

# The profile of the sports manager between training misunderstandings and impact on internal stakeholders

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**Purpose:** This study aims to understand internal stakeholders' perceptions of the new legislative provisions introduced in Italy regarding the professional figure of the sports manager; and to evaluate their understanding and the concrete application of these provisions.

**Methods:** A questionnaire was administered to 60 presidents and managers of sports associations and clubs in the province of Salerno. The questions seek to probe stakeholders' perceptions on the liking, appropriateness, and usefulness of sports manager. The validity and reliability of the questions were calculated. A chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) analysis was performed to check for significant differences in perception.

**Results:** From the results, it was possible to appreciate a discordance of opinions between the stakeholders. Differences in perception emerged concerning the conviction that this professional figure should be integrated within the sports organization chart ( $\chi^2 = 7.84$ ;  $P = .001$ ), for the contribution that the manager can make in terms of improvement to the sports company ( $\chi^2 = 7.84$ ;  $P = .001$ ) and for the most appropriate training path for exercising this profession ( $\chi^2 = 7.76$ ;  $P = .001$ ).

**Conclusions:** The perceptual contradictions found in the stakeholders' answers show how the complexity of the recent regulatory provisions and the assumed equivalences to the title of sports manager have generated additional confusion compared to the ordinary one.

**Keywords:** exercise and sport sciences, manager, sports law, professional sport profile

## Introduction

In Italy, the 2021 sports reform<sup>1</sup> came to recognise, through a state decree, specific figures of workers who gravitate towards sport and who have long fought for full recognition of the professional nature of the activities they perform. Reference is made to sport sciences graduates, who, due to the specific qualification obtained, the skills acquired during their studies and the specific tasks assigned to them by the regulations, will play a key role in protecting the health of individuals, athletes and sportsmen and women. The regulation of the four professional figures, which operate in different fields, is set out in article 41 of Legislative Decree No. 36 of 28 February 2021.<sup>2</sup> These include the figure of the sports manager. Paragraph 5 of this article specifies that the purpose of this professional activity is: (a) the planning and management of sports facilities; (b) the conduction and management of public and private facilities where sporting activities take place; (c) the organisation, as an expert and consultant, of sporting events and shows, including recreational and leisure events. However, it must be emphasised that the reform implemented by the delegated legislator began some time ago and, not without great effort, has led to the enhancement of a figure that had not been given adequate importance in the past.<sup>3</sup> A first relevant regulatory intervention is found in Legislative Decree (d.lgs.) No. 178 of 8 May 1998, entitled "Transformation of the Higher Institutes of Physical Education (ISEF) and establishment of the faculty and degree course in sport sciences".<sup>4</sup>

This measure abolishes the ISEF and, at the same time, establishes

degree courses in exercise and sport sciences and their faculty. These courses of study, as stipulated in Article 2, paragraph 2 of the legislative decree, are aimed at the acquisition of "adequate knowledge of cultural, scientific and professional methods and content in the following areas": (a) *teaching-educational*, aimed at teaching in schools of all levels; (b) *prevention and adapted physical education*, aimed at subjects of different ages and disabled subjects; (c) *technical-sports*, aimed at training in the various disciplines; (d) *managerial*, aimed at the organisation and management of sports activities and facilities. A precise identity and dignity were conferred on studies in exercise and sport sciences field, relocated within the university sphere, also to encourage an osmosis phenomenon between research and teaching. This d.lgs. allowed the creation of three academic scientific disciplines (ASD) titled "*physical training and methodology*" (subsequently code M-EDF/01), "*sport sciences and methodology*" (subsequently code M-EDF/02) and "*science of the organisation and management of sports facilities*". However, until the advent of the 2021 reform, the last-mentioned academic discipline remained unimplemented, maybe, for the already provisions of similar academic disciplines in economical and managerial scientific area. If this ASD had been set up, the development of the field of sport management and sport activity would probably have been at a higher level than at present.

