

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING PLAYER'S PERSONAL SKILLS. A RESEARCH REGARDING THE ACTIVE BASKETBALL ORGANIZATIONS WITHIN THE ROMANIAN MEN' NATIONAL BASKETBALL LEAGUE

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Abstract. *Personal development is an aspect that has gained more and more importance in the last years in both business and sports organizations. Companies have been continuously investing in employee training programs in order to be able to further develop and reach the desired performance. In Basketball, however, we can find a lot of research about physical training and less about players' personal (soft skills) development. That is why, through this research, the author wanted to find out if the personal development of basketball players is considered by clubs that are active in the men's Romanian National Basketball League in the 2021 – 2022 season. Thus, the base of this research is a quantitative data analysis whose population consists of basketball coaches and management staff employed at basketball clubs, which were active in the men's Romanian National Basketball League in the 2021 – 2022 season. Furthermore, as a representative sample, the author chose to focus the research on the main coaches of these basketball clubs. As a strategy, the research will use non-probability purposive sampling because the sample is representative of the full population. The results confirmed that most basketball clubs from the men's Romanian National Basketball League do not invest in the soft skills development of their players. However, the results also pointed to the fact that constant investments in the development of soft skills of players would help basketball clubs reach the desired performance much faster. More so, the results showed that basketball coaches consider developing soft skills for players to be important and that these can help players become better team members. Finally, the contribution brought by the present research is to emphasize that a basketball player's personal skills need to be taken into consideration and developed by basketball clubs.*

Keywords: *Basketball; Coaching; Learning Organizations; Personal Development.*

Introduction

“Basketball, one of the most popular and most dynamic sports in the world has always been in the spotlight in local, national or international media when it comes to player transfers and how these movements affect the team.” (Branga, 2021) In today's economic environment, business and sports organizations alike need to adapt their recruitment activities in order to ensure the building of efficient and effective teams. Recruiters and scouts have also started to consider candidates' personal skills. This topic has become increasingly important in recruitment and scouting even before the covid-19 pandemic. On the one hand, various types of research such as (Crook et al., 2011; Jehanzeb & Bashir, 2013; Sung & Choi, 2014) and practices prove the fact that companies have been continuously investing in employee training programs in order to be able to further develop and reach the desired performance. In Basketball, however, the situation is different. If on the one hand, we can find a lot of research about physical training, on the other hand, the topic of basketball players' personal development has not been researched to the same extent. In this research, the author will analyze the

importance of developing players' personal skills from the coaches' point of view. The relevance of this paper will be emphasized through the results it obtained and by highlighting the need for more in-depth research on basketball players' personal development.

Literature Review

The performance of athletes can depend on various factors such as physiological, psychological, social, and emotional factors. (Lorenz et al., 2013) These factors have also been analyzed by Reilly who notes that these performance indicators include anthropometric factors (ex.: body mass, acceleration etc.), physiological factors (ex.: muscle strength and power), biomechanical factors (ex.: mechanical efficiency), and psychological factors. (Reilly, 2001) Furthermore, a study by Rogers et al identified that "a range of psychological, game intelligence, physical fitness, and movement skill indicators were considered by elite athlete coaches to be important to extremely important for the recruitment / selection of basketball players." (Rogers et al., 2022) Considering this, the author focused the research on a part that constitutes the psychological factors mainly the soft skills of basketball players. Thus, according to Klaus et al "soft skills encompass personal, social, communication, and self-management behaviors. They cover a wide spectrum of abilities and traits: being self-aware, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, critical thinking, attitude, initiative, empathy, confidence, integrity, self-control, organizational awareness, likability, influence, risk-taking, problem-solving, leadership, time management, and then some." (Klaus et al., 2009) Soft skills can be considered fundamentally important to an individual's well-being and success. (Feraco & Meneghetti, 2022)

Constant investments in developing the soft skills of its human capital can help organizations achieve better results and performance. (Crook et al., 2011) In order to be able to develop its human capital (ex.: players, coaches, and administrative staff) basketball organizations need to evolve into so-called "learning organizations". This term describes "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together." (Senge, 2006) Researching this aspect regarding basketball organizations active within the Romanian men's national basketball league in the 2021 – 2022 season is a novelty aspect brought by this research, as the author could not identify if this aspect was previously researched.

