughts on the role, including potential capabilities required for the role.	'Can you explain what the term Sporting Director means to you?' 'Can you outline the key roles and responsibilities associated with the Sporting Director role?' 'Can you describe the capabilities required for the Sporting Director role?'
Phase 4 – Challenges to the role and the future considerations. <i>Aim:</i> Summary questions, to explore the thoughts and perceptions of challenges and barriers to the role and the future of football.	'Can you explain the current challenges for Sporting Directors?' 'Can you outline what you view as the future challenges for Sporting Directors?'
Phase 5 – End of interview <i>Aim:</i> Express an appreciation of the participant's time and articulation of their experience and opinions, offer an opportunity for further clarification and/or dialogue	'Are there any further comments you would like to add or questions you have?'

interviews were completed face-to-face, and nine were via a web-based video platform, dependent upon personal circumstances and logistics. The interviews ranged from between 52 to 110 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

The analysis was undertaken in two stages to address inductive and deductive content. The first stage concerned identifying the commentary directly related to the themes associated with the semi-structured interviews, including the Sporting Director role within football, the challenges to the role and future considerations. This was undertaken initially by the first author and then secondly and separately by the second author. Each of these author's findings were pooled to provide a single account for each area of interest. The second stage involved thematic analysis of data identified in phase one.⁴³ This process of thematic analysis was split into six phases: (i) familiarization with the data; (ii) generating initial codes; (iii) searching for themes; (iv) reviewing themes; (v) defining and naming themes and finally, once there was a set of fully worked out themes, and (vi) writing-up.⁴⁴ In practice, however, analysis was iterative and moved forwards and backwards between phases as required. As a result of this process, the themes reported were consistent within and across each analysis stage, providing a degree of triangulation.⁴⁵ The final process involved these authors meeting to agree on the final themes and content. This reflection and critical dialogue process was designed to challenge the active, iterative data coding and categorization process and scrutinize alternative interpretations of the data to ensure that they were valid and grounded in the data. In addition, all the authors discussed the findings between themselves and the participants to gain their feedback and confirmation on points made.⁴⁶ The data are represented by presenting contextual verbatim extracts from the interviews, which will offer rich insight in the Sporting Director role and give a voice to senior stakeholders in football.

Table 3. Results themes and sub-themes.

Overarching themes	Thematic sub-theme
The role of the Sporting Director	Perceptions of the role Job description clarity Communication

Results

This research offers novel empirical insight into football's Sporting Director role, challenges, and future considerations. Table 3 provides the overarching and sub-themes developed from the qualitative thematic analysis. This research focuses on three key themes related to the Sporting Director role that address this study's aims. The themes concern the Sporting Director's role in football, notably the perception of the role, job description clarity, and communication.

The role of the Sporting Director

Perceptions of the role

There is a clear acknowledgement across the data identifying the immediate and intense demands of modern hyper-commodified football. One participant from the Professional Footballers Association (PFA) outlined:

The game has evolved so much ... they're commercial and business entities, not just football clubs anymore that they were maybe in the 60's and 70's ... there are too many people [i.e., players and backroom staff] in a club to manage ...

This acknowledges that football clubs are significant business operations that require additional support to protect financial (and football) sustainability, with one strategy being the Sporting Director:

I think the Sporting Director role if you get it right, creates stability ... more than anything else ... from a results and performance base, but also as an organisation ... I think stability's key to it (participant from The PFA).

This finding is echoed in other research that outlines that the Sporting Director's role is designed to create stability, provide direction, support the head coach, and plan for the club's long-term future may prove favourable. However, one participant from the media outlines that: '*... the role is utilised in so many different ways at different clubs. It can depend on the structure of the club and the personalities involved even ...*'⁴⁷

The participants viewed the purpose of the role to be very much around stability and sustainability. Noting that football has (and is) associated with a high turnover of first-team managers/head coaches and backroom support staff,⁴⁸ as such: '*it surely makes sense to have some continuity in decision-making*' (Director of Football, English Premier League). Moreover, participants viewed the role as having someone on the board who could: '*Oversee everything from the bottom-up and making sure that it stays within in vision of the club and to keep developing the structure*' (Director of Football, Championship Club). In particular, the Sporting Director must understand how:

things are conducted on the field and in the dressing room. And can understand the boardroom and how decisions are made. The Sporting Director is one way to bridge the different roles and skill sets required in a club (FIFA council member).