Following the establishment of degree courses, significant legislative proposals were submitted as early as the 15th legislature to regulate the professional figures who, after graduation, would have access to the world of work. Legislative proposal No. 1757, tabled on 3 October 2006, and legislative

proposal No. 2228, tabled on 7 February 2007, aimed to regulate the “professional figures in physical activity and sports”. The aim was to valorise the figures of sport sciences graduates to ensure that sportspeople exercise their activities correctly. Legislative proposal No. 1757 ambitiously aimed at the introduction, by regional law, of special registers, the core of the innovative scope of the reform. It was intended to guarantee the technical preparation of operators, making them part of the so-called regulated professions. Proposal No. 2228, on the other hand, dispenses with the establishment of registers and merely stipulates the requirement of a degree in exercise and sport sciences to work as a professional in physical and sporting activities. These legislative proposals, in any case, were not followed up. There have been many instances aimed at recognising the professional dignity of exercise and sport sciences graduates; at the same time, they have never fully asserted themselves. The reason for this is to be found in the desire of specific professional categories not to see their prerogatives violated, a situation that, over time, has prevented the growth and professional recognition of sport sciences graduates.<sup>5</sup>

The category of sport sciences graduates, by the lack of national legislation outlining their traits clearly and unambiguously, was organised in associative form according to the modalities indicated by Law No. 4 of 14 January 2013, dedicated to the so-called unregulated professions.<sup>6</sup> These professionals, therefore, had the choice of either accrediting themselves on the market in compliance with the parameters set by the associations to which they belonged, obtaining the relevant recognitions, or carrying out their activity regardless of the certifications. Finally, dedicated legislation has been provided for sport sciences graduates with Legislative Decree 36/2021. However, some aspects of this legislation are unclear, and it may be difficult to understand the logic of some choices. Some critical issues also emerge for the figure of the sports manager.<sup>7</sup> As with the sports kinesiologist, the figure of the sports manager also faces competition from sports managers of specific disciplines trained within the institutionalised sports system through the regional sports schools under the Italian National Olympic Committee, with specific training courses organised by the individual sports federations. For master’s degree graduates in sport management, an employment uncertainty could arise since the sports system could prefer those who have been formed internally through the training courses provided.

In the face of these critical issues, this study aims to understand the perception of the stakeholders regarding the new professional figure of the sports manager. Basically, the aim is to assess the impact, i.e., the effects of the reform, by identifying its success and failure factors. The effects are assessed about the results

that the policy has set out to achieve and the factors that have contributed to its success or failure, also with a view to possible corrective action for the launch of new policies, contributing to the action that the policy-maker conducts.

## Method

### Study participants

The study was conducted through an online questionnaire addressed to a sample of 60 figures (33 male, 27 females; average age: 32±8 years) operating within sports clubs and associations in the province of Salerno in southern Italy, who are present in the management organization chart. These are presidents and sports directors. The numerosity and significant representativeness of the sample at the territorial level make it suitable for professional and scientific discussion. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Anonymity was guaranteed to each individual and full and honest information about the content, purpose and process of the study was provided in a comprehensible way.

### Data Collection

Data collection was carried out considering the methodological implications and the available economic and human resources. On this basis, it was decided to administer a questionnaire, the design of which was based on the conceptual dimensions and related indicators identified during the definition of the study objective. Some studies in the literature have demonstrated the validity of the questionnaire in detecting stakeholders’ perceptions.<sup>8,9</sup>

### Design

In this study, construct validity and content validity were assessed.<sup>10</sup> Construct validity refers to the conciseness of items in terms of clarity, brevity, and completeness.<sup>11</sup> Content validity refers to the degree to which the items reflect all aspects of the construct and is based on the judgement of a group of experts in a specific area of interest.<sup>12</sup> The questionnaire was revised by two study groups to ensure these two types of validity. The first group consisted of survey experts who adapted the structure of the questionnaire as they saw fit. The second group consisted of sports management experts who assessed whether the questions correctly covered the topic. Items with a content validity index (CVI) greater than 0.78 were included in the final questionnaire. By administering the questionnaire to the stakeholders, it was possible to understand their perceptions of the usefulness and scientific nature of the sports manager. The questionnaire, consisting of 10 closed-ended items, is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Questionnaire administered to the stakeholders.

