

Training with top athletes at work: Toward a conceptual framework on employee health, social and feeling benefits

Abstract

The sick leave in Norway is around 6%, and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (FHI) states that Norway faces several major health challenges. The aim has been to inform people about life-reducing factors and to trigger a healthier lifestyle. An important group is employees, which represent a large part of a population. However, too little research is done on how to implement pro-active health measures in a work context. To link challenges in a society with unused resources, the group of top athletes should be considered. Many top athletes are not attractive sponsorship objects, have a poor disposable income, but have extra leisure time. Given the health challenges, the purpose of this article is to identify employee benefits in terms of health, social and feelings when they are put in training sessions with top athletes. Employees from the companies Findus and Wilhemsen took part in aerobic, yoga and dance sessions with two different top athletes. The findings, in terms of, for example, positive emotions, the importance of socialization, joy at work, and co-operation lead to the development of a conceptual framework.

Introduction

Malik and Guptha (2014) refer to a sports celebrity endorsement strategy as a means to promote corporate image targeting customers in the market place, and Yu (2005) argue that because sports stars are experts, widely recognized and charismatic, they are favored spokespeople, especially for sports brand companies. Research dealing with sports celebrities and top athletes focuses on their influential role in the consumer market. For example, sports celebrities are used to influencing consumers' emotional attachment to a brand like brand love (Zhou et al., 2020) and consumers' decision making like purchase intention (Dikčius & Ilciukiene, 2021). Such endorsement strategies target the external market and not employees. Given the capabilities and characteristics of top athletes, it is important to address if we can extend the use of them. The purpose of this paper, regardless of whether the top athletes are endorsers or sponsorship objects or not, is to examine how top athletes influence employees from a health perspective. How will top athletes, playing the role as training instructors, be perceived in terms of characteristics and capabilities and what employee benefits will they trigger?

Theory

The role of sports celebrities and top athletes' characteristics and capabilities

Bjerke and Elvekrok (2020) concluded that top athletes can contribute to the co-creation of valuable employee health care programs (from a sponsorship perspective). Arai and Kaplanidou (2013) launched the Athlete Brand Image, which is a consumer-based brand equity model for athletes. It consists of three dimensions: (1) athletic performance; (2) attractive appearance; (3) and marketable lifestyle. However, this model does not define neither roles top athletes can get in co-operation with companies, nor capabilities necessary to have in order to create employee health benefits for companies. Bjerke and Kirkesaether (2020) proposed the The Sports Event and Athlete Sponsorship Object Star suggesting that a top athlete, from a co-creation perspective, should have capabilities in terms of being a developer of employee involvement, pride, relationships, entertainment and employee health care programs. However, the literature lacks research indicating or documenting how top athletes may influence an internal target group like employees in an organizational and training session context.

Employee health and feeling outcomes of physical exercise

According to Golaszewski, Allen, and Edington (2008) work engagement is positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment and good health. Besides, physical exercise may reduce sick leave and lead to the development of an organizational health culture (Golaszewski et al., 2008). Bjerke and Elvekrok (2020) showed that internal activation of sport sponsorship, with top athletes as objects, may be leveraged as employee health care programs. There are numerous benefits to gain for employees and thus, employers if employees are encouraged to participate in training sessions at work.

Physical exercise, socialization and laughter are likely to enforce positive emotions and brain capacity. Basso and Suzuki (2017) reviewed research from the beginning of the 80s until 2016 and found that the three most consistent cognitive and behavioral effects of an "ad hoc" training session are strengthened executive functions (e.g. task solving and attention), improved mood and reduced stress level. Such effects can be explained, for example, increased production of dopamine (Winter et al., 2007), and high levels of the stress hormone cortisol will be reduced by low-intensity exercise (Hill et al., 2008). Cortisol reduces the immune system (Berg & Otterholt, 2020), and disproportionate amounts will block learning (Dinse et al., 2017) and harm memory (Wolf, 2009; Tollenaar et al. 2008). Work stress

sources are such as long working days, overtime, time pressure and unclear roles/role ambiguity (Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010; Kamarek et al, 2005).