Indeed, the role would be seen as an approach that would address the long-standing mistrust between first team managers/head coaches and traditionally non-football board members.⁴⁹ Almost all participants acknowledged the Sporting Director role's strategic nature, such as providing stability, set the club's vision and have the skills to deliver a strategy. Participants also shared that

despite assumptions that most decisions for football clubs resided within the strategic apex of football clubs with the chief executive officer, board or chairperson,⁵⁰ many Sporting Directors did not assume board level positions. Indeed, the clubs operated varying organizational structures.

Across the interviews, participants reported inconsistencies regarding the hierarchical position of the Sporting Director. Participants provided examples of football clubs with notable structures and where Sporting Directors assumed board level positions, i.e. Southampton FC (English Premier League Club) and Norwich City FC (English Championship Club). However, within a club where the Sporting Director does not sit on the board within the English Premier League, an owner explains the club's reasons for employing a Sporting Director:

I think the role is becoming more popular as the task of assembling and managing a football squad becomes increasingly complex, expensive, and global. The idea of a manager being the head coach of the first team as well as responsible for personnel decisions and the management of the sporting operation is a less efficient one in my view, since almost every Premier League club seeks to recruit players from all over the world and have complex operations built to support the football programme. . . . the cost and commitment to create and maintain the facilities required of an elite sporting institution, the medical and sports science needs, etc. have lead clubs like ours to add the Sporting Director role to work with the [first team] Manager to both build the squad and execute those duties that elite performance demands.

Across Europe, the research identified that some clubs adopted an executive board, but it was responsible for both youth and professional (first-team) environments.⁵¹ This structure usually included two vice-presidents with respective responsibility for the football departments (i.e. one for youth and one for first team).⁵² Despite this, our participants stated that ideally, the Sporting Directors should sit on the football club board to influence decisions.⁵³ Currently, Sporting Director's often occupy a middle-line position that would place them above the first team manager/head coach but below the board. In the instance of a Sporting Director assuming a middle-line position, they could still be the link between the first team manager/head coach and the board: '*staying totally out of the playing side*' and focusing on operations (Manager/Head Coach, National Women's Super League (NWSL)). Whilst this could alleviate pressure on the first team manager/head coach,⁵⁴ it may equally create a natural tension regarding the recruitment and release of the first team manager/head coach (Nissen, 2016). The participants reported that despite discussions of 'ideal' practice, the reality was that individual clubs operated towards their specific needs at any given point. Yet, a main theme that continually appeared was that whilst many assumed the title of 'Sporting Director' or otherwise (i.e. Technical Director, Head of Football Operations, Director of Football), almost all have different roles and responsibilities, with some Sporting Directors residing on the board and others below the board. It is common for innovation to take time to find the optimum organizational structure within an industry. At present, the Sporting Director position and football appears no different, as owners and club executive navigate this experimentation period.⁵⁵

Job description clarity

It became evident from the data that there was a lack of formal job descriptions at football clubs, across women's and men's football, and both England and the US. For some, this was a result of skills, capabilities and practice:

I think it's a function of start-up mode . . . where the spirit is 'get it done' . . . the other part of the problem is that our GM's [General Manager] background is on the football side, not on the business side, it's not in his nature necessarily to codify, to put in writing, etc (Owner, NWSL Club).

Other participants highlighted that their role (or the role) as a Sporting Director varied in scope across different organizations. For example, the Sporting Director may be responsible for all playing and non-playing staff recruitment and deal-making at one club. However, in the next club, they only identified playing talent, but did not make the final decision.

Participants recognized the importance of ‘... *clearly defined roles and responsibilities within job descriptions is vital to ensure clarity in who has responsibility for various aspects within a club ...*’. (Manager/Head Coach, Women’s Super League)⁵⁶ and that ‘*without this clarity and clear communication then confusion will [can] reign ... It is vital to have clear leadership on who provides the focus and drive for a team*’ (Director of Football, English Championship Club). Lack of such constructs are likely to lead to challenges for quality management and issues with communication.⁵⁷ Despite this, participants reported that it was common for a Sporting Director (and other positions) in football to agree a contract that identified their specific purpose and clearly defined roles and responsibilities:

It’s difficult to turn down an Sporting Director opportunity at a Premier League club. You don’t expect it to turn messy, but it can if you don’t nail down your role and the role of those around you (Director of Football, English Premier League Club).

The consequence of this lack of clarity on job-role may lead to negative dual leadership situations.⁵⁸ However, it was clear that some Sporting Directors hoped to ‘get in’ and then attempt to develop, enhance, and evolve their position through role crafting to something more favourable.

