The Standard of Player Engagement in the National Basketball Association: A Comprehensive Analysis of Qualifications, Staffing Structures, and Pathways to the Profession

Global Sports Leadership Program

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to provide an overview of the way the 30 teams in the National Basketball Association (NBA) support players through their Player Engagement Departments. This study reviews the education, work history, organizational structure, and career paths of the 63 players who are currently involved in supporting NBA players. These findings reveal large differences among the 30 NBA organizations regarding how they choose to help engage their players, ranging from larger departments with multiple people working on player engagement to smaller groups where one person handles both their job and those of others related to the team's operations. On average there were 2.1 employees in each of the player engagement departments and most had a bachelor's degree and over 12.5 years of relevant experience. The authors found that 71.4% of people currently employed by the organizations do not have a history of being a competitor in sports; therefore, it was determined that being a professional athlete is not required for employment as part of a player engagement department in the NBA.

Keywords: *player engagement, NBA, player development, sports leadership, staffing analysis, career pathways, holistic athlete support*

I. Introduction

The NBA today is now more than an athletic association. The league generates billions of dollars each year in revenue across the world. Consequently, the overall wellness of its players has become a major focus point for the league. Previously considered to be informal and to be handled by retired players, coaches, trainers, etc. player engagement has now become a formally structured department in most NBA front office organizations. The responsibilities of the department are to provide players assistance through the complexities of professional life including financial literacy, self-reflection, time management etc. mental health counseling services family services, community outreach programs and career development after retirement.

Historical research shows that player engagement in professional sports originated from the increasing focus on athlete wellness programs. When the NBA first started playing games, most players were left to find their own ways to address their personal problems. Although the leagues primary focus historically has always been on producing winners on the court, the leagues support systems have historically focused on preparing the physical and mental well-being of players to play at the highest level. However, as the NBA became more popular culturally and financially during the late 80's and early 90's, so did the amount of exposure in the media about the off-court issues faced by professional athletes. These issues included money management, drug use and poor mental health issues which attracted additional scrutiny on professional sports and prompted the NBA and other professional sports leagues to begin supporting their athletes differently.

In 1986, the NBA introduced its rookie transition program. The purpose of this program was to assist players in developing tools needed to prepare for the non-basketball elements of becoming a professional athlete. This program assisted in laying the groundwork for a broader approach

towards assisting athletes. For the next thirty years, the NBA would continue to grow its commitment to player welfare. Until 2019 each of the 30 teams in the NBA had designated personnel who coordinated mental health service providers for players. In 2019, however, the NBA made it mandatory for each of its thirty teams to hire at least one full-time licensed mental health provider. This action marked a major step forward in formalizing an athlete support system. Also, in 2018, the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) established its mental health and wellness program directed by Dr. William D. Parham. The program provided players with access to confidential mental health counselors throughout the United States. Although, league wide programming continues to evolve, the variations in how teams support their players through their respective player engagement units remain large. Some teams have built large player engagement departments staffed by multiple individuals who work specifically in different capacities (player services, family engagement and player education). Other teams have assigned player engagement duties to employees who perform functions associated with basketball operations, communications or administrative/executive roles. Differences in organizational commitments to player engagement among teams lead to critical concerns regarding if the league provides consistent guidelines for player care and if teams make equal commitments to supporting their players.

This study will explore answers to those questions through a review of employee profiles representing the people working in player engagement positions for all thirty NBA teams. A total of sixty-three employee profiles detailing each individual's educational credentials, professional background experience and employment history will be reviewed in order to accomplish the objectives of this study. The objectives of this study are to achieve four goals: First, to complete a benchmark assessment of where we currently are as an industry relative to our current state-of-

play of player engagement; Second, to determine the typical paths taken by professionals entering into player engagement positions; Third, to reveal differences between teams concerning staffing and organizational commitment; Finally, to provide recommendations based on empirical data for future professionals looking to pursue careers in player engagement and for team decision-makers.

Ultimately this study will positively impact not only the NBA but also other professional sports leagues. As leagues continue to initiate programs aimed at providing holistic support for their athletes, trends and practices identified within the NBA can serve as either a model or cautionary example for sport leadership professionals worldwide. Understanding who works in these areas, how they arrived at these areas and what skills they possess are essential in identifying models for best practices in evolving areas.

II. Literature Review

The Evolution of Player Welfare in Professional Sports

The development of a culture of athlete welfare in professional sports leagues was an evolutionary process. For decades, professional sports leagues considered the impact of professional sports on the personal lives of their players (financially, mentally, family) irrelevant. However, when the economic model of professional sports drastically changed, so did the way professional sports organizations responded to those changes. Today, professional athletes are individually responsible for managing large amounts of money. In addition, the amount of media attention athletes receive today is exponentially greater than ever before. This exposure increases pressure on athletes to understand the psychological aspects of their fame. Although the complexity of the lives of professional athletes today has grown, the resources provided to assist them in navigating that complexity remains extremely limited.

