

# INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF SERVICES MANAGEMENT

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## **An investigation of human resource empowerment in municipal sport organizations**

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### **Abstract**

The primary purposes of this study were to investigate: (a) the extent to which human resource empowerment is applied to Greek Municipal sport organizations, and (b) the correlation between human resource empowerment and organizational performance of Greek Municipal sport organizations. The study was a quantitative design using descriptive statistics, and Spearman correlation, to examine the purpose of the study. A sample of 120 directors of 30 Greek Municipal sport organizations in the region of Peloponnese was surveyed using a questionnaire. The results of the particular study indicated that the human resource empowerment process is applied to a large extent by Greek Municipal sport Organizations. Also, the present study supported that significant and positive correlations were found between human resource empowerment and organizational performance of Municipal sport organizations. This study is useful in extending the concept of human resource empowerment to sport sector.

**Keywords:** Human resource empowerment, organizational performance, Municipal sport organizations

## Introduction

Sport sector is faced a number of challenges (Slack, 1997) because of the rapid changes in the economic environment, increasing competition and the necessity for more knowledgeable staff (Slack, 1997; Gibb, 2000b; Papaioannou, 2009). This fact has led sport organizations on the one hand to transform significantly their attitude towards Human Resources Management, and on the other hand to look for methods of improving their service quality (Yee, Yeung & Cheng, 2008).

Municipalities are officially recognized as sport service providers. According to the literature municipal sports organizations are responsible for promoting participation in a variety of sports within their departments and local communities (Mafini, Surujlal & Dhurup, 2011; Mafini, Surujlal, & Dhurup, 2013). This means that municipal sports employees are valuable to any municipality and their needs must be met by the organization (Mafini et al., 2013). The organization has the responsibility to establish a work climate which encourages the development of employees to act in empowered ways. Moreover, the organization is responsible for removing barriers that control the ability of staff to act in empowered ways (Armache, 2013).

The effective human resource management can promote the work force behavior that contributes to the achievement of the strategic goals in municipal sport organizations (Huang, 2001; Papaioannou, 2009). A number of authors consider that in a competitive and boisterous environment in which organizations must be not only faster and leaner but also more efficient and more profitable as well as they must provide better quality service, an empowered service workforce is believed to be strictly necessary (Bowen & Lawer, 2006; Fulford & Enz, 1995; Bowen & Lawler, 1995; Papaioannou, 2009). Due to the above mentioned human resource empowerment in the specific working and social environment of each organization, has greater importance than the management of other resources and requires meticulous attention (Papaioannou, 2009).

Human resource empowerment has been defined “as a means to allow employees to take decisions on their own and take responsibility for their actions” (Kriemadis & Papaioannou, 2006 p. 117). Such an approach may facilitate both the sustainability as well as the competitiveness of municipal sport organizations (Papaioannou, 2009; Mafini, Surujlal & Dhurup, 2011; Mafini, Surujlal, & Dhurup, 2013). According to the literature, a topic that remains unresolved is the extent to which the several methods and techniques of human resource management have

diverse influence on organizational efficacy that apart from financial performance, includes the successful application of organizational strategy and the accomplishment of strategic goals (Ferris, Hochwarter, Buckley, Harrell-Cook, & Frink 1999; Papaioannou, 2009).

Empirical research on human resource empowerment and organizational performance has been conducted within the sport sector, and particularly in football clubs, in sport federations, in fitness clubs and in Municipal Sport Organizations (Kriemadis & Papaioannou, 2006; Papaioannou, Kriemadis, Alexopoulos, Vrontou, & Kartakoullis, 2009; Papaioannou, Kriemadis, Leivadi, Kourtesoulou, Alexopoulos, & Vrontou, 2010; Papaioannou, Vamvoukaki, Kriemadis, Vrontou & Kourtesoulou 2011; Papaioannou, Kriemadis, Alexopoulos, & Vrontou, 2012a; Papaioannou, Paschalidis, Kriemadis, Kourtesopoulou, & Terzoudis 2012b). Nevertheless, research on the topic of human resource empowerment in the Municipal sport organizations is still limited.

The purpose of the current study was (1) to ascertain the extent to which human resource empowerment is applied to Municipal sport organizations and (2) to examine the correlation between the human resource empowerment and organizational performance of Municipal sport organizations.