One risk or problem of distributed leadership over multiple individuals is that it creates the risk of conflict between the leaders themselves.⁵⁹ Participants’ lack of clarity on player recruitment responsibilities created confusion across the football club’s internal and external stakeholders. On the most basic front, this may involve other clubs and agents (intermediaries) contacting the incorrect person or creating an entangled web of miscommunication and conflict at the more complex. The ambiguous transparent nature of the environments and job-role appears fertile ground for misinformation, poor communication, and mistrust, which echoes preliminary findings on Sporting Directors’ current issues in elite football and elite football in general.⁶⁰ Despite the research that supports the need for clarity in the job role,⁶¹ given the haphazard and unpredictable nature of the football environment, any flexible job role could be associated positively with a low bureaucracy and ‘fast-moving’ organization. However, the lack of role clarity may result in an environment or ‘team’ of individuals with multiple motivations who may be more focussed on performance irrelevant and self-interested (personal) agendas, rather than a performance-focused common purpose.⁶² Such issues with job clarity could hamper the Sporting Director strategy’s progress and development, especially the external perception of the role by fans and the media and developing a relationship with the first team manager. Indeed, one unsuccessful Sporting Director appointment may remove the appetite in ownership for this strategy in the future.

Communication

The absence of role clarity appears to rest upon its lack of formalization and absence of communication within the football club. This appears to have added to the mistrust between the first team manager and Sporting Director.⁶³ One participant highlighted that:

I was recruited after the 1st team manager [/ head coach]. It was a bit tricky at first. People from the academy to other clubs did not know who made the final decisions on players. In an ideal world, this could have worked ok – we could have worked together and made decisions together, however he [the manager] was under pressure to win the next game, where my job was to – in part help with that, but also to prepare for the future. He didn’t and couldn’t buy into my strategy and this tension did not help our relationships (English Premier League Sporting Director).

This is an example of several task-related conflict examples.⁶⁴ Task conflict can be associated with positive debate and creative decision making.⁶⁵ However, the role boundary issues outlined, including player recruitment, staff recruitment, and decisions related to the environment, often led to stress and relationship conflict suggestions.

It appears an abstract notion for multi-million-pound enterprises not to engage in clear communication, yet this is comparable to other research on this topic.⁶⁶ One participant explained:

You see many clubs not making it clear who is doing what. If other clubs don't know who to contact, then the media and fans are open to speculate too. This mostly results in either a 1st team manager [/ head coach] feeling precarious in their role, or equally the Sporting Director feeling like the manager may go above their head to get rid of them [i.e., the Sporting Director]! Whilst everyone waxes lyrical about strategy and forward planning – current form [i.e., 1st team performance] usually dictates who has the power in these situations (Sporting Director, German Bundesliga Club).

The absence of communication and clarity may continue to hinder clubs with ambitions of enhancing their operational performance both on and off the pitch.⁶⁷ Thus, creating power issues between the Sporting Director and first-team manager⁶⁸ and relationship conflict,⁶⁹ anxiety, lower commitment, effort and ultimately performance.⁷⁰ Similarly, first-team manager scepticism may continue concerning the Sporting Director and result in a missed opportunity for an ally within the club.⁷¹ The participants did raise concerns regarding the decision-making process by those, mostly chairmen or chief executive officers, who recruit Sporting Directors: *'One must ask questions on some Sporting Director recruitment. There appears an absence in strategy or a genuine benchmark for how owners recruit Sporting Directors'* (Owner, English Premier League Club). This raises a genuine concern for potential misunderstanding and lack of clarity on an Sporting Directors essential role and capabilities by those responsible for decision-making at an organization's apex.⁷²

Conclusion

Since the formation of the English Premier League in 1992, there have been numerous developments. One recent change, which is currently evolving, is the operational role of Sporting Directors. This study offered novel empirical qualitative findings examining Sporting Directors' perceptions and practice and its implications in the growing global business of football. The research captures insight from across Europe and the US, alongside owners' perspectives to head coaches both within the men's and women's game. One clear message from the perceptions of the role is that clubs are using the Sporting Director strategy in very different ways, related to title, organizational structure, and job role.

Our research provides evidence of role ambiguity in Sporting Directors in football. This lack of role clarity is evidenced across all three themes addressed. We provide essential considerations for the Sporting Director role. For example, participants associated the role with someone responsible for overseeing the club's football strategy. However, those responsible for strategy development and implementation would tend to be associated with decision-making positions on the board. Therefore, Sporting Directors should sit on the football club's board to influence decision-making, such as resource allocation. Nevertheless, many Sporting Directors do not occupy board level positions meaning the role's potential effectiveness is limited and remains open to outside influences. As the football industry experiments with what could be described as an innovation in operational structure (i.e. employing a Sporting Director), it may take time for clubs to locate the optimum and most efficient method for deploying the role.