Studies conducted by sport psychologists and researchers examining organizational behaviors have shown that athlete well-being directly corresponds to athletic performance. Additionally, studies show that when athletes perceive that they are supported by their organization (i.e., they have access to mental health services, financial planning assistance, and post-career transition assistance), they are more likely to contribute to their team long term; improve their athletic performance; and develop positive relationships with their team. These findings can serve as evidence to justify the expansion of player support by professional sports organizations. In some ways, professional sports have developed a culture of "athlete welfare." However, this culture is still developing, especially considering that there may still be several professional sports organizations that do not currently provide a wide range of services to their players.

The NBA's Framework for Player Support

The NBA is among the top professional sports leagues in developing structured support systems for its players. Over time, the NBA has developed three distinct phases for developing formalized support systems for its players. Phase I (roughly from the NBA's founding through the mid-1980s) lacked any formal system to provide support to its players. Thus, an individual player's relationships with his coaching staff and teammates provided the primary means of support.

Phase II (which ran from approximately 1986 until roughly 2002) saw the establishment of programs designed to meet the specific needs of players. Programs at this time focused on educating players about a variety of topics such as personal finance, how to manage their public image/media relations and how to prevent substance use. While these programs proved useful, they tended to be episodic and thus did not constitute ongoing support. Moreover, although the NBA made available tools for teams to develop similar programs, there was little consistency regarding how teams chose to utilize those tools.

Phase III represents a much more complete and integrated model of athlete support. A major catalyst for Phase III was the NBA requiring all teams to employ a full-time mental health specialist in 2019. Thus, Phase III is characterized by teams establishing player engagement departments within the front office of the team. It represents the growing professionalism of player engagement positions, and most importantly, recognizes that effective support of athletes is best accomplished through relationship-based programs which are active throughout the calendar year as opposed to being sporadic or occasional.

Holistic Athlete Development as Organizational Strategy

The concept of player engagement is evolving from simply being considered a well-being aspect of sports organizations into being viewed by contemporary sport management research as a strategic organizational investment. Organizations that create strong and supporting systems for their athletes will gain competitive advantage in terms of recruitment and retention of talent, as well as performance optimization. Players are empowered and able to choose from numerous aspects when selecting a team; however, in many cases, the primary consideration when making the decision is which organization best supports the athlete's overall well-being. When two or more teams offer equivalent financial compensation packages, the choice may be made based upon which organization best supports the athlete's overall well-being.

The National Football League's Total Wellness program provides one example of how organizations can create a framework for enhancing the well-being of their athletes. Licensed psychologists created the NFL's Total Wellness Program, each having extensive clinical experience. The NFL's Total Wellness Program integrates educational programming and initiatives promoting awareness, clinical resources, peer-to-peer support networks and transition programs within an overarching wellness system. The elements of the NFL model were adopted by the National Basketball Association and further developed to emphasize individual team autonomy in developing and staffing their player engagement functions. Organizational autonomy allows teams to create new and customized methods for engaging their players. This autonomy has provided numerous benefits; however, the benefit of creating new customized approaches to engage players has resulted in significant variation in organizational structure and staffing models for these functions as identified in this study.

Gaps in the Literature

While an abundance of research has been published in recent years about the mental health of athletes, player development programs and sports organization management; surprisingly little research has been conducted to investigate the background and experience of those staffing departments for player engagement. Most of the previous research has focused on program structure and outcome as opposed to the human capital that delivers it. The purpose of this study is to address the gap by creating a complete picture of the demographics and professional experiences of today's player engagement department personnel throughout the National Basketball Association (NBA).

III. Methods

Research Design

This project used an analytical survey (cross sectional) as a way to describe the employee positions for player engagement at all thirty (30) National Basketball Association (NBA) teams. A comprehensive description was developed from information provided by the NBA that described each identified position working with players, including but limited to player engagement, player development, player services or other related roles at each NBA team.

Data Collection

Data was collected through a systematic review of publicly accessible information via several platforms. These included; team websites, official listings from the National Basketball Association's Organizational Directory, and professional networking sites like LinkedIn. The systematic search for data focused on everyone that held an employment designation or description that suggested they had some type of responsibility for engaging players, developing players, providing player service, managing relationships with players, providing lifestyle service to players and their families, supporting the engagement of players' families, or similar positions. Once all individuals that were deemed to have some role in player engagement or development were identified, the following data elements were collected for each individual; Team Affiliation, Position Level (VP/Director/Assistant), Full Name, Job Title, Highest Educational Degree Attained, Collegiate Athletic Participation, Professional Athletic Experience, Prior Work Experience, Estimated Years of Relevant Professional Experience, and Documented Skills/Competencies.