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. To what extent is the human resource empowerment process being used in Greek Municipal sport organizations?
2. Is there a relationship between human resource empowerment and organizational performance of Greek Municipal sport organizations?

### **Literature review**

Research has demonstrated that there are efficacious practices for human resource empowerment which can be implemented by the sport sector so that its goals are realized and its further improvement and sustainability is assured. The following methods are essential for the achievement of human resource empowerment: (1) “organizational culture”, (2) “vision statements”, (3) “organizational values”, (4) “teamwork”, (5) “the role of manager – leadership”, (6) “devolving responsibility – accountability”, (7) “information sharing”, (8) “continuous training”, (9) “appraisal rewards”, (10) “goal setting”, and (11) “performance appraisal process” (Kriemadis & Papaioannou, 2006, p. 119).

Human resource empowerment constitutes a significant managerial tool that is applied in business sector, public sector as well as in service organizations such as: schools, universities, banks, medical centers, hospitals, restaurants, hotels, manufacturing organizations, sport and leisure organizations. The most important benefits regarding the application of human resource empowerment include: (a) increased productivity, (b) increased organizational performance, (c) increased service quality and customer satisfaction, (d) increased employee loyalty, (e) increased employee commitment, (f) increased organizational commitment, (g) increased job satisfaction, (h) increased employees' motivation and effectiveness, and (i) increased trust among supervisor-employees and work units (Papaioannou, 2009).

Regarding human resource empowerment in the sport sector a study placed under investigation the extent to which human resource empowerment is implemented in Greek Football Clubs on a professional level and the role that human resource empowerment plays on performance. The football clubs were divided into two groups according to their budgets: 1) "wealthy football clubs" and 2) "less wealthy football clubs". The results showed that human resource empowerment was used identically in both cases. The main difference was that managerial style of human resource empowerment was different. In "less wealthy football clubs" directors used not only "more empowering and less controlling style of management" and "controlling style of management", but also "totally empowering style of management", in comparison with "wealthy football clubs". Also, the findings of the research pointed out that human resource empowerment was strongly and positively correlated with the performance indicators of less "wealthy football clubs" (Papaioannou et al., 2009).

Furthermore, in another study, on the one hand was investigated the extent to which human resource empowerment was implemented to the divided Greek Sport Federations as shown by one variable (Sport Federations size: number of active clubs) and on the other hand was investigated if differences existed among the Greek Sport Federations (large, medium sized and small) as shown by one variable (number of active clubs) and the key factors of human resource empowerment via a survey instrument (Papaioannou et al., 2010). The results of the study showed that Medium-sized federations were more likely to apply human resource empowerment to a greater extent than large and small ones. The findings of the study also showed that

the most significant constraint to human resource empowerment was “controlling style” of management. (Papaioannou et al., 2010).

Moreover, the extent to which human resource empowerment is used to Greek fitness clubs, and the association between human resource empowerment and organizational performance (profit, ROI, sales volume and market share) of Greek fitness clubs was examined, via a questionnaire. The results pointed out that the majority of the directors of fitness clubs used empowerment in a great extent. Moreover, there were found significant and positive correlations between the human resource empowerment and organizational performance of fitness clubs (Papapioannou et al., 2011).

Accordingly, in an additional study was investigated the relationship between human resource empowerment and organizational performance in municipal sport organizations in the region of Attica. The results pointed out that two third of the directors of Municipal sport organizations used empowerment to a great extent. Also the results demonstrated that human resource empowerment influences positively the performance of Municipal sport organizations (perceived service quality, participants' satisfaction) (Papaioannou, Paschalidis, Kriemadis, Kourtesopoulou, & Terzoudis 2012b).

Moreover, in a more exploratory study was investigated the extent to which human resource empowerment is implemented to Greek sport federations, according to their organizational performance (as shown by two variables: government funding and Olympic distinctions). The results of this study showed that there were significant differences in the application of human resource empowerment among the aforementioned federations. Furthermore, the findings of the study showed that the directors of aforementioned sport federations in Greece should empower employees through their participation in planning process. Also, they should take into account that the delegation of decision authority to the employees is a fundamental characteristic of empowerment, thus, they should share decision-making power, in order to have more free time to think strategically and innovatively about how to develop further their organization (Papaioannou et al., 2012a).