Humor is widespread in human social interactions (Howrigan & MacDonald, 2008). Laughter leads to increased production of endorphins (which give a good feeling) (Gray, Parkinson & Dunbar, 2015), and endorphins are related to the positive development of social relationships (Machin & Dunbar, 2011). Socialization is defined as the most important life-extending factor (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), and socialization is associated with humor and laughter, which trigger the production of endorphins (Gray, Parkinson, & Dunbar, 2015). Endorphins make people more relaxed (an opioid effect) and catalyze the sharing of more intimate information (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009) and thus, ease the formation of social relationships (Machin & Dunbar, 2011). Humor is a form of communication that is used to form relationships, and it can boost cooperative behavior (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). At strategic level, the literature has proposed that top athletes can be used to create employee health care programs, build relationships and involvement. In addition, there is plenty of research showing that health care programs will produce health benefits for employees and physical exercise triggers positive emotions. However, there has not been completed research documenting specific emotional effects of employee training sessions run by top athletes.

Method

The top athletes as instructors for employees at two companies

Tarjei Svalastog is a top athlete in dance and has been a sports dancer at the top level in Norway. He is also a professional dancer and instructor on the Norwegian TV2 show 'So you think you can dance' ("Skal vi danse?"). He is originally from Kristiansand but lives and works in Oslo. Stina Kajsa Colleou is a top athlete in swimming and was born and raised in Oslo. She is part of the Norwegian national team. Stina has become the Nordic champion in the 200m breaststroke, been in the semi-finals of the European Championships, has 30 individual medals in the National Championships and is Norwegian champion 9 times. Nomad Foods, of which Findus is a part of, is Europe's largest supplier of frozen food with over 4600 employees, an owner of 13 different production sites and a distributor of food to 17 countries. The brand 'Findus' has a 36.8% market share in Norway. Findus, with 250 employees, has two factories in two Norwegian cities. The main office is at Lysaker outside Oslo. The Wilhelmsen Group, an international logistics and maritime company, is located in 74 different countries with more than 21,000 employees. The company's ambition is based on innovation and expertise. The company focuses on a sustainable future and global cooperation and is based at Lysaker, with over 300 employees. Both companies have very good training facilities for their employees and have experience with instructors from the health studios chain SATS.

The participants and interviewees

In the months of November and December 2021 and March 2022, Stina was the instructor of an aerobic and a Yoga session for 7 and 8 female Findus employees. In March 2022, Tarjei ran two dance sessions with female Findus and Wilhelmsen employees (9 and 7, respectively). The participants were between 25 and 56 years old, spent between 7 and 12 hours still sitting a day and were physically active between 35 and 70 minutes a day. They all had experiences with instructors from the health gym chain SATS. 7 of the participants were recruited to be informants for the in-depth interviews based on emailed invitations to all participants.

The interview guide, data collection and analysis

The key terms from the relevant theory, re-defined as codes, were first pulled out from the literature review and then, used in the interview guide (with open-ended questions) and then,

the analysis of the transcribed interviews (Spiggle 1994). Specific prompts, especially about emotions, were meant to encourage elaborations (McCracken, 1988).

The interviews took place at the beginning of April 2022, were Zoom-based and Iphone-recorded and lasted between 30 and 38 minutes. Recorded interviews were transcribed and treated as text to be content analyzed based on themes and sub-themes (codes). The codes were applied to make it possible to categorize themes and sub-themes, sort statements into categories and interpret the text. The data was interpreted in terms of constructivism to establish meanings based on the pre-identified codes (Crotty, 1998) (like top athlete characteristics, top athlete capabilities, instructor characteristics and capabilities, emotions, health benefits, well-being, relationships and co-operation). The credibility of the study (Geertz, 1983) was strengthened by interviewing employees from two companies – Findus and Wilhemsen as multiple sources from two different companies. It was applied an inductive approach and qualitative data was used as a tool to enrich the meanings of sentiments and arguments expressed by the interviewees (Creswell, 2003).

Findings

Characteristics and capabilities

When the informants were asked about essential characteristics of a fitness instructor, it was the instructor's perceived physical fitness and the overall credibility that appeared as the most important. Several of the interviewees emphasized that overall appearance did not play a major role, but the instructors should look well trained and have health-promoting values to be credible. Also, the credibility of an instructor would be enforced if the participants of the work out were impressed by the physical capabilities of the top athletes. Such capabilities were important in situations where they demonstrated exercises and movements. For example, Tarjei demonstrated great rhythms and fine movements, and Stina was perceived to be strong and flexible.