Q1	Which of the following categories do you belong to?
	(a) Entrepreneur
	(b) Freelancer
	(c) Employee
	(d) Student

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Q2	Which professional figures currently make up the organisation chart of your sports club? (Multiple answers possible)
	(a) President (b) Sports Director (c) Team manager (d) Secretary
Q3	What is the educational qualification of these professionals in the organisation chart?
	(a) Certificate of secondary education (b) High school diploma (c) Bachelor's/master's degree (d) Qualification obtained from a sports federation
Q4	Are you aware of the professional figure of the sports manager, defined in the Sports Reform Act of 28 February 2021?
	(a) Yes (b) No (c) Yes, but not in detail (d) I don't know
Q5	Are you in favour of integrating this professional figure into the organisation chart of your sports club?
	(a) Extremely convinced (b) Partially convinced (c) Not convinced in part (d) Not at all convinced
Q6	Do you think that this figure can bring improvements to the organisation, management and operation of the activities implemented by your sports club or company?
	(a) Extremely convinced (b) Partially convinced (c) Not at all convinced (d) Needs a study to verify it
Q7	What do you think is the most appropriate educational pathway to become a sports manager?
	(a) Bachelor's degree in legal services (L-14) (b) Master's degree in sports management (LM-47) (c) Master's degree in business economics (LM-77) (d) Register for the appropriate course at the sports federation of interest
Q8	Do you think there are differences between the role profiles of sports managers of associations belonging to different sports federations?
	(a) Extremely convinced (b) Partially convinced (c) Not at all convinced (d) Needs a study to verify it

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Q9	Do you think there are gender differences in being a sports manager?
	(a) Extremely convinced
	(b) Partially convinced
	(c) Not at all convinced
	(d) Needs a study to verify it
Q10	What is the main skill (or ability) that a sports manager should have to be at his best in his profession?
	(a) Leadership
	(b) Problem solving
	(c) Communication skills
	(d) Conflict management and resolution

### Reliability Procedure

Reliability is the ability to reproduce a result consistently across time and space or from different observers.<sup>10</sup> The reliability criteria calculated in this study were stability, which measures how similar the results measured at two different points in time are through the test–retest with a sample of at least 50 subjects and the calculation of the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), and internal consistency, which shows whether all items of an instrument measure the same characteristic through Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficient.<sup>13-14</sup>

### Statistical Analysis

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed through Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  and the associated 95% confidence intervals (CI). A Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of 1 indicates perfect reliability, while a cut-off of .70 indicates acceptable internal consistency.<sup>15</sup> Then, the test–retest reliability was assessed by administering the questionnaire after one month to a sub-sample of 50

presidents who agreed to be contacted again about the study. The ICC was interpreted using the criteria suggested by Portney and Watkins as poor reliability (ICC  $\leq$  .50), moderate reliability (ICC .50–.75), good reliability (ICC .75–.90), and excellent reliability (ICC  $\geq$  .90).<sup>16</sup>

A Chi-Square Test ( $\chi^2$ ) was performed to check for significant differences in stakeholders’ perceptions. Significance was set at  $P \leq .05$ . Data analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Science software (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 25.0, IBM, SPSS Inc., Armonk, NY, USA).

## Results

### Data Quality Check

The internal consistency of the survey was excellent (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficient [95% CI] .92 [.89–.94];  $P \leq .05$ ). The test–retest reliability of the survey ranged from moderate to excellent. A detailed description is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Test re-test reliability.

Variable	ICC (95%CI)	P
Q1	.95 (.92–.97)	.001
Q2	.96 (.93–.97)	.001
Q3	.66 (.41–.81)	.001
Q4	.97 (.96–.98)	.001
Q5	.91 (.85–.95)	.001
Q6	.93 (.88–.96)	.001
Q7	.91 (.84–.95)	.001
Q8	.86 (.74–.92)	.001
Q9	.97 (.95–.98)	.001
Q10	.87 (.78–.92)	.001

### Chi-Square Associations

The first significant difference in perception among the stakeholders emerged between question 4 and question 5 ( $\chi^2 = 7.84$ ;  $P = .001$ ). Those who indicated that they were aware of the professional figure of the sports manager (56.7%) were convinced of the integration of this professional figure within the sports organisation chart (40%). Those who do not know the sports manager in detail (36.7%) are not convinced of integrating him into their organisation chart (43.3%). A second difference in perception emerges between question 4 and question 6 ( $\chi^2 = 7.84$ ;  $P = .001$ ). The stakeholders who are aware of the

figure of the sports manager (56.7%) are convinced that the sports manager can bring improvements to the sports company (46.7%). Conversely, those who do not know him in detail (36.7%) are partially convinced of the positive contribution of the sports manager (33.3%). A third difference in perception emerges between question 4 and question 7 ( $\chi^2 = 7.76$ ;  $P = .001$ ). Stakeholders who are aware of the figure of the sports manager identify the master’s degree course in sports management as the most suitable training course for exercising this profession. On the other hand, those who do not know this new professional figure in detail identify the training courses organised by

sports federations as the most appropriate training pathway for exercising this profession. A detailed description is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Chi-Square Associations.