Sample

The final sample of individuals included 63 from the total of 30 National Basketball Association (NBA) teams. Player Engagement Staff were positioned into three categories: Tier One – VP Level (Most Senior Player Engagement); Tier Two – Directors (Mid-Senior Management); and Tier Three – Assistants (Coordinators/Specialists/Entry to Mid-Level). In cases where a subject's educational background or additional data could not be confirmed by publicly available information those fields will reflect "Not Found.

Analytical Approach

A few descriptive statistical methods were employed to describe the demographics of the 63 identified NBA player engagement staff, (such as education, work experience, athlete experience, job responsibilities and team organizational structure). Using Microsoft excel; we have obtained frequencies, percentiles, means, medians and range for each demographic variable. We also employed pivot tables and cross-tabulations to discover if there are any relationships or associations between some variables such as position(s) on staff, level of education, total years of professional experience, athlete experiences, team affiliations and how they are structured. The career paths for each position were categorized by theme to identify the most common ways that individuals transitioned from other careers into an NBA player engagement position. Finally, all graphical images were developed using a version of Microsoft excel and will be displayed in black and white to follow journal publishing standards. The analysis is organized around four primary research questions:

1. *What is typical of the background education or experience for people who have current employment as a Player Engagement professional in the NBA?*

2. *How do each team's staffs and size of their staff differ from one another?*

3. *Which teams use non-player engagement personnel to manage player engagement, while those employees continue to perform job functions that were assigned to them prior to their being involved in player engagement?*

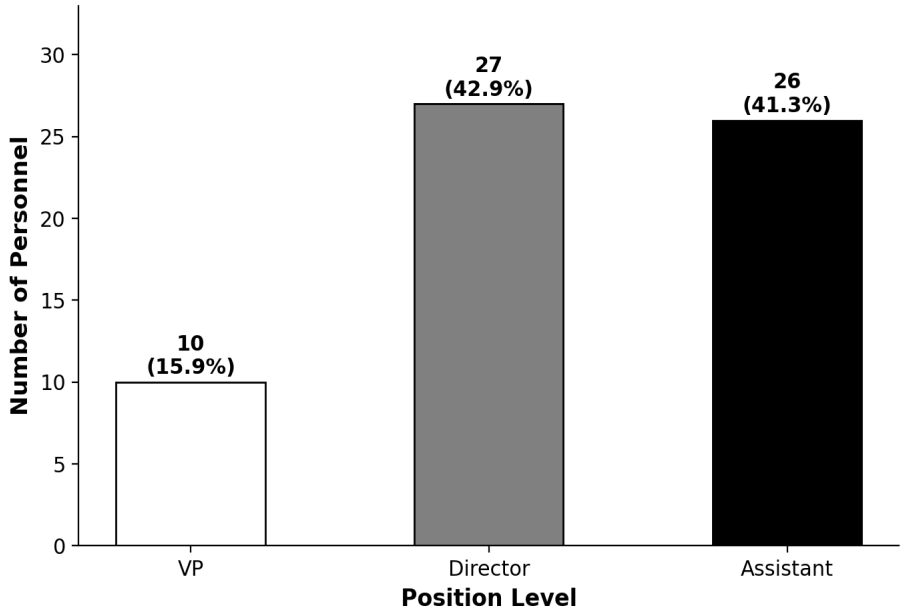
4. *What is the best route into a Player Engagement position in the NBA.*

IV. Analysis and Findings

Overview of the Player Engagement Workforce

The study found that there are 63 people employed in player engagement or similar positions throughout the NBA's 30 franchises. There were 10 VPs (15.9%); 27 Directors/Managers (42.9%); and 26 Assistants (41.3%) within these groups. The breakdown is reflective of an inverted pyramid model, where much of the workforce consists of middle managers (Director/Manager) and support personnel (Assistant), while top-tier leadership oversees strategy for all players.

Figure 2: Distribution of Player Engagement Personnel by Position Level



Staffing Structures and Team Comparisons

The average number of people employed by an NBA team for their department of player engagement is 2.1 players; however, the median (the middle value which separates the higher half from the lower half of the data set), was 2.0. What these averages hide is the difference

between the smaller department (one person in ten) and larger department (four people as in the case of the Oklahoma City Thunder).