Also, in another study was examined the extent to which the City Council of Nairobi (CCN) had implemented employee empowerment practices and the association between employee empowerment and the performance of the (CCN). The study used both primary and secondary data. The findings of this study showed that

employees are empowered to a large extent. Also, the study pointed out that there is a strong and positive relationship between employee empowerment and performance of the (CCN). Finally the researchers argued that employee empowerment had a great and positive impact on the performance of the (CCN) (Nzuve & Bakari, 2012).

Similarly, Mafini , Surujlal, and Dhurup, (2013) examined the association between job satisfaction and loyalty among municipal sports officers, via a questionnaire. The results revealed that significant relationships were found between the job loyalty of municipal sport officers and five job satisfaction factors namely working conditions, ability utilization, teamwork, creativity and autonomy. The researchers claimed that municipalities should emphasize on upgrading the job loyalty of their sport officers by positively modifying the five abovementioned job satisfaction factors. This will enable municipalities to meet successfully the increased demand for sport services within their respective communities (Mafini , Surujlal, & Dhurup, 2013).

## **Research Methods**

### **Sampling**

The research was addressed to all Municipal sport organizations in the region of Peloponnese (38 Municipal sport organizations, which recognized by Decentralized Administration of Peloponnese, Western Greece and the Ionian) and involved 152 experienced directors who were the most knowledgeable regarding personnel management issues. Responses were received from 120 directors of 30 Municipal sport organizations with a 76% response rate. According to the findings of this research, 67 (55.8 %) were males and 53 (44.2 %) of the participants were females with a mean age of 36 (sd = 12); the educational level of the participants was grouped into three categories: 23 (19.2 %) had elementary/high school education, 73 (60.8 %) had university level education and 24 (20 %) had post-graduate level education. 54 (45 %) were managerial directors and 66 (55 %) were technical directors. All had full-time working experience.

### **Questionnaire**

A questionnaire developed by Vogt and Murrell (1990) focused on the issue of human resource empowerment, was modified and simplified by Kriemadis (2011) and Papaioannou (2011). The modified questionnaire consisted of 30 questions related to human resource empowerment, demographic characteristics of the respondents and

their perceptions related to the performance of the Municipal sport organizations. This particular part provided information on how directors assess themselves in relation to the human resource empowerment and included the following six key factors of human resource empowerment:

- “management-information/communication system skills”
- “decision-making and action-taking skills”
- “project-planning, organising, and system-integration skills”
- “system-evaluation and internal-control skills”
- “leadership, motivation, and reward-systems skills”
- “selection, placement, and development of people skills”.

The questions were answered using a five-point Likert scale. Each point of the scale symbolized different managerial styles (developing from the three basic managerial styles, which are the “empowering style of management”, the “middle-ground style of management”, and the “controlling style of management”) and described the respondent’s behaviour and actions. In the first case (“empowering style of management”) the manager generates and shares power. In the second case (“middle-ground style of management”) the manager adds together the two styles of controlling and empowering equally and in the third case (“controlling style of management”), the manager is concerned with control and rarely shares, generates or empowers subordinates. The reliability of the scale was found to be:  $\alpha = .89$ .

The content validity of the questionnaire was determined by a panel of experts which consisted of 6 academics and practitioners in the fields of human resource management, sport professionals, management research, and sport management.

In the particular study the business performance of Municipal sport organizations was rated by a subjective method that is based on managerial perceptions of the business performance. In such a case, managers are needed to evaluate the performance of their sport business according to their expectations relative to the following criteria: well executed budget, perceived service quality, participants’ satisfaction and employees’ satisfaction on a five-point Likert scale. The above criteria were adapted from the literature (Papaioannou et al., 2012b). Moreover, the questionnaire included three closed questions related to the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The questions referred to participants’ gender, educational background and job title.



## **Procedure**

The data collection was accomplished through questionnaires. The questionnaires were completed at each Municipal sport organization's premises, after their agreement, via appointments that were arranged by phone. Information was given to the directors of the foresaid Municipal sport organizations about the research and their consent was requested in order to realize the questionnaire. After their consent was given, appointments were scheduled at specific dates with each and every one of the directors of Municipal sport organizations, in order to complete the questionnaire. Clarifications were given to subjects when asked for.

## **Data analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to answer the first research question, while Spearman correlation was performed to answer the second research question and especially the relationship between the human resource empowerment and organizational performance of Municipal sport organizations, using SPSS software (version 22).