Our findings show the Sporting Director is associated with bringing stability and sustainability to the club, therefore, one key aspect of the role is to address high first-team manager/head coach turnover. An important factor in achieving this is the long-standing mistrust between the board members, who traditionally do not have any football background (i.e. playing or coaching) and the first team manager/head coach. Whilst the role in the current form can help with this relationship, the Sporting Director does not assume a role on the board, reducing their ability to protect the longevity of their first team manager/head coach.

We also find the title of Sporting Director itself is misleading as there are many different permutations of not only the title, but the role itself, job specification and role boundaries. The success of the role will rely on the intelligence and intent behind the job description, as the titles themselves are largely meaningless without the back-up of the role specification. Several participants also identified that clubs have in the past and do now, utilize somebody in the role but do not necessarily use the Sporting Director title. One of the former issues with the Sporting Director role has been the actual understanding of the role from those within and outside of the sport. From our research, it appears that there is an improved shared, common, stakeholder understanding of the role. Yet, clearly more work is required in ensuring all football stakeholders clearly understand the role.

To summarize, the Sporting Director is a new initiative for the English Premier League, which is more embedded across Europe and is likely to remain as a key feature in the future as owners seek to protect their financial investment and deliver on the pitch success. Consequently, it is essential future work is needed to clearly define the role with clear descriptors. Similarly, the professional education, qualifications, recruitment and development pathway for the Sporting Director should be further developed. The activities of member associations, such as the Association of Sporting Directors, should take a more active role in engaging and informing decision-makers in football on the role of the Sporting Director. Finally, further work is needed to understand the interlocking contexts of the Sporting Director role within the overall organizational structure, especially in relation to efficiencies between Sporting Director and non-Sporting Director model of football governance. In the meantime, this research offers decision-makers considerations for developing the Sporting Director role in football clubs.

Notes

1. Morrow and Howieson, "The new business of football: A study of current and aspirant football club managers."
2. Parnell et al., "The sporting director: Exploring current practice and challenges within elite football."
3. Parnell et al., "The Emergence of the Sporting Director Role in Football and the Potential of Social Network Theory in Future Research."
4. Church, *Technical director report*.
5. Kelly and Harris, "Managers, directors and trust in professional football."
6. Bridgwater, *Football Management*, and Kelly, *The Role of the Professional Football Manager*.
7. Lawrence, *Football Club Management: Insights from the field*, 69.
8. Deubert et al., "National Football League General Managers: An Analysis of the Responsibilities, Qualifications and Characteristics."
9. Parnell et al., "The Emergence of the Sporting Director Role in Football and the Potential of Social Network Theory in Future Research".
10. Ibid.
11. Parnell et al., "The sporting director: Exploring current practice and challenges within elite football."
12. Ibid.
13. Church, *Technical director report*.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Parnell et al., "The sporting director: Exploring current practice and challenges within elite football"; and Parnell et al. "The Emergence of the Sporting Director Role in Football and the Potential of Social Network Theory in Future Research."
17. Deloitte, "Total January spend of £175 m sees Premier League transfer spending surpass £1 billion in a season for the first time"; and Walker, "REVEALED: Big Six have spent £26BILLION on wages and transfers since the Premier League began – half of all other club's spending in almost three decades – but Leicester show that clever recruitment can still loosen Man City and Co's grip on the top flight."
18. See note 5 above.
19. Kelly, *The Role of the Professional Football Manager*.