Figure 1: Player Engagement Staff Size Distribution Across NBA Teams

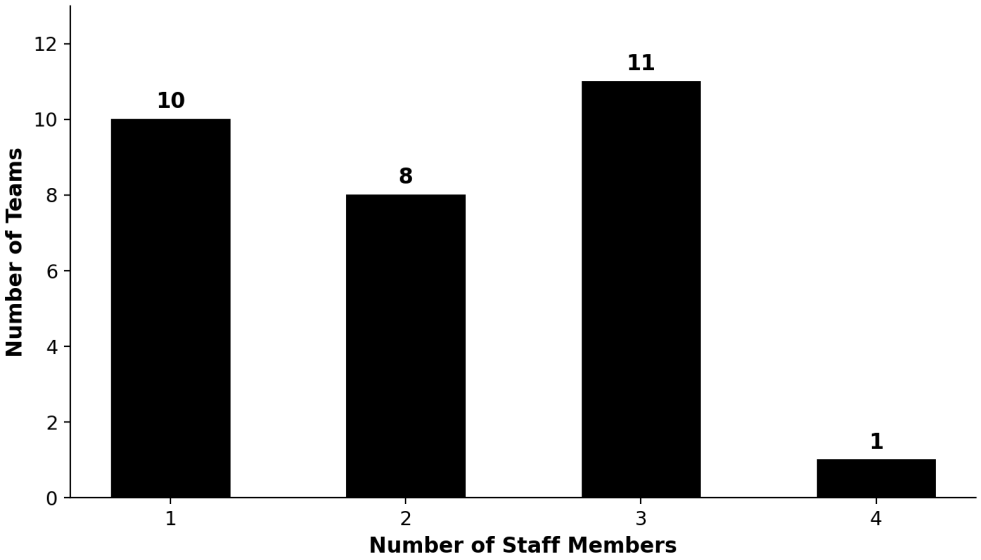


Table 1 presents the complete breakdown of staff sizes across all 30 franchises.

Staff Size	Teams	Franchises
4 Staff	1	Oklahoma City Thunder
3 Staff	9	Atlanta Hawks, Chicago Bulls, Detroit Pistons, Indiana Pacers, Los Angeles Lakers, Memphis Grizzlies, New Orleans Pelicans, Orlando Magic, Phoenix Suns
		Portland Trail Blazers, San Antonio Spurs
2 Staff	8	Cleveland Cavaliers, Denver Nuggets, Golden State Warriors, Miami Heat, Philadelphia 76ers, Sacramento Kings, Toronto Raptors, Utah Jazz
1 Staff	10	Boston Celtics, Brooklyn Nets, Charlotte Hornets, Dallas Mavericks, Houston Rockets, Los Angeles Clippers, Milwaukee Bucks, Minnesota Timberwolves
		New York Knicks, Washington Wizards

Table 1: Player Engagement Staff Size by NBA Franchise

The fact that approximately 33% of all National Basketball Association franchises (the 10 franchises out of 30) are staffed by a singular person to assist players is very significant. In at least five of these instances the person's job description and title strongly implies that assisting basketball players was secondary to other obligations. For example, the Houston Rockets have a

senior vice president of basketball operations who is also their senior player development manager. He has spent 38 years as an athletic trainer. The Charlotte Hornets have only one representative. Their senior manager of basketball communications is the franchise's liaison to the local sports media.

Teams Without Dedicated Player Engagement Focus

A key conclusion from this research is the presence of teams whose apparent responsibilities for engaging players appear to fall under the umbrella of overall business functions, rather than being focused upon solely. Utilizing job titles and descriptions for specific positions; there are several NBA teams that do not have true dedicated representatives responsible for player engagement.

Orlando Magic represents an example. The Director-level representative of the team is titled Executive Assistant to the President of Basketball Operations & Head Coach, a position that is clearly administrative. Of the two assistant level representatives, both were titled Team Services Coordinators, which indicates a very general operational responsibility and does not indicate a particular emphasis on providing care and growth for players. As such, the question arises as to whether player engagement at the Orlando Magic receives the individualized attention required by evolving expectations of the league.

Houston Rockets and Boston Celtics present an additional model in which a single high-ranking official provides representation for all the teams' player engagement needs while simultaneously providing representation for the other aspects of their organizational operations (basketball operations, organizational strategy, etc.). Although the experience and rank of those officials may ensure that they provide a voice for player engagement in discussions of leadership

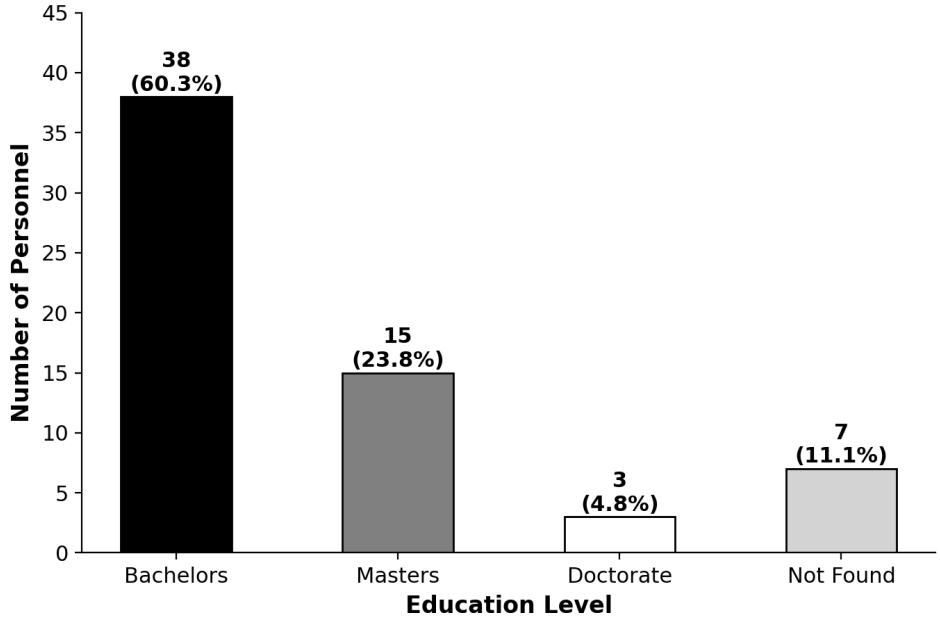
decisions, their multiple areas of responsibility may preclude them from having the time available to devote themselves to the daily needs of their players.

