

# A negative career shock and career capital: The perspective of sports clubs personnel during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the impact of the COVID-19 career shock to career capital among sports clubs personnel. With this aim, an explanatory mixed-method research was undertaken based on data gathered via a survey among the personnel of sports clubs in Poland ( $N = 226$ ). The quantitative stage of data analysis (a multivariate analysis of covariance) determined the scale of the changes in career capital and its elements (*knowing-how*, *knowing-why*, *knowing-whom*) across different respondent groups, while the subsequent thematic analysis of the data gathered through open questions explored the sources of these changes. The results show that the shock had a positive impact mainly on *knowing-how*, and a lesser one on *knowing-why*, while it was neutral for *knowing-whom*. Nevertheless, there is an important heterogeneity of the experiences among sports club personnel, even when accounting for the differences in the way that COVID-19 impacted their clubs. By exploring the consequences of a career shock to career capital, this study contributes to career construction theory.

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## KEYWORDS

career shock, career competencies, career resources, career development, sports clubs, Poland

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a shock for many organizations and their employees. This is particularly true for sports clubs that have suffered from strict lockdowns – in many countries, sports activities were suspended for a long time, and when they finally resumed, active and passive sports consumption did not return to the previous levels. The suspension of financial flows from consumers, fans, sponsors, and media jeopardised the financial fundamentals of many sports clubs and made their employees face new challenges and hardships, making a potential impact on their careers. In practice and theory however, very little is known about the COVID-19 pandemic's influence on careers in the sports sector.

The existing literature on career shocks (Akkermans et al. 2020) shows that the COVID-19 pandemic may have obvious negative short-term consequences for careers (such as job insecurity, reduced salary, increased stress when tackling professional problems under uncertainty, the emotional impact of social distancing or increased general anxiety about future career paths). It may also have some potential positive effects in the short-term (such as new career competencies, improved employability, or entrepreneurship) that in the longer term may generate valuable career outcomes for the employees themselves and for their organizations. Moreover, the results are expected to vary across different groups of peoples and contexts (e.g. industries). What is less clear in the career literature is the mechanisms through which career shocks in general, and the COVID-19 career shock in particular, interact with personal and contextual dimensions to produce this diversity of potential career outcomes. A possible transmission element may be the individual's career capital which has been found to play an important role in career self-management (Kuijpers – Scheerens 2006) and career success (Colakoglu 2011).

Consequently, the goal of this empirical research was to explore the effects of the COVID-19 career shock on the career capital of sports clubs personnel. In particular, this research set out to answer two research questions: RQ1) What is the scale of the changes in career capital and its constituents among sports club personnel? RQ2) What are the sources of these changes?

With this aim, an explanatory mixed-method research was undertaken based on data gathered from personnel of sports clubs in Poland. Its results contribute to the integration of the concept of a career shock into career construction theory (Savickas 2013). On the practical side, the research improves our understanding of the post-COVID-19 situation in sports clubs as well as in other sectors.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: CAREER SHOCKS AND CAREER CAPITAL

While the early understanding of a career shock in career studies focused on the chance nature of exogenous events influencing individual careers (Betsworth – Hansen 1996; Miller 1983; Roe – Baruch 1967), the modern conceptualisation stresses the importance of an individual's sense making of an event for their career (Akkermans et al. 2018; Lee – Mitchell 1994; Salomone – Slaney 1981; Seibert et al. 2013). The career shock therefore involves both a disruptive event being beyond an individual's control and an individual perception of the event (Akkermans et al. 2021b).

Consequently, the outcomes of a shock depend on the dynamic interplay between the context (e.g., organisation, country, occupation, an family), the nature of the shock (its valence,



frequency, predictability, controllability, duration, and source) and the focal individual's characteristics (e.g., career competencies and resilience, occupational and cultural belonging, life and career stages) (Akkermans et al. 2021b). Thus, the outcomes of the same career event for different persons might be very heterogeneous (Wordsworth – Nilakant 2021). On the other hand, both negative and positive shocks may propel people towards the same decision concerning their careers (Seibert et al. 2013). Moreover, the outcomes of a career shock may differ across time horizons with negative effects in the short run turning into positive ones in the long run (Rummel et al. 2021; Zikic – Richardson 2007).

This complex and dynamic relationship between career shocks and career outcomes has been a subject of some recent conceptual works (Akkermans et al. 2021a) and empirical studies (Blokker et al. 2019; Hofer, Spurk, and Hirschi 2021; Kraimer et al. 2019; Nadvi et al. 2011; Pak et al. 2021; Seibert et al. 2013), some of which in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Akkermans et al. 2020; Hite – McDonald 2020). They have, however, offered only initial and fragmented insights and the understanding of the mechanisms explaining how career shocks impact individual career development is still insufficient (Akkermans et al. 2021b).