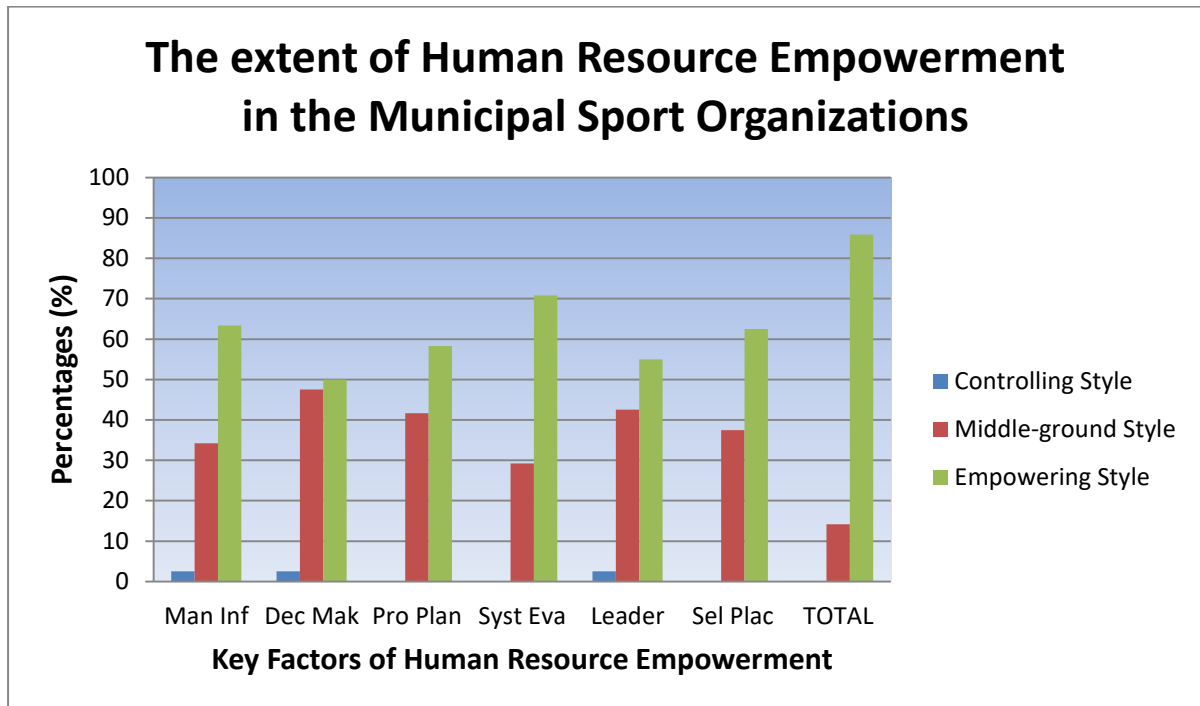
## **Results**

From the analysis it is shown that the managerial and technical directors of Municipal sport organizations used 85.9% "empowering style" and 14.1% "middle-ground style" (adds together the two styles of controlling and empowering equally) in the key factor of human resource empowerment: "Total for all managerial functions".

Moreover, 70.8% of them used "empowering style", and 29.2% "middle-ground style" in the key factor: "system-evaluation and internal-control skills".

Concerning the key factor "Management – information / communication system skills", the directors used 63.4% "empowering style", 34.2% "middle-ground style" and 2.4% "controlling style". Referring to the key factor: "Selection, placement, and development of people skills", 62.5% of them used "empowering style" and 37.5% "middle-ground style". Furthermore, in the key factor "Project-planning, organizing, and system-integration skills", they used 58.3% "empowering style", and 41.7% "middle-ground style". Also, in the key factor "Leadership, motivation, and reward-systems skills", the directors used 55% "empowering style", 42.5% "middle-ground style" and 2.5% "controlling style". Finally, in the key factor "Decision - making and

action-taking skills”, they used 50% “empowering style”, 47.5% “middle-ground style” and 2.5% “controlling style” (figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The extent of human resource empowerment in the Municipal sport organizations