Furthermore, through this research, the author wanted to identify how basketball organizations active within the Romanian men's national basketball league in the 2021 – 2022 season structure and organize their induction process for new players as this can be considered a useful method that can help with integrating new players a lot faster and they would become a "team" much faster. Thus, the induction process was analyzed from the perspective of a "process of helping a new employee / player to settle quickly into their job so that they soon become an efficient and productive employee / player". (Foot et al., 2016) After searching different international databases such as ProQuest, Science Direct, or Web of Science, the author could not identify other research that analyzed such a topic regarding the basketball organizations in Romania. Thus, it can be stated that this is another aspect that emphasizes the novelty character and the importance of this research for the basketball organizations in the Romanian men's national basketball league.

Research on topics that affect basketball organizations in Romania is low. As a comparison, a search of the keywords "basketball" and "Romania" returns 253 results on the Science Direct database in contrast to a search of the keyword "NBA" which

returns 11651 results on the same database. If we would filter our search even more according to the topic of this paper “basketball player’s personal development” and “Romania”, we would get 61 results out of which very few articles analyzed topics similar to this one. Considering this, the topic of this article will serve as a new addition to the research regarding different aspects that can influence a basketball player’s development, other than hard skills training.

Methodology

Firstly, this research aimed to identify if basketball players’ personal development is considered by basketball clubs active in the men’s Romanian National Basketball League. In order to reach this objective, quantitative research on the topic was conducted during the 2021 – 2022 season of the Romanian National Basketball League. The research was conducted from a critical realism point of view, which means that an objective analysis of quantitative data on the subject at hand was undergone. More so, this research type can be categorized as being inductive and exploratory as the theory can be generated from the data collected. Also, the time horizon of this research can be categorized as cross-sectional as the data was collected at one point in time, the moment the questionnaire was answered.

In order for a better structure of the questionnaire, various concepts such as abstract (ex.: soft skills, induction process, mentorship) or objective ones (ex.: investments in basketball players’ development – time, money, and energy; performance) have been established. These concepts were further put together to form constructs such as: learning organizations (formed out of the induction process, mentorship, and performance) and personal development (formed out of soft skills and investments in players’ development). Also, the research was conducted considering variables such as dependent ones: basketball players’ personal development, independent ones: soft skills of basketball players, and moderating ones: investments in players’ personal development, which can influence the performance of the basketball organization.

Secondly, for the goal of this research, the following research questions were drafted: 1. Do soft skills complement hard skills in basketball? 2. What are the three most important soft skills for a player to have from the point of view of a coach? 3. Are basketball players viewed as resources or assets? 4. Do Basketball clubs active in the Romanian Men’s National Basketball League have the characteristics to be considered Learning Organizations? 5. Does a basketball organization need to constantly invest time, money, and energy in the development of its human capital (ex.: players, staff – coaches, and management) in order to achieve its desired performance? An answer to these questions can be given by analyzing the responses collected through the questionnaire.

Thirdly, before establishing the target group for this research, a number of three hypotheses were established. The first one is a descriptive hypothesis: *Most basketball clubs in the men’s Romanian national basketball league do not invest in the soft skills development of basketball players.* The second one is a descriptive hypothesis: *Clubs in the men’s Romanian national basketball league can not be considered Learning Organizations.* The third and last hypothesis is a causal one: *Investments in the soft skills development of basketball players would help basketball clubs reach the desired performance much faster.*

Fourthly, the sampling strategy for this research consists of a non-probability purposive (intentional) sample because the sample is representative of the full population. The population for this research consists of basketball coaches and management staff employed (approx. 48) at basketball clubs that are active in the men’s Romanian national basketball league during the 2021 – 2022 season. From this population, the author chose to focus the study on a representative sample consisting of the main

coaches employed by basketball clubs active in the men’s Romanian national basketball league during the 2021 – 2022 season. The main criteria for considering a coach for this research was that they should be active as a main coach at one of the basketball clubs in the men’s Romanian national basketball league during the 2021 – 2022 season. Finally, the data was gathered via Google Forms and exported to Microsoft Excel where it was prepared, summarized, and analyzed.