Simultaneously, career studies provide extensive knowledge about the role of career competencies in successful career development (Colakoglu 2011; Eby et al. 2003; Van Der Heijde – Van Der Heijden 2006; Kuijpers – Scheerens 2006; De Vos et al. 2011), especially in times of rising frequency of *new careers* which evolve across the organisational and industrial boundaries, bounded largely by individual career competencies and personal employability (Arthur – Rousseau 1996, DeFillippi – Arthur 1994, Sallivand – Baruch 2009). According to DeFillippi and Arthur (1994), career competencies consist of three ways of *knowing* which together make an individual career capital. *Knowing-how* reflects career relevant skills and job-related knowledge, as well as the comprehension needed to perform the tasks required. *Knowing-why* competencies relate to career motivation, personal meaning and identification which allow for self-understanding, adaptation to a changing work environment and exploration of new possibilities in order to achieve occupational or personal objectives related to work (e.g. changing job characteristics or balancing work and private life). Finally, *knowing-whom* refers to contacts and networks – both professional and social – which are useful in career development. Each of the *knowing* competencies support an individual's ability to pursue a subjectively successful career.

The individual ability to self-manage one's career is a distinctive trait of the *new career* concept. In this framework, in line with career construction theory (Savickas 2013), individuals own and craft their careers (as opposed to the concept of *old careers* which were managed mainly by employing organisations). However, according to Akkermans et al. (2018), the focus of contemporary career studies on individual agency and control in career development has somehow overshadowed the role of external events in this process, even though careers are increasingly more volatile and unpredictable because of external sociological, economic and technological changes. Consequently, there is a need to incorporate the concept of career shocks into career construction theory (Akkermans et al. 2021b; Rudolph et al. 2019).

Based on the above calls for a better understanding of the mechanisms explaining how career shocks impact individual career development, this study explores the impact of a career shock to the employees' career capital in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sports industry. The focus of this study is on the way that the career shock impacts directly career capital. This approach differs from the one taken by Blokker et al. (2019) who explored the way that shocks



moderate the impact of career competencies via career success on perceived employability. This study, on the other hand, follows the conceptual perspective of Morgeson et al. (2015) and Akkermans et al. (2018) who argued that negative organisation-related shocks should trigger an interpretative thought process concerning one's career. This may be interpreted as the impact of a career shock to the *knowing-why*. Furthermore, Hite and McDonald (2020) put forward the need for adaptation to the post-COVID-19 ways of working, which implies changes in *knowing-how*. Finally, the nature of the COVID-19 shock itself, which led to important restrictions on of face-to-face contacts and the accelerated digitalisation of individuals' communication, allows to hypothesize changes to *knowing-whom*.

### 3. RESEARCH CONTEXT: POLISH SPORTS CLUBS FACING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In 2020, there were 14,245 sports clubs in Poland with slightly over one million members (Statistics Poland 2021). Most of the members were children and youths (70%), and men (74%). The clubs employed (on paid or voluntary basis) over 55,400 coaching staff (17% women), 2,500 medical and wellness staff (23% women), and 9,600 administrative staff (44% women). Around one third of the coaching staff were employed in football (34%), followed by volleyball (6%), sport shooting (5%), athletics (4%), and swimming (4%).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in mid-March 2020, the Polish government introduced a complete lockdown, including a total interdiction of sporting and recreational activity. This meant the temporary closure of all sports and fitness clubs, swimming pools and other indoor and outdoor sports facilities. In summer, the number of the infected went down and most of the lockdown measures concerning sports were lifted. The sports trainings in both professional and amateur clubs restarted, as did sporting events (with some limits on the number of participants and spectators allowed). When the second COVID-19 wave hit in the autumn, the restrictions were gradually reintroduced, although not to the previous level – this time, sports classes for students, organised sports activities, high performance and professional sports activity, and sporting competitions were for a long time exempted from the restrictions. Even in the short periods of their lockdown, the sports infrastructure remained open for members of the national teams of all Polish sport associations, professional athletes, as well as children and youths practicing sports under an umbrella of the Polish sport associations. The outdoor sporting facilities also remained opened this time. However, spectators were once again banned from live participation in sports events (Ministerstwo Sportu i Turystyki 2020). The lifting of the restrictions started only in May 2021 after the third COVID-19 wave and allowed for an almost complete return to normal activity. In autumn 2021, the fourth COVID-19 wave arrived. This time however, despite the growing number of infections, no important restrictions on sports or other activities were enforced. The new sports normality was only slightly restrained in terms of the number of sports participants relative to the infrastructure area in December 2021, when the country faced the peak of the fourth COVID-19 wave and a perspective of the new, more virulent variant of the virus.