Also, the results of the study indicated that significant correlations between the key factors of human resource empowerment and organizational performance of Municipal sport organizations were found (Table 1). The results showed that the key factor “Management-information /communication system skills” was correlated significantly and positively with well executed budget ( $r = .231$ ,  $df= 118$ ,  $p=.011$ ). Furthermore, the key factor “Decision - making and action-taking skills” had a significant and positive relationship with service quality ( $r = .316$ ,  $df= 118$ ,  $p=.001$ ). Also, the key factor “Project-planning, organizing, and system-integration skill” was correlated significantly and positively with participants’ satisfaction ( $r = .314$ ,  $df= 118$ ,  $p=.001$ ) and employees’ satisfaction ( $r = .286$ ,  $df= 118$ ,  $p=.002$ ). Moreover, the key factor “Selection, placement, and development of people skills” had a significant and positive relationship with service quality ( $r = .213$ ,  $df= 118$ ,  $p=.020$ ). Finally, the key factor “Total for all managerial functions” was correlated significantly and positively with well executed budget ( $r = .358$ ,  $df= 118$ ,  $p=.001$ ), and participants’ satisfaction ( $r = .200$ ,  $df= 118$ ,  $p=.028$ ). No other significant correlations were found between the key

factors of human resource empowerment and the organizational performance of Municipal sport organizations.

**Table 1.** Significance of relationships between the key factors of human resource empowerment and organizational performance of Municipal sport organizations.

Key Factors of Human Resource Empowerment	Well executed budget	Service quality	Participants' satisfaction	Employees' satisfaction
Management – information/communication on system skills.	.231* (p=.011)	.003 (p=.976)	.075 (p=.415)	-.075 (p=.418)
Decision-making and action-taking skills.	-.066 (p=.476)	.316** (p=.000)	-.084 (p=.362)	.092 (p=.317)
Project-planning, organizing, & system-integration skills.	.164 (p=.073)	.089 (p=.336)	.314** (p=.000)	.286** (p=.000)
System-evaluation and internal-control skills	.161 (p=.080)	.159 (p=.084)	.050 (p=.587)	.091 (p=.322)
Leadership, motivation, and reward-systems skills	.128 (p=.164)	.140 (p=.128)	.105 (p=.254)	.005 (p=.959)
Selection, placement, and development of people skills.	.155 (p=.090)	.213* (p=.020)	-.065 (p=.479)	.096 (p=.299)
Total of all Managerial functions	.358** (p=.000)	.002 (p=.985)	.200** (p=.028)	.135 (p=.143)

\* p<.05, \*\* p<.001

## Discussion

Based on the findings of this study the human resource empowerment process is applied to a large extent by Greek Municipal sport Organizations. Almost, eighty six percent of the directors are using the “empowering style”. This finding is in accordance to the literature in the sport sector (Nzuve & Bakari, 2012; Papaioannou et al., 2012b), and shows that directors applied empowerment to a large extent in the

municipal sport organizations. Concerning the key factor “Management – information /communication system skills”, most of the directors used “empowering style of management”. This signifies that the managerial and technical directors were gathering, analyzing and distributing “sensitive” and “good” information relative to organizational, commercial, financial, and strategic issues which constitute a core element in understanding the significant difficult tasks that the organization faces in today’s boisterous environment. Moreover, they convinced their employees to spend time and energy in order to improve and define the means to better communication techniques which in turn will contribute to the application of empowerment. (Vogt & Murrell, 1990; Papaioannou, 2009).

Referring to the key factor “Decision - making and action-taking skills” the majority of directors used “empowering style of management”. It seems that they had a facilitative role, insuring that decisions are made precisely and performed successfully (Vogt and Murrell, 1990). The “empowering style of management” contains employees’ opinion, effective participation with a sense of “ownership” and creating trust which improves the organizational commitment (Bowen & Lawler, 2006; Papaioannou, 2009).

Concerning the key factor “Project-planning, organizing, and system-integration skills”, most of the directors used “empowering style of management”. Therefore, they applied a participative planning process, where the employees had the opportunity to affect the organizational system, and to recognize that they can do so (Cook, 1994; Papaioannou, 2009).

Regarding to the key factor “System-evaluation and internal-control skills”, most of the directors used “empowering style of management”. Thus, they had the role of evaluator and counselor to help individuals assess themselves and offering appreciation to those who are working hard for the common cause (Vogt & Murrell, 1990; Papaioannou, 2009).

Concerning the key factor “Leadership, motivation, and reward-systems skills” most of them used “empowering style of management”. Therefore, they created a day to day motivational climate of the municipal sport organization in two types: (a) they assure healthy, fairly and safe rewarded conditions of employment, and (b) they create and promote the team work (Vogt & Murrell, 1990; Bowen and Lawler, 2006; Papaioannou, 2009).