In addition, examples such as Brooklyn Nets (Director of Player Engagement & Basketball Operations), and Charlotte Hornets (primary function of basketball communications) demonstrate how some organizations will combine player engagement with other areas of responsibility, rather than isolate player engagement as its own area of operation.

Educational Qualifications

The educational profile of the player engagement workforce reveals a field that is predominantly accessible through bachelor's-level education, though advanced degrees are well-represented. Of the 63 identified personnel, 38 (60.3%) hold a bachelor's degree as their highest verified credential, 15 (23.8%) hold a master's degree, and 3 (4.8%) hold a doctoral degree. For 7 individuals (11.1%), educational information could not be verified through public sources.

Figure 3: Educational Attainment of Player Engagement Personnel



When examined by position level, the data reveal interesting patterns. Among VP-level personnel, 60.0% hold a bachelor's degree and 30.0% hold a master's degree. At the Director level, 63.0% hold a bachelor's degree, 18.5% hold a master's degree, and 11.1% hold a doctorate. Among Assistants, 57.7% hold a bachelor's degree and 26.9% hold a master's degree. The presence of three doctoral degree holders, all at the Director level, is noteworthy. These individuals include Stephan Alli of the New Orleans Pelicans, whose doctorate is in counseling psychology; Lacee Carmon-Johnson of the Toronto Raptors; and Rahman Anjorin of the

Washington Wizards. Their advanced training suggests a growing recognition that player engagement benefits from specialized clinical or academic expertise.

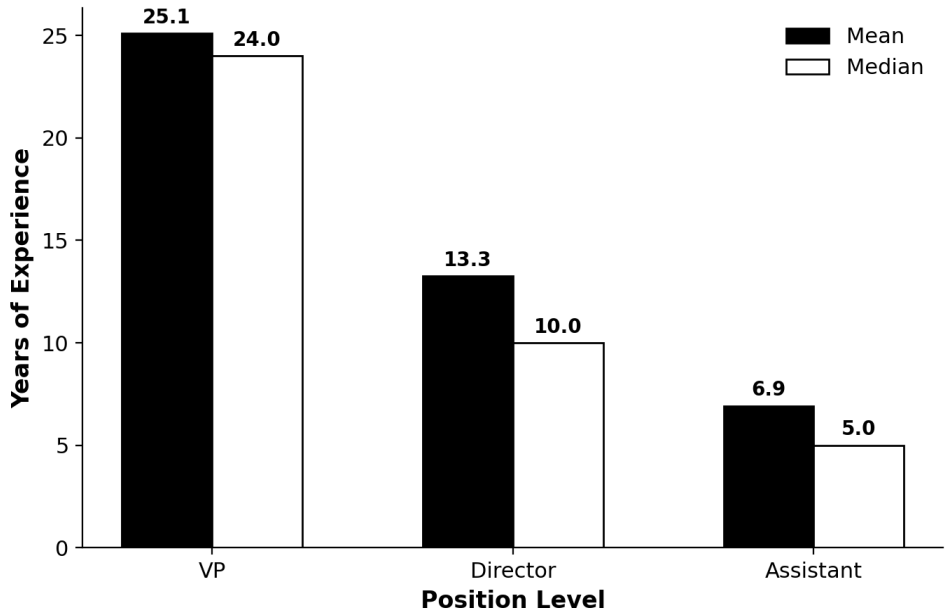
Table 2: Educational Attainment by Position Level

Level	Bachelors	Masters	Doctorate	Not Found	Total
VP	6 (60.0%)	3 (30.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (10.0%)	10
Director	17 (63.0%)	5 (18.5%)	3 (11.1%)	2 (7.4%)	27
Assistant	15 (57.7%)	7 (26.9%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (15.4%)	26
Total	38 (60.3%)	15 (23.8%)	3 (4.8%)	7 (11.1%)	63

Professional Experience

Years of relevant professional experience represent one of the starkest differentiators across position levels. The overall average across all 63 personnel is 12.5 years, with a median of 10.0 years. However, this aggregate figure masks dramatic differences between tiers.

