

Managing the Digital Transformation – The Case of Professional European Sport Clubs

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Abstract: This paper addresses the question: *How do professional team sport clubs perceive the sport-specific efforts and challenges of the digital transformation?* Based on qualitative insights from professional football, basketball, and handball clubs in the German-speaking region, we give insights into how professional sports clubs engage, cope and struggle with digital transformation. We show, that from eight interrelated fields of action, which collectively shape digital transformation processes, professional sports clubs address fundamentals of digital transformation and advanced transformers. Our findings highlight that the way clubs interpret and organize the relationship between the two domains on-field and off-field plays a central role in shaping their digital strategies. Rather than following a uniform pathway, clubs exhibit distinct patterns in how they integrate or separate on-field and off-field initiatives, pointing to the need for context-sensitive approaches. The work offers a sport-specific lens through which the complexity of digital transformation in team sport clubs can be better understood and systematized.

Keywords: Sport, Digital Transformation, Digitalization, Sports Club

Die digitale Transformation managen – Das Beispiel professioneller europäischer Sportvereine

Zusammenfassung: Der Beitrag untersucht, wie professionelle Sportvereine Herausforderungen der digitalen Transformation wahrnehmen. Dafür wurden qualitative Interviews mit Vertreter*innen professioneller Fußball-, Basketball- und Handballvereinen im deutschsprachigen Raum geführt. In den Ergebnissen wird eine Unterscheidung in „fundamentals of digital transformation“ und „advanced transformers“, je nach strategischer Reichweite der Adaptionsprozesse herausgearbeitet. Dies geschieht vor dem Hintergrund von acht identifizierten Handlungsfeldern der digitalen Transformation. Dabei zeigt sich die Bedeutung der Beziehung zwischen den Bereichen „auf dem Spielfeld“ und „außerhalb des Spielfelds“. Die Art und Weise, wie Vereine diese Beziehung interpretieren und organisatorisch verankern, hat maßgeblichen Einfluss auf die Ausgestaltung ihrer digitalen Strategien. Einige Vereine integrieren digitale Initiativen über beide Bereiche hinweg, während andere eine klare Trennung vornehmen. Der Artikel bietet eine sportspezifische Perspektive, die dazu beiträgt, die Komplexität der digitalen Transformation in Mannschaftssportvereinen, wie Fußball, besser zu verstehen.

Schlagwörter: Sport, digitale Transformation, Digitalisierung, Sportverein

Introduction

Digital technologies have long since found their way into professional team sports. Whether it's digital ticketing (Marquez et al. 2020; Kim et al. 2022), live streaming (Kim/Kim 2020), a new stadium app (Horbel et al. 2021), or the social media presence (Vale/Fernandes 2018) of the favourite club, digitization enables new customer touchpoints at various points along the normal value chain in sports. This change offers professional sport clubs, characterized by Lang et al. (2018), the potential to widen their portfolio of service offerings and emotional bonding to new fan groups and stakeholders turning into new business models.

Sports management lacks a holistic approach to digitalization in clubs. Most clubs are content with partial, standard developments, missing the greater potential of a club-wide digital transformation (Gimpel et al. 2018). Achieving this requires a mindset shift throughout the organization, breaking old business models (Berghaus/Back 2017). The main issue: clubs lack guidance on adopting such a holistic digital strategy. There are no frameworks for integrating digitalization both off-pitch (management, marketing, ticketing) and on-pitch (coaches, sports scientists, scouts) (Diel et al. 2021b). While other sectors have digital management tools, the socially crucial sports sector (Hainline 2019) still lacks a comprehensive strategy. To address this, we ask the following research question:

How do professional team sport clubs perceive the sport-specific efforts and challenges of the digital transformation?

As other sectors have digital transformation management approaches, we draw on Management Information Systems (MIS) research to find structural orientation to answer our question. Over recent decades, MIS has studied digital transformation's impact and offers initial frameworks for a holistic approach (Gimpel et al. 2018; Verhoef et al. 2021; Vial 2019). However, the digital transformation is a highly sector-specific process (Gebauer et al. 2020), which is why due to the peculiar setting of professional sport clubs (Xiao et al. 2017) existing frameworks are too generic and, therefore offer only a starting point for deriving concrete guidelines for the sports clubs. We follow Mayring (2016) and Myers/Newman (2007) for conducting a qualitative research study to transfer the concepts of MIS to the context of sport clubs. Sports club managers can use our developed tool to understand, structure and manage digitalization regarding existing domain specifics. Our results also indicate that a key factor for effectively navigating the digital transformation lies in how each club individually interprets and handles the relationship between on-field and off-field domains.

Conceptual Background

Digital Transformation

The economy, as well as academia, often use the terms “digital transformation,” “digitization,” and “digitalization” synonymously and without a clear distinction. According to Tilson et al. (2010), “digitization” is the process of converting analog information into digitally encoded information. Thus, the core of the concept lies in the technological component, which forms the basis for digital transformation. While we can sharply define “digitization,” there is no sufficient distinction in the literature between “digital transformation” and “digitalization.”