Results and discussions

Sixteen main coaches active at basketball clubs active in the men’s Romanian national basketball league during the 2021 – 2022 season participated in this research. Out of these sixteen, eight have been employed at the basketball organization for over three years as shown in figure 1. Another demographic aspect of the target group is represented by their age. Thus our target group can be organized based on four age groups as we can see in figure 2. Regarding this, the average age of a main coach employed by a basketball club that was active in the men’s Romanian national basketball league during the 2021 – 2022 season was 45,19 years.

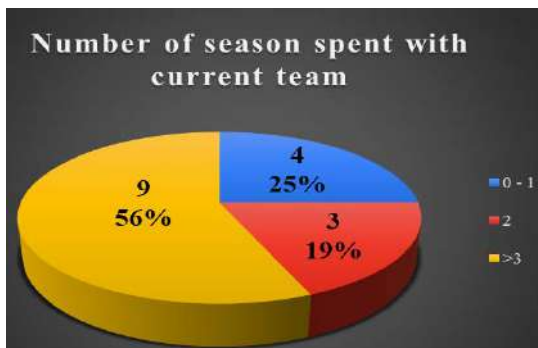


Figure 1: Number of seasons spent with current team
Source: Authors’ own research results

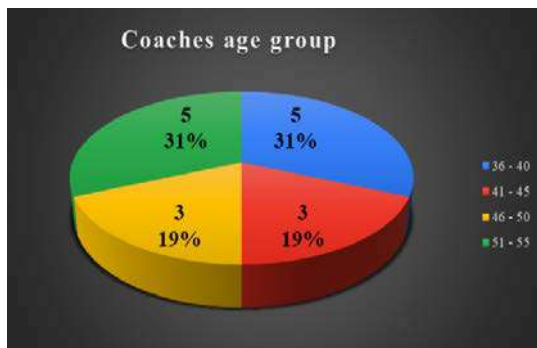


Figure 2: Coaches Age Groups
Source: Authors’ own research results

If we look at the number of coaches (9) that have spent more than 3 years in their main coach position at the current teams, we can state that the majority of basketball clubs active in the men’s Romanian national basketball league during the 2021 – 2022 season decided to focus on continuity in regard to the main coaching position.

The main findings of this research endeavor are represented by the validation of two and the invalidation of one of the hypotheses. The first hypothesis that was validated was that most basketball clubs in the men’s Romanian national basketball league do not invest in the soft skills development of basketball players. A number of 11 main coaches answered positively to the question if the basketball organization is currently actively investing in the soft skills development of its basketball players. This means that 69% of basketball clubs active in the men’s Romanian national basketball league during the 2021 – 2022 season invest also in the personal development of their players not just in the physical one. Furthermore, it is important to understand the reasons where, why 31% of basketball clubs do not invest in this area. In this regard, the three main reasons these basketball organizations do not invest in the soft skills development of their players are: lack of budget, lack of well-trained personnel regarding this area, and lack of expertise on behalf of the basketball organization regarding this matter.

The second validated hypothesis was that investments in the soft skills development of basketball players would help basketball clubs reach the desired performance much faster. Figure 3 shows that most (10) of the coaches agreed with this statement while only one disagreed.



Figure 3: Level of coaches' agreement about constant investments in the development of human capital in basketball organization

Source: Authors' own research results

Although not all coaches were on the same page regarding the previous statement, almost all of them agreed that in order to obtain performance, a basketball organization needs to constantly invest time, money and energy in the development of its human capital (players, staff – coaches and management) as can be seen in the following figure.



Figure 4: Investments in the development of the human capital of basketball organizations

Source: Authors' own research results

The third hypothesis, which stated that clubs in the men's Romanian national basketball league can not be considered Learning Organizations was the one that got invalidated. In this regard, 62% of the respondents considered that the basketball organizations where they were active can actually be considered learning organizations. However, when asked about how often the basketball organization invests in developing soft skills programs for its players, the opinions of the target group were quite different, as can be seen in the following figure. An example of how basketball can invest in soft skills development can be taken from the NBA. As Martenzie Johnson wrote in an article for www.andscape.com, in 2021 the NBA decided to launch a new personal development

training program to teach young players about leadership, mental health and other civic activities that can help them better prepare for their careers in the sports industry. Taking this into consideration, basketball organizations active in Romania could benefit in three ways from the implementation: firstly, their young players would be better prepared to step up to the first team; secondly, their involvement in this area could bring positive aspects to the image of the club; thirdly, they could be able to retain players for a longer period of time.