20. Kelly and Harris, "Managers, directors and trust in professional football"; Bridgewater, *Football Management*, and Parnell et al., "The Emergence of the Sporting Director Role in Football and the Potential of Social Network Theory in Future Research."
21. Archer, "Harry Redknapp performs shock U-turn with director of football role at Derby."
22. Ibid.
23. Molan et al., "Leadership off the pitch: the role of the manager in semi-professional football."
24. Ogbonna and Harris, "Organizational Cultural Perpetuation: A Case Study of an English Premier League Football Club."
25. Kelly and Harris, "Managers, directors and trust in professional football"; Kelly, *The Role of the Professional Football Manager*, and Parnell et al., "The sporting director: Exploring current practice and challenges within elite football"; and Parnell et al., "The Emergence of the Sporting Director Role in Football and the Potential of Social Network Theory in Future Research."
26. Lawrence, *Football Club Management: Insights from the field*.
27. Kelly and Harris, "Managers, directors and trust in professional football"; and Parnell et al., "The sporting director: Exploring current practice and challenges within elite football".
28. Reid and Karambayya, "Impact of dual executive leadership dynamics in creative organizations."
29. Ibid.
30. Jehn, "A multimethod examination of the benefits and detriments of intragroup conflict."
31. Ibid.
32. Nissen, "Playing the game: How football directors make sense of dismissing the coach."
33. Biddle, "Recent developments in role theory."
34. Biddle, "Recent developments in role theory"; House and Rizzo, "Role conflict and ambiguity as critical variables in a model of organizational behavior"; Kahn et al., "Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity"; and Rizzo et al., "Role conflict and ambiguity in complex organizations."
35. Jackson and Schuler, "A meta-analysis and conceptual critique of research on role ambiguity and role conflict in work settings"; Tubre and Collins, "Jackson and Schuler (1985) revisited: A meta-analysis of the relationships between role ambiguity, role conflict, and job performance"; Sakires, "Role ambiguity in voluntary sport organizations"; and Doherty and Hoyer, "Role ambiguity and volunteer board member performance in nonprofit sport organizations."
36. Kahn et al., "Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity."
37. Rogalsky et al., "Understanding the sport event volunteer experience: an investigation of role ambiguity and its correlates."
38. Kikulis et al., "Sector-specific patterns of organizational design change."
39. Slack and Parent, "Understanding sport organizations: The application of organization theory."
40. Relvas et al., "Organizational Structures and Working Practices in Elite European Professional Football Clubs: Understanding the Relationship between Youth and Professional Domains"; and Parnell et al., "The Emergence of the Sporting Director Role in Football and the Potential of Social Network Theory in Future Research."
41. Kelly and Harris, "Managers, directors and trust in professional football"; Bridgewater, *Football Management*, Kelly, *The Role of the Professional Football Manager*, and Parnell et al., "The sporting director: Exploring current practice and challenges within elite football."
42. Cargan, *Doing social research*.
43. Braun and Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology."
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Smith and McGannon, "Developing rigor in qualitative research: problems and opportunities within sport and exercise psychology."
47. Kelly, *The Role of the Professional Football Manager*, and Parnell et al., "The sporting director: Exploring current practice and challenges within elite football."
48. Bridgewater, *Football Management*, and Kelly, *The Role of the Professional Football Manager*.
49. See note 19 above.
50. Mintzberg, *The structuring of organizations*.
51. Relvas et al., "Organizational Structures and Working Practices in Elite European Professional Football Clubs: Understanding the Relationship between Youth and Professional Domains."
52. Ibid.
53. Mintzberg, *The structuring of organizations*.
54. Bridgewater, *Football Management*, Kelly, *The Role of the Professional Football Manager*.
55. Henderson and Clark, "Architectural Innovation: The Reconfiguration of Existing Product Technologies and the Failure of Established Firms."
56. See note 56 above.
57. Woodman and Hardy, "A case study of organizational stress in elite sport", De Knop, "Quality management in sports clubs."

58. Reid and Karambayya, "Impact of dual executive leadership dynamics in creative organizations."
59. Ibid.
60. Parnell et al., "The sporting director: Exploring current practice and challenges within elite football"; and Relvas et al. "Organizational Structures and Working Practices in Elite European Professional Football Clubs: Understanding the Relationship between Youth and Professional Domains."
61. Reid and Karambayya, "Impact of dual executive leadership dynamics in creative organizations"; and Parnell et al., "The Emergence of the Sporting Director Role in Football and the Potential of Social Network Theory in Future Research."
62. Cruickshank and Collins, "Illuminating and applying and 'the dark side': insights from elite team leaders"; and Drust, "Managing performance in elite professional football."
63. See note 47 above.
64. See note 28 above.
65. Jehn, "A Qualitative Analysis of Conflict Types and Dimensions in Organizational Groups."
66. See note 51 above.
67. Woodman and Hardy, "A case study of organizational stress in elite sport", De Knop, "Quality management in sports clubs"; Relvas et al., "Organizational Structures and Working Practices in Elite European Professional Football Clubs: Understanding the Relationship between Youth and Professional Domains"; and Parnell et al., "The sporting director: Exploring current practice and challenges within elite football."
68. See note 32 above.
69. See note 65 above.
70. Tubre and Collins, "Jackson and Schuler (1985) revisited: A meta-analysis of the relationships between role ambiguity, role conflict, and job performance"; Sakires et al., "Role ambiguity in voluntary sport organizations"; and Doherty and Hoyer, "Role ambiguity and volunteer board member performance in nonprofit sport organizations."
71. See note 54 above.
72. See note 56 above.

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