Clearly, the social, economic, psychological and health related effects of the harsh lockdown on sports and general activity during the first COVID-19 wave, as well as the strong social resistance to the restrictions, pushed the government to soften the limitations on sporting



activities in the following waves. The national and regional governments and few national sport federations (mainly the football one) tried to offer some financial support to the sports organisations affected. Nevertheless, the three months of the first lockdown and the limits on the number of sports participants and spectators during the following months had a negative impact on many sports clubs. In 2020, their number was by 13% lower compared to 2018, while the number of the sports clubs members decreased by 11% (Statistics Poland 2021). These developments contrast visibly with the past tendency of regular increases in these indices. Additionally, in 2020, the number of mass sports events was 65% lower compared to 2019. The number of event participants went down by 75% (Statistics Poland 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic made most of the sports clubs experience a sudden disruption to their activity, as well as a loss of income, disorganisation and incertitude. The annulment of many sporting contests combined with a disorganisation of training activities meant a lower quality of sporting performance and a loss of motivation and engagement for many athletes. The sanitary limitations of access to indoor sports infrastructure and the exclusion of some categories of consumers, as well as the fear of COVID-19 infection discouraged both active and passive sports consumption. Consequently, many sports clubs lost their members and revenue sources. Absences among the clubs' staff and athletes due to COVID-19 sickness, isolation or quarantine disorganised the clubs' routine, training and competition cycles. The temporary lockdown of the sporting infrastructure made trainings in some sports impossible, while in other sports the coaches strived to compensate with home online trainings or outdoor activities, although with varying success. In professional sports clubs, athletes returned to regular trainings and competitions earlier, but the absence of spectators in the stadia decreased match day incomes and threatened fan loyalty. The relationships with sponsors were also put at risk as not all promotional obligations contracted by the sponsoring companies could be realised by the clubs. As the pandemic environment became difficult for many actual and potential sponsors and face-to-face meetings were avoided, clubs struggled to develop new sponsorship contracts. The transfer of the clubs' communication with their external and internal stakeholders to online channels was not easy for many of them. The live meetings and interactions during sports events, conferences, and vocational training were limited. International sports projects (sporting contests as well as training and business opportunities) were also restrained and the life of international coaches and athletes got complicated as border crossing became a challenge. Public financial support was not always sufficient or accessible for all. These challenges put club staff under psychological pressure, threatened their income and consequently jeopardised many early and established careers in the sports sector. Some people left the sports clubs for other industries or retired. Those who stayed in underfinanced sports clubs despite all of the hardships, suffered from limited opportunities for paid vocational training, reduced resources for new equipment and poor if any financial bonuses. The sports clubs found it difficult to retain and motivate their personnel, especially freelance workers.

This pessimist picture should, however, be nuanced. Notably, not all sports suffered from the restrictions imposed on indoor activities (e.g. horse riding or running). Some sports clubs relied exclusively on volunteers' part-time work or obtained sufficient public/community support to adapt to the changing conditions. Finally, while many sports clubs registered a loss of interest in their activities (as some athletes were demotivated, children were more engaged in computer games, and adults were striving to balance having a home office with their children's activities), other clubs reported an increase in their membership base (as some people realised



the importance of sports for their well-being and some parents strived to compensate for the online education and home isolation of their children through sports activities). Consequently, the professional experiences among sports clubs' personnel during the 2020/21 pandemic years were quite heterogeneous.

## 4. DATA AND METHODS

The target population of this research was people working for sports clubs (both for-profit and not-for-profit ones, of different legal status, at amateur and professional level) in full-time or part-time jobs, with various forms of contracts, as well as on a voluntary basis, and in various jobs and positions (with the exception of professional athletes). After the pilot version of the survey involving 10 respondents, its final version was distributed electronically in October and November 2021. In this process, convenience sampling was applied. The invitations to participate in the research were sent to the email addresses found mainly on the websites of sports clubs associated with the regional sport federations in Poland or through their Facebook mailing boxes. In total, 5,990 emails were sent, of which 749 turned out not to be active. After the first invitation, a reminder followed two weeks later. This way, 208 responses were collected, resulting in a 4.0% response rate. Additionally, the invitation was published on several social media profiles, including groups active in sports (e.g. publishing job announcements or groups for sports marketing professionals). This way only 23 responses were collected. The initial exploration led to a rejection of five responses as they were not consistent in terms of qualitative and quantitative answers. The final sample consisted of 226 respondents. The respondents were mainly men (68%), under 50 years old (75%). Additionally, 19% of them had been working for the club for less than three years and 37% for more than 10 years. They worked mostly in full-time paid jobs, while 10% of them were volunteers. Their job areas were mainly to do with the management board (37%) and sports department (26%) followed by communication and marketing (15%), and event organisation (12%). Most of the respondents (60%) were either owners or top and higher managers. Their clubs were active altogether in at least 31 sports, mainly football (40%) followed by volleyball (13%), basketball (14%), combat arts (10%), swimming (8%), track and field (8%), handball (7%), horse riding (4%), and fencing (3%). A big fraction of them (43%) competed in the highest division of the national league, while 25% trained athletes for individual competitions. Almost 60% of them were not-for-profit organisations (see details in [Nessel 2022](#)).