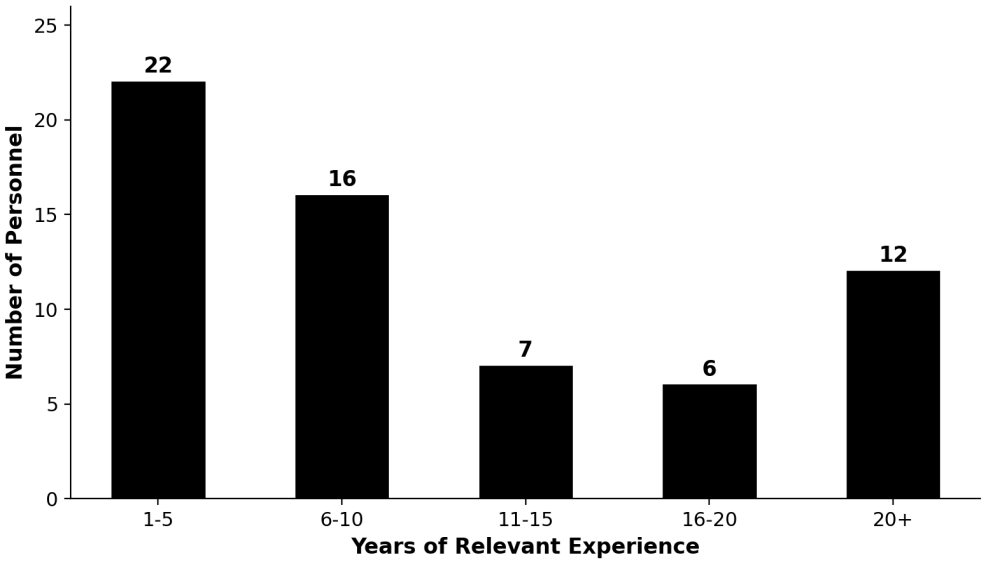
Figure 4: Average Relevant Experience by Position Level



VP-level personnel average 25.1 years of relevant experience, with a median of 24.0 years and a range spanning from 10 to 50 years. The most experienced individual in the dataset is Cheri Hanson of the Portland Trail Blazers, whose career in NBA communications and player programs spans approximately 50 years, dating to 1974. Other long-tenured VP-level personnel include Allen Lumpkin of the Philadelphia 76ers (47 years), Chantal Hassard of the Memphis Grizzlies (32 years), and Karen Atkeson of the Indiana Pacers (29 years).

Director-level personnel average 13.3 years of experience with a median of 10.0 years. Assistant-level personnel average 6.9 years with a median of 5.0 years. These figures suggest a relatively clear experiential ladder, with approximately 5 to 7 years of experience positioning individuals for entry-level roles, 10 to 15 years for Director-level positions, and 20 or more years for VP-level leadership.

Figure 6: Distribution of Years of Relevant Experience



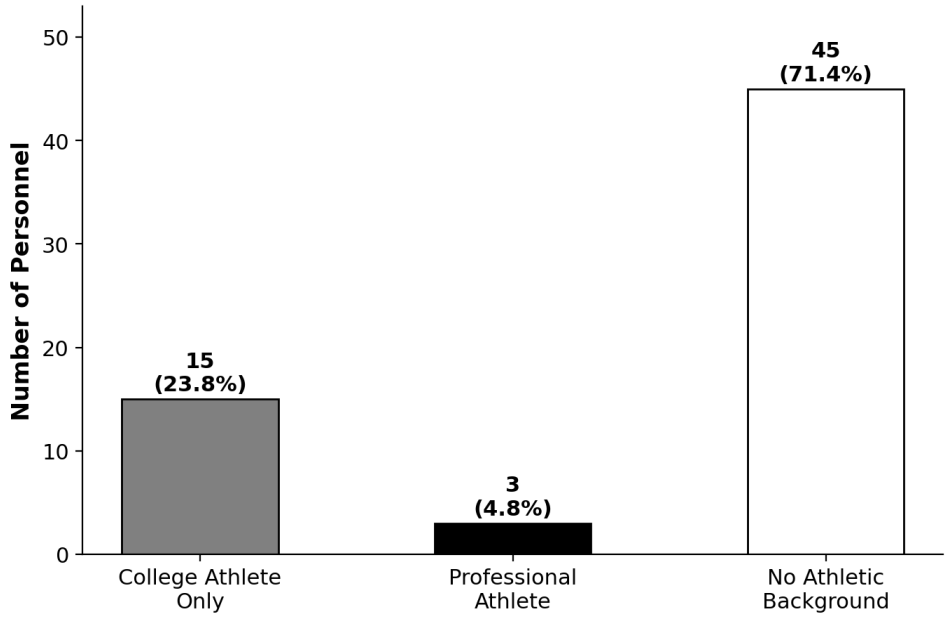
The distribution of experience across the entire workforce reveals that the largest cohort (22 individuals, or 34.9%) falls in the 1-to-5-year range, indicating a significant influx of relatively new professionals into the field. The 6-to-10-year range accounts for 16 individuals

(25.4%), while 12 individuals (19.0%) have more than 20 years of experience. This bimodal distribution suggests a workforce characterized by both emerging professionals and deeply experienced veterans, with a thinner middle cohort that may reflect either career transitions out of the field or a relatively recent expansion of these roles.