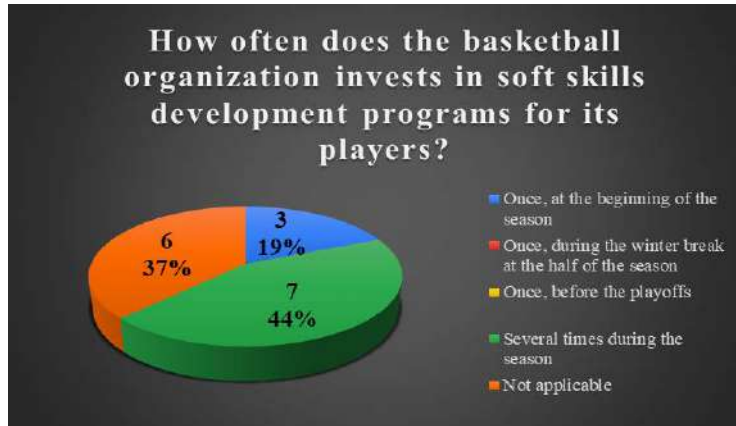


Figure 5: Frequency of investments in soft skills development programs of basketball players
 Source: Authors' own research results

Moreover, when asked if the basketball organization where they are currently active has a well-established learning system or if they have implemented an induction training phase, the majority of the responses (10) of the coaches were negative. However, when asked if they think implementing an induction training phase would benefit the basketball organization, a majority (14) of the coaches answered affirmatively. Also, when asked how they think implementing an induction training phase would benefit the basketball organization, the first two responses were that players would become „a team” faster and that the team’s performance would increase. A classification of the benefits of implementing an induction training phase can be seen in the following figure.

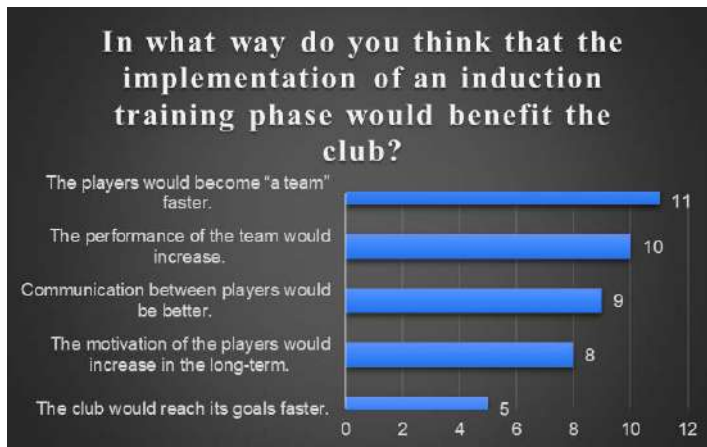


Figure 6: Benefits of implementing an induction training phase
 Source: Authors' own research results