		Q5. Are you in favour of integrating this professional figure into the organisation chart of your sports club?			$\chi^2$	<i>P</i>
		Extremely convinced	Partially convinced	Not convinced in part		
Q4. Are you aware of the professional figure of the sports manager, defined in the Sports Reform Act of 28 February 2021?	Yes	22	10	2	7.84	.001
	No	0	0	2		
	Yes, but not in detail	0	16	6		
	I don't know	2	0	0		
		Q6. Do you think that this figure can bring improvements to the organisation, management and operation of the activities implemented by your sports club or company?			$\chi^2$	<i>P</i>
		Extremely convinced	Partially convinced	Not convinced in part		
Q4. Are you aware of the professional figure of the sports manager, defined in the Sports Reform Act of 28 February 2021	Yes	24	8	2	7.84	.001
	No	0	0	2		
	Yes, but not in detail	2	12	8		
	I don't know	2	0	0		
		Q7. What do you think is the most appropriate educational pathway to become a sports manager?			$\chi^2$	<i>P</i>
		LM-47	LM-77	Course of the sports federation		
Q4. Are you aware of the professional figure of the sports manager, defined in the Sports Reform Act of 28 February 2021?	Yes	28	2	4	7.76	.001
	No	2	0	0		
	Yes, but not in detail	6	4	12		
	I don't know	2	0	0		

## Discussion

What emerges from the results is that while the stakeholders are aware of the professional figure of the sports manager, for 60% of the sample, this profile within their company organigramme could be seen as a heavy economic cost burden by the operators. The presence of an additional professional might represent a significant cost for the employer, which is why, if there is no sanctioned obligation in place, it is easy to see how it will be difficult for the professionals involved to obtain an employment contract.<sup>17,18</sup> The sports manager could face competition from managers of specific disciplines formed within the specialised courses programme organised by the individual sports federations of the Italian National Olympic Committee.<sup>19</sup> Although most stakeholders recognise the master's degree in sports management as the most appropriate training pathway to exercise this profession, the sports system, as can be seen from the answers provided, continues to prefer those formed internally, a further reason that will presumably lead sports managers to suffer serious job insecurity. On the other hand, it is the same legislative decree no. 36 of 2021, in paragraph 6, Article 41 refers to possible equivalences to exercise the profession.<sup>20</sup> Equivalences between the sports federations' training courses and university courses would be difficult to achieve because these are determined according to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) scheme that stratifies official qualifications.

According to this scheme, a bachelor's degree is level 6 and a master's degree level 7, whereas technical specialisation certificates issued by national sports federations (NSF) are level 4 and, therefore, cannot be made equivalent.<sup>21</sup> The study results show that little attention has been paid to the legislation introducing this new professional figure. It will be necessary to review the discipline concerning the sports manager, a profile that has been considerably penalised by what has been outlined.

## Conclusions

Some differences in the stakeholders' perceptions regarding the professional figure of the sports manager emerge. The results show that in Italy, the managerial roles within sports clubs are not particularly specialised, often even in large clubs with many members. The specific environment of the sports society and the procedures used for financing are mostly related to a value orientation influenced more by the participative value of associationism than by the objective of producing quality services.<sup>22</sup> Sports managers contribute, in varying proportions, time and financial resources, with still insufficient forms of remuneration. In order to promote the development of this professional figure, further studies are needed that integrate stakeholders' perceptions with the results of analyses on the development of the sector.

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## Ethical Committee approval

The use of these data did not require approval from an accredited ethics committee, as they are not covered by data protection principles, i.e., they are non-identifiable, anonymous data collected through an anonymous questionnaire. In addition, based on Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council on 27 April 2016 on the protection of individuals concerning the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data (which entered into force on 25 May 2016 and has been compulsory since 25 May 2018), data protection principles do not need to be applied to anonymous information (i.e., information related to an identifiable natural person, nor to data of a subject that is not, or is no longer, identifiable). Consequently, the Regulation does not affect the processing of our information. Even for statistical or research purposes, its use does not require the approval of an accredited ethics committee.

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## Author-s contribution in according to ICMJE

Giovanni Esposito, PhD student, made substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work; the acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data for the work; drafting and revising the work critically and to the final approval for the version to be published. He agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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