“They have to look well trained. They cannot weigh 100 kg, then they are not credible. They cannot be too thin either, then you look sick.”

"Appearance doesn't matter, but communication skills are very important."

"It's not really important how well trained they are, but subconsciously, you will probably more easily follow and trust someone who is physically well trained."

Most of the participants expressed their satisfaction with the session and that a top athlete must not necessarily run a session similar to the sports discipline the athlete competes in. It was further revealed that the competence of a top athlete was not seen as necessary for an instructor to be perceived as good enough. An ordinary instructor was claimed to be satisfactory technically (based on previous experiences with SATS instructors) (Norwegian fitness center). Nevertheless, it is a big plus if the instructor is a top athlete because it was great to be trained by one of the best in the respective sports discipline.

"It is very important that it looks like the instructor knows what they are going to demonstrate well and that the people live up to expectations. So that, for example, a dancer looks like a dancer and is not stiff in her/his movements."

The impressions of the participants' sentiments were that the top athletes contributed to increased motivation and commitment due to their sparkling behavior, positive energy, and positive attitude. Besides, they were perceived to be charismatic and eager. Also, several of the informants highlighted the top athletes' good communication -and pedagogical skills and

their follow-up capabilities of the participants, which they regarded as important. Pedagogical skills were described as making participants feel comfortable in the training situation.

“It is very important how good they are at teaching. He (Tarjei) was very pedagogical, and good at explaining. Not only because he is a top athlete, but also because he has educational insight.”

The informants agreed that good sports merits and sports celebrity status are likely to have a good effect on the number of participants in top athlete-run training sessions. International sports merits could also influence motivation as it felt extra inspiring to train with such athletes.

"Sports merits are important considering that it can lead to more people joining the session. I had a little extra desire to join because of Tarjei's participation in 'So you think you can dance' ("Skal vi danse") and that Stina was a good performer."

"Sporting performance has a lot to say and seeing how good they are. It is very fun and inspiring and extra cool if they are very good. Extra motivating if they are the best in their sports discipline."

Feelings, health and work joy - effects of physical training sessions with top athletes

The informants both from Findus and Wilhelmsen meant that the top athletes worked well to enable the creation of relationships between participants/colleagues. The training sessions represented a shared experience, characterized by positive emotions. The dance session was a good example of this sharing and positive energy. Tarjei made the choreography feel like a shared project that everyone had to master together, despite that everyone danced alone. Several of the interviewees believed that they all contributed to creating a social community and joy at work. The sessions were perceived to be fun and afterwards they could talk about them. They had expressed to each other after the sessions that they were satisfied, thought it was fun and that it was something they wanted to do again.

"They were good at giving feedback, and they saw us."

"Good at adapting to everyone's level, moving forward slowly and building up their lessons so that everyone can participate and cope."

When the informants were asked about feelings before, during and after the training sessions, a few pointed out that they led to joy, smiles, laughter and the production of endorphins. However, some felt nervousness and butterflies in their stomach ahead of the sessions due to the insecurity of being good enough to take part in training sessions with top athletes. Also, a few informants wondered if they would be able to complete the sessions. The nervous feelings, on the other hand, disappeared after warming up when they had become comfortable in the training situation.

"I came out of the dance class buzzing and having had a lot of fun. It was so different that I had endorphins for days. It was a lot of fun, and it lasted a long time."

"You get happy and get endorphins, get really happy, only positive feelings. Yoga gives a good feeling and has a calm and relaxing effect."

"Lots of laughter in dance class. Butterflies-in-the-stomach feelings before the session. Excited. Jumpy. Fortunately, focus took over for the nerves."

The pre-session emotions were replaced with focus, joy expressed through smiles and laughter, but some frustrations in situations with difficult exercises. Nevertheless, the feelings

were described differently depending on the type of session. The aerobics and dance sessions were characterized by positive emotions such as joy, happiness, euphoria and a good mood. The employees also felt energetic, more exuberant and very happy after the sessions. The yoga session, on the other hand, was characterized by triggering a relaxed feeling in the body, joy and general calmness. The differences in experienced feelings were explained by the variations in the tempo of the music, the content and intensity of the session. After the aerobics and dance sessions, emotions such as joy, ecstasy, pride, satisfaction, a good atmosphere in the groups, and sensed togetherness were reported. The yoga session was also characterized by joy, satisfaction, a good atmosphere and togetherness afterwards.