Also in this regard, when asked if they think that implementing an induction training phase would help basketball organizations reach their desired performance much faster and easier, a majority (14) of the main coaches answered affirmatively. Regarding this induction training phase, the author wanted to better understand how such a phase can look for a basketball organization. That is why the participants in this research that formed the target group were asked what they think an optimal induction training phase should look like so that the basketball players can have a good start in the team and in the new season. Most main coaches voted for the option: Players sign a contract with the club. Upon arrival, a club delegate (friendly and helpful first contact) picks them up from the airport. They receive a welcome package from the club during the first dinner with the entire team. First initial briefing during team meeting (each new player gets assigned a “buddy” from the older players). Introduction to the workplace (physical training period begins). Feedback discussion after the first training period. Championship starts. Furthermore, because the main objective of this research was to identify if the personal development of basketball players is taken into consideration by basketball clubs that are active in the men’s Romanian National Basketball League during the 2021 – 2022 season, the research contained questions that were constructed in order to emphasize the importance of soft skills in basketball players. Thus, considering the definition of soft skills presented previously in the introduction part of this article, we found out that the majority (81%) of the main coaches consider that basketball players have and show a variety of soft skills. More so, all 16 coaches of the target group agreed that soft skills (ex.: adaptability, critical thinking, self-control etc.) should complement hard skills (ex.: shooting, passing, rebounding, defending etc.) of basketball players. However, when asked about the importance of soft skills compared to a basketball player’s hard skills, most coaches considered them to be between 51% and 71% as important. In this regard, the author wanted to determine if and in what percentage basketball organizations should divide their training between hard and soft skills. The results pointed out two ways of dividing the players’ training: 20% soft skills – 80% hard skills and 40% soft skills – 60% hard skills as seen in the following figure.



Figure 7: Division of training for basketball players

Source: Authors' own research results

Additionally the author wanted to find out which are the three most important soft skills for a basketball player to have and to develop from the point of view of the coaches. The results show that quick-decision making is at the first place in being the most important soft skill that a basketball player should have according to our target group, followed by teamwork capability and self-control. The ranking of soft skills according to the importance they have for a basketball player from the main coaches employed by

basketball clubs that were active in the men’s Romanian national basketball league during the 2021 – 2022 season can be seen in the following figure.

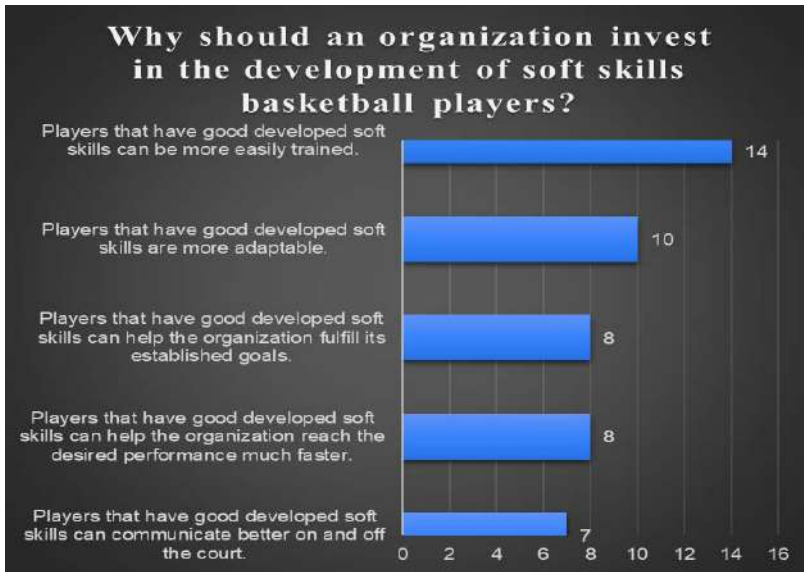


Figure 8: The three most important soft skills for a basketball player to have and develop
 Source: Authors’ own research results

Previously in this chapter we showed that almost all coaches out of the target group agreed that in order to obtain performance a basketball organization needs to constantly invest time, money and energy in the development of its human capital. While very few disagreed, all of the 16 coaches were in agreement when asked if they think that the organization should invest in developing the soft skills of its basketball players. The reasons behind this agreement can be seen in the following figure.

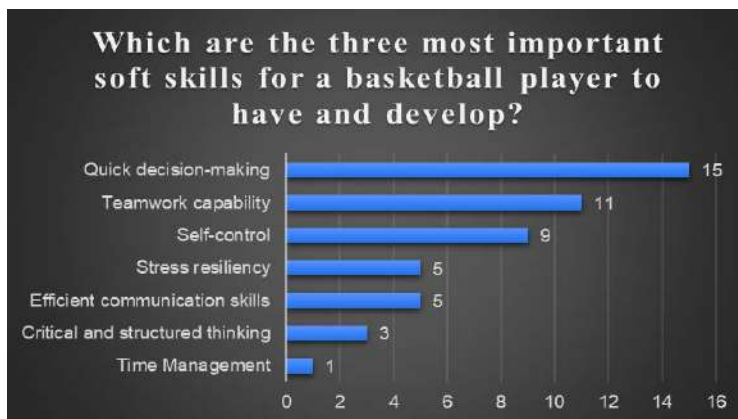


Figure 9: Reasons for investing in the development of soft skills in basketball players
 Source: Authors’ own research results