Given the nature of the research questions, both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from the sample. The survey included item specific rating questions (concerning the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the respondents' career capital and the situation of their clubs) as well as open-ended questions (asking the respondents to describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on each of their ways of *knowing*) completed with multi-choice questions (about the respondents' and clubs' main characteristics).

The item specific rating questions ("How do you evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your *knowing-how/knowing-why/knowing-whom*/career capital/club's situation) were bipolar, anchored by 1 = "strongly negative," 4 = "neutral" and 7 = "strongly positive", with all ratings points labelled to increase the reliability and criterion validity ([Lau 2018](#)). Item specific questions rather than agree/disagree questions of the Likert-type were chosen as they are



regularly shown to yield estimates of higher reliability and validity (Schaeffer – Dykema 2020). These questions used single item measures, as they were preceded by the open-ended questions (incorporating definitions of the main constructs), therefore the constructs were judged to be doubly concrete in the minds of the respondents (Rossiter 2002).

The answers to the two questions measuring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the situation of the respondents' clubs (in the short- versus long-term) were averaged to indicate the aggregated character of the COVID-19 pandemic's shock to the clubs (Table 1). The internal reliability of the two questions regarding the situation of the club (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ) and that of the three questions related to the different ways of knowing (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.79$ ) was high.

The open questions allowed the respondents to present their subjective experience in lines with a constructivist and narrative perspective of career construction theory (Del Corso – Rehfuß 2011). As the terms *knowing-how/why/whom* have no direct translation in Polish, the constructs had to be translated in a descriptive way which could bias the respondents. On the other hand, the operation served also as a construct explanation which should improve the reliability of the open-ended questions and single item rating ones.

Consequently, the main data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative techniques in a two-stage process guided by an explanatory-sequential approach. In the first stage, a quantitative analysis of the scale of changes in the respondents' career capital during the COVID-19 pandemic was performed. The main part of this stage was an exploration of the role of the respondents' characteristics in the changes of their three ways of *knowing* while controlling for the character of the shock for the club. To this end, an analysis of covariance was applied, specifically a six-way MANCOVA. The normality of the dependent and covariate variables was assessed based on their skewness and kurtosis (Table 1) and the homogeneity of variance of the dependent and covariate variables over all subcategories was evaluated using Leven's tests. Both assumptions for the analysis of covariance were met.

In the second stage of the analysis, the sources of the changes in the career capital elements were explored with the use of thematic analysis (Braun – Clarke 2006) applied to the data gathered in the open questions (15,070 words in total). The multiple reads of the data led to a

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of the ordinal data and correlations

	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. <i>Knowing-how</i>	4.51***	1.34	-0.24	0.29	1						
2. <i>Knowing-why</i>	4.26***	1.47	-0.05	-0.26	0.64	1					
3. <i>Knowing-whom</i>	3.90	1.42	-0.11	-0.19	0.52	0.51	1				
4. Career capital	4.07	1.40	-0.19	-0.39	0.72	0.78	0.70	1			
5. Club shock ST	3.48***	1.36	0.41	-0.05	0.34	0.45	0.41	0.52	1		
6. Club shock LT	3.53***	1.42	0.04	-0.56	0.31	0.41	0.35	0.49	0.79	1	
7. Club shock AV	3.50***	1.31	0.25	-0.24	0.34	0.45	0.40	0.53	0.94	0.95	1

Notes: \*\*\*median different than 4.0 (neutral impact) at  $P < 0.001$ .

Source: author.



refinement of a coding frame (available in [Nessel 2022](#)). Subsequently, to verify the reliability of the analysis, a naïve coder coded the data from randomly selected 75 (33%) respondents (5,525 words, 37%). The Krippendorff's  $\text{cu-}\alpha$  of 0.82 (calculated in ATLAS.ti 9) indicates that the inter-coder agreement of the main themes was substantial and that the author's subjectivity when coding all the data was not an issue. Finally, the relative frequency of the main themes in the whole sample and in the subsamples of interest found in the first, quantitative stage of the analysis, was determined.

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1. Scale of changes in career capital

The initial exploration of the data ([Table 1](#)) shows a neutral impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on career capital ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ,  $P = 0.45$ ). However, behind this aggregated result there is much heterogeneity. First, the COVID-19 pandemic had a positive impact on *knowing-how* ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ,  $P = 0.00$ ) and, to a lesser extent, on *knowing-why* ( $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ,  $P = 0.01$ ). In contrast, it had a negative but non-significant impact on *knowing-whom* ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ,  $P = 0.30$ ). Moreover, all three elements of career capital show a clear dispersion (coefficient of variation