"Dancing makes me very happy, I get a lot of energy from it. I become happier and more energetic from sessions with a bit of speed, while I become more tired and satisfied after a calmer training session. I don't feel happy and energetic in the same way after yoga."
"Laughter and smile. Afterwards, I got a very good feeling, and I did a good job and I get my body going."

Almost all the informants believed that the training sessions with top athletes had a positive effect on job satisfaction. Several pointed out that the good atmosphere and the positive feelings gained after the sessions were conveyed back to the work office. The feelings also spread to those who had not taken part in the training sessions. The informants claimed that the positive feelings led to an increase in job efficiency leading to profitability. Some also mentioned that their well-being was positively affected, and thus, it was more pleasant to be at work afterwards. Others underscored the unity they established with their colleagues during the training sessions, leading to increased job satisfaction.

When asked the informants about the possible impact on mental health, several answered that the training sessions with the top athletes had a positive effect. They knew they were doing something healthy for themselves and their bodies, which positively affected mental and physical health. Getting to know colleagues in a different way and in a non-work context was also stressed as a positive aspect of the training sessions, which could have a positive effect on mental health. They did something fun together, and the socialization made them feel lighter mentally.

"Yes, I would probably say that I smile a lot more, joke and fool around and make things a little easier afterwards. Things become less problematic, and I become more solution-oriented. This also means that you are better equipped to take on new things and challenges afterwards."

"It's clear that it's nice to go to work, but it's extra nice when you can also have a break with a training session together."

"Suddenly, I was standing in the kitchen and demonstrating dance steps to the others. Everyone in the office realized that we were high on endorphins, and I think that rubs off on the rest."

"I think it is connected with mental well-being, because when you have exercised and moved, it will be more pleasant at work, you feel better and fresher."

Several informants claimed that they had a higher tolerance for work-related stress when they exercised regularly, and all managed to release worries and stress during the training sessions with the top athletes. This emotional release was explained by the attention and focus on what happened in the training session.

"I didn't think about work and stress while I was training, I focused on the session."

“I didn't think about work and stress at all. I was just focusing on what we were doing.”

It emerged from the in-depth interviews that the training sessions with top athletes could affect the relationships between employees in the organizations, as they could become more acquainted in other arenas than just in a real work situation. The employees may get to know each other privately in a setting that is not as serious as work. Such contexts allow employees to see different sides of each other and meet employees that they otherwise would not meet. Also, importantly, in the training sessions, all the employees were equal, regardless of their position in the organization. According to the informants, improved relationships and closer contact between employees could also lead to a shorter way to contact colleagues in a work situation, and positively affect cooperation. Informants' belief in improved employee relationships taking part in top athlete-run training sessions would lead to more joy at work as friendships would be established in an informal context.

"I would definitely say that the relationships are strengthened because you meet in a non-work-related arena. We have the training session together, so we have more to talk about, and we see each other from other angles. Also, we meet people we do not work with or know. If someone is insecure with employees with higher positions, in such a session we are equal."

"We get a little closer to each other, it will be easier to ask about things because we become closer and are less serious together, due to, for example, fun dancing sessions."

"When you have trained and hung out together, you have another social arena that makes it easier to talk together at work too."

"It's important that the instructor can help create relationships. I didn't know the people. Now, I have got something to talk to them about afterwards. I'm new to the organization, so it was nice to get better relationships with colleagues I don't see very often."

Discussion

As Figure shows, the top athletes' positive characteristics and capabilities seem to lead a number of individual and group benefits. This study reveals that the positive emotions triggered by joint employee physical exercise, socialization, smiling and laughing due to the production of dopamine (Winter et al., 2007) and endorphins (Gray, Parkinson & Dunbar, 2015) can be categorized in three (pre-feelings, during, and post-feelings). Also, in line with theory, these sessions provide social and health benefits, especially relationship building and stress resilience (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Gray, Parkinson & Dunbar, 2015; Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). New to the theory in particular, is that this study indicates clearly that such trainings sessions with top athletes will at the end influence positively joy at work, colleague co-operation and job satisfaction.

Please place Figure 1 here.

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Figure 1. Benefits gained by training with top athletes