Athletic Background

One of the most consequential findings of this study pertains to the athletic backgrounds of player engagement personnel. Contrary to what might be assumed in a sports organization context, the overwhelming majority of individuals in these roles do not possess a background as a professional or collegiate athlete.

Figure 5: Athletic Background of Player Engagement Personnel



Of the 63 identified personnel, only 3 individuals (4.8%) have experience as a professional athlete. These are Allison Feaster of the Boston Celtics, who had a professional basketball career; Kaleb Thornhill of the San Antonio Spurs, who played professionally; and Austin Peebles, also of the Spurs. An additional 15 individuals (23.8%) participated in collegiate athletics but did not compete professionally. The remaining 45 individuals (71.4%) have no verified competitive athletic background at either the collegiate or professional level.

This finding has significant implications for aspiring professionals considering a career in player engagement. While an athletic background can provide valuable experiential knowledge

and credibility with players, the data clearly demonstrate that it is not a prerequisite for success in the field. The vast majority of current practitioners have built their careers through other pathways, including sports administration, community relations, communications, event management, and academic support roles within athletic departments.

Career Pathways and Prior Experience

An analysis of prior work experience reveals several dominant career pathways into player engagement roles. The most common trajectory involves internal progression within professional sports organizations. Many current personnel began their careers in adjacent functions, such as community relations, basketball operations, team services, or communications, before transitioning or being promoted into player engagement positions. This pattern is particularly pronounced among long-tenured employees who have spent the majority of their careers within a single organization.

A second common pathway involves experience within collegiate athletic departments, particularly in roles related to academic support, student-athlete development, and athletic administration. Several current Directors and Assistants gained foundational experience through positions at universities before transitioning to the professional level. Lacee Carmon-Johnson of the Toronto Raptors, for example, served as Director of Professional Development at Purdue University Athletics before assuming her current role.

A third, less common but increasingly visible pathway involves cross-sport mobility. Several current personnel gained experience in other professional sports leagues, particularly the NFL, before transitioning to NBA player engagement. Kaleb Thornhill of the San Antonio Spurs served as Director of Player Engagement for the Miami Dolphins and Director of Player

Development for the Detroit Lions before joining the Spurs. Blake Johnson of the Atlanta Hawks similarly worked in community and youth programs for the Miami Dolphins. This cross-sport pathway suggests that player engagement skills are transferable across sports, and that experience in one league can serve as a credential for opportunities in another.

The Wayne and Theresa Embry Fellowship through the Toronto Raptors has also emerged as a notable pipeline into NBA player engagement. Multiple individuals in the dataset, including Winta Desta of the Memphis Grizzlies and Josh Cardoza of the Los Angeles Lakers, participated in this fellowship before securing full-time positions within the league.

Table 3: Primary Career Pathways into NBA Player Engagement Roles

Pathway	Prevalence	Description	% of Total
Internal NBA Org Progression	Most Common	Starting in community relations, team ops, or basketball ops within an NBA franchise	~42%
Collegiate Athletics	Common	Academic support, student-athlete development, or athletic administration roles at universities	~20%
Cross-Sport Transfer	Moderate	Player engagement or operations roles in NFL, NHL, MLS, or WNBA before transitioning to NBA	~11%
Fellowship / Pipeline Programs	Emerging	NBA league programs such as the Embry Fellowship or Future Basketball Ops Stars cohort	~8%
Non-Sports Professional	Less Common	Careers in media, education, marketing, counseling, or nonprofit management prior to sports	~19%

Summary of Key Metrics

Table 4: Summary of Key Workforce Metrics

Metric	Value
Total Personnel Identified	63
Total NBA Teams Represented	30 (100%)
Average Staff Size per Team	2.1
Median Staff Size per Team	2.0
Teams with 1 Staff Member	10 (33.3%)
Teams with 3+ Staff Members	12 (40.0%)
Average Years of Experience (All)	12.5 years
Average Years of Experience (VP)	25.1 years
Average Years of Experience (Director)	13.3 years
Average Years of Experience (Assistant)	6.9 years
Bachelor's Degree Holders	38 (60.3%)
Master's Degree Holders	15 (23.8%)
Doctoral Degree Holders	3 (4.8%)
Professional Athletes	3 (4.8%)
Collegiate Athletes	18 (28.6%)
No Athletic Background	45 (71.4%)

Table 4: Aggregate Workforce Metrics for NBA Player Engagement Personnel (N=63)