As we can see, the results show that players that have good developed soft skills can be more easily trained and are more adaptable. This means that coaches also analyze basketball players’ personal side (ex.: through soft skills) when trying to recruit them and not just on the technical / hard skill side which can be analyzed through the

statistical reports of each player. Furthermore, the author wanted to find out if the coaches out of the target group agree, or not, that if a basketball player focuses on developing his soft skills on his own he can become a better team member and implicitly a better basketball player. The results in this matter show a total agreement of the majority (12) with this statement. Also, the majority (13) of the coaches totally agreed to the statement that the development of soft skills is important for basketball players. However, the author also wanted to identify if the soft skills of basketball players have an influence on the performance of the basketball organization. Thus, the results show that most (9) of the coaches agreed with the statement that basketball players with good developed soft skills have a big influence on achieving the desired performance. One way basketball clubs in the Romanian national league can get directly involved in developing players' personal skills is by having a dedicated person in the organization responsible for this area. An example of such a position can be found at Fenerbahçe Beko Istanbul Basketball club. According to the Euroleague Basketball website, the club announced in 2021 that they hired former fan favorite player Ali Muhammed as Senior Team Development Coach and Youth Team Ambassador. Thus, as mentioned previously, Fenerbahçe Basketball club managed to retain one of its emblematic players and further benefit from his experience on and off the court.

Moreover, most (10) of the coaches agreed with the statement that basketball players with good developed soft skills can help the organization reach its desired performance much faster. Considering these results, we can clearly state that the soft skills of basketball players are a topic that coaches have begun to consider more and more when scouting or trying to help a player develop.

Lastly, as a bonus question in the questionnaire, the author wanted to identify how coaches see players, as a resource or as an asset. In this regard, the author defined a resource as a useful or valuable input that brings value to the basketball organization; and an asset as a useful or valuable input that not only brings value to the basketball organization but also has high trading value. The results were that 9 (56%) coaches see players as a resource and 7 (44%) see them as an asset.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the results of this research prove the fact that developing a basketball player's personal skills (soft skills) can have benefits not only for the player but also for the basketball organization where he is employed. Moreover, as the results of this study have shown, the soft skills of basketball players should complement their hard skills, not replace them, and should be considered to be developed individually by each player and collectively by the basketball organization through the organization of various soft skills training programs. As we could see through the results of this study, we validated two of the hypotheses and invalidated one. Regarding the invalidated hypothesis, we can see a tendency of subjectivity on behalf of the main coaches from our target group as they evaluated their employers as learning organizations only according to the definition for this term that we provided. However, the other questions on this topic show us that basketball organizations that were active in the men's Romanian National Basketball League during the 2021 – 2022 season cannot be considered learning organizations as they lack various aspects that a learning organization should have such as a well-established learning system, investments in the development of the soft skills of its employees, induction training programs and mentorship. So, the question that now arises is: can basketball clubs active in the men's Romanian National Basketball League during the 2021 – 2022 season really be considered learning organizations? An answer to this question can serve as the basis for future and perhaps more in-depth research on this topic.

Finally, there are some recommendations that the author would like to make for the basketball organizations active in the Romanian national league. The first one is the implementation of a personal skills development program that can be structured in four parts: 1. at the start of the season, 2. after the first training period, 3. in the break between the first and second part of the season, 4. at the end of the season. The second recommendation would be to hire (like in the example with Fenerbahce Basketball club) a person responsible for the development of players' personal skills. If this isn't possible, they could contract an external company specialized in this type of development. The third recommendation is in regard to the structure of the financial budget. Romanian basketball organizations should allocate each year a specific percentage of their budget for the development of the personal skills of their players. Implementing such measures could benefit basketball organizations in areas such as: better-prepared players, retention of players, and positive benefits for the club's image.

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