Lastly in the key factor “Selection, placement, and development of people skills”, most of the directors used “empowering style of management”. Consequently, the directors spent significant amount of time in order to improve the capacity of individuals, teams and organization to work effectively. The feeling of wellness stemmed from the directors to help the organization to operate successfully by accomplishing the current and future goals. (Vogt & Murrell, 1990; Papaioannou, 2009).

These findings propose that managerial and technical directors have realized the innovative management methods such as team working, delegation of authority, devolving responsibility, performance appraisal process, etc., which are no longer restricted to large companies, since small businesses (such as the Municipal sport organizations) constitute the ideal place for the improvement of human resource management because they usually have flatter hierarchy, direct communication, greater flexibility and clearer impact of each employee on organizational performance (Bacon, Ackers, & Coates, 1996; Papaioannou, 2009).

The results also indicated that human resource empowerment had a positive correlation on organizational performance of the Municipal sport organizations. This result is in agreement with previous studies on human resource empowerment and organizational performance, in sport sector and particularly in football clubs (Papaioannou et al., 2009), in fitness clubs (Papaioannou et al., 2011) and in municipal sport organizations (Nzuve & Bakari, 2012; Papaioannou et al., 2012b) and demonstrates that the level of empowering style which directors applied in Municipal sport organizations is linked to their performance. The present findings support the argument that organizations in nowadays must deliver better service quality in order to be more effective and more sustainable. Therefore, it is vital the presence of an empowered personnel which is capable to accomplish effectively the organizational goals and missions (Huang, 2001).

## **Conclusions**

A total of 30 (76%) of Greek Municipal sport organizations responded to the survey. According to the literature a response rate of 50% or more is generally recognized as a satisfactory response rate in the surveys (Babbie, 2015). Bearing that in mind, it seems that the results of the study could be generalized to the target population (Greek Municipal sport organizations).

Concluding, it is clear from the findings of the research that empowering style is implemented to a large extent by the municipal sport organization. Considering that human resource empowerment contributes in the survival and prosperity of sport organizations, the directors of Municipal sport organizations can be urged to carry it into effect in a greater extent. This could happen by developing an empowering culture which includes the following practices (Vogt & Murrell, 1990; Papaioannou, 2009):

a) Establishment of functional leadership which delegates employees to take on considerable responsibilities and look for constant and gradual improvement.

b) Development of a strategic vision from the bottom up in a participative manner where the vision and the process that produced it, communicated to all members of the organization, giving them an opportunity to be part of an overall plan and the ability to identify their contributions to its achievement.

c) Creation of a top-management team well-grounded in team work skills and values (acceptance of individual differences, trust building, collaborative process of decision making, communication skills, group problem solving skills, and group leadership skills).

d) Development of workforce and support systems that demonstrate correspondence between management behavior and the verbalized belief in people (i.e. fair and competitive reward system that includes all employees in the organization's success, a performance-review process that is consistent and growth oriented, programmes that encourage employee input in the organization, regular organization-effectiveness surveys, a selection and job placement process that allows for self-assertion and identification with the goals and the values of organization).

e) Form participative organization and communication structures by broadening the span of control, installing systematic planning and budgeting programmes, and widening each employee's area of freedom.

The study was demarcated to the Municipal sport organizations. In the particular study the data was collected only from the Municipal sport organizations. Therefore, the generalization of this information to the whole sport sector is not possible. Moreover, the study was demarcated to a questionnaire aimed to collect data concerning human resource empowerment according to Vogt and Murrell (1990). Possible limitations of this research need to be acknowledged as follows: (a) The participant's level of comprehending the terminology of empowerment and (b) The

impartiality, degree of correctness and truthfulness of the participants during the completion of the questionnaire.

Still there is room for further study, therefore follow-up studies should be done to the same population (Municipal sport organizations) in the future to explore probable alterations in the application of the human resource empowerment process. Also, the replication of the particular research should be done, using different measures of performance. For example, a future research may employ the objective way of measuring business performance, which is based on the comparisons of the absolute measures of performance (balance sheets, sales revenue, pre tax profit, etc.).

Further research could also entail assessing the effect of human resource empowerment on consumers' loyalty and satisfaction.

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