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

Player engagement has become a major part of how the NBA does business. However, there is still much work to be done to make sure each player has the same level of support. There were 63 different player engagement professionals throughout the league. These professionals came from a variety of backgrounds such as counseling psychologists, former professional athletes, experienced sports administrators, and young professionals looking to begin their careers in the sports administration field. On the positive side of things, there was evidence that there was a growing body of knowledge on best practices in providing services to players. However, the findings also demonstrated inconsistent organizational commitments to providing player engagement. For example, only one third of all NBA teams have just one individual that works in the player engagement department and many of those individuals work in multiple areas. Therefore, the league has not developed a commonality in standards of care for its athletes. A comparison between a team that exemplifies a strong commitment to player engagement (the Oklahoma City Thunder), whose player engagement department consists of four professionals led by a Vice President and the player engagement department of another team (Houston Rockets or Charlotte Hornets), where player engagement is included in operational or communication departments, is strikingly different.

The Optimal Pathway into Player Engagement

Based on research and data collected in this project, the most effective entry methods into an NBA player engagement position include: 60.3% of present-day employees have earned a Bachelor Degree as the highest level of academic attainment. A bachelor's degree is the baseline.

The next category of credentialing is a master's degree; 23.8% of the workforce holds a Master's Degree. Many Assistant Level employees hold Master Degrees. This shows that younger employees entering this new field are seeking additional education to establish themselves as leaders in the field.

Many employees' first experience working in an NBA Front Office occurs when an employee initially works in a professional sports organization in a capacity directly connected to an area of player engagement (community relations, team operations, basketball operations and event coordination). Generally, a prospective employee will move into a Coordinator/Assistant Position as a player engagement employee once they have worked for five-seven years in a related capacity. Once an employee accumulates ten-fifteen years of relevant experience, he/she will be eligible to assume a Director Level Position. Employees generally assume a Vice President Position after twenty plus years of progressing through leadership roles. A notable point about this career pathway is that an athlete background is NOT required. Although 71.4 percent of the current employee population lacks competitive athletic experience at either the collegiate or professional level, the career field is open to anyone possessing applicable professional skills such as program management, counseling, communications, community outreach and organizational leadership.

Recommendations for NBA Organizations

First, the NBA needs to establish minimum staffing requirements for player engagement departments. At least two full-time employees (Director and Assistant) would need to be employed by each team to provide consistent and specialized support to their respective players and their families. Ten teams currently do not meet this threshold. Second, teams must commit to ensuring that employees employed in player engagement capacities have job titles and job

descriptions that accurately reflect their primary responsibilities for performing player engagement functions. Placing player engagement employees into larger operational/administrative/communications roles will dilute resources and attention devoted toward the well-being of players. Finally, the league and all member teams must develop pipeline programs creating formal career paths into player engagement professions. Programs such as the Wayne & Theresa Embry Fellowship and the NBA's Future Basketball Operations Stars Program demonstrate potential as talent development initiatives and should be further supported.

Recommendations for Aspiring Professionals

There are numerous recommendations based on empirical data contained in this study for individuals interested in pursuing a career in NBA Player Engagement. To improve one's chances of success in securing an entry-level position as an NBA Player Engagement Employee, at least a bachelor's degree in Sports Management/Psychology/Counseling/Communications or a similar field should be pursued along with earning a master's degree in Sports Administration/Counseling Psychology/Social Work. In addition to pursuing higher education, experience working in a professional sports organization in a role related to Player Engagement (such as Community Relations/Team Operations/Event Coordination) prior to applying for a position in Player Engagement is recommended. The roles have historically served as entry points into Player Engagement positions. Developing the ability to administer programs, build relationships, plan events, and communicate effectively among multiple cultures will be attractive to players/coaches. Experience in other sports such as the NFL or WNBA may also serve as a viable pathway as they too have developed many skills that are applicable to the NBA environment. Finally, applying to Fellowship and Pipeline Programs offered through the league

and each franchise has shown to be effective in creating entry level opportunities for careers in Player Engagement.

Limitations and Future Research

This study uses publicly available data and there are many limitations to acknowledge with this type of research. For example, educational and professional background data for some participants cannot be confirmed, therefore there will be "Not Found" entries (approximately 11.1%) when looking at the education category. The study is limited by only capturing a single point in time and does not take into consideration historical staffing trends, employee turn-over or new staff hired recently which may not reflect current staffing in their respective departments. The classification of role level also requires subjective judgment if the job title was non-standard or ambiguous.

Future research could include exploring the thoughts, feelings and experiences of those performing the functions within this role through qualitative interviews, studying the relationship between staffing numbers and actual performance results of players, and monitoring the evolution of the player engagement work force as the sport industry becomes more professionalized. Future comparative studies including player engagement models used in other professional sports leagues (domestic/international) will add additional knowledge and insight into this important aspect of international sports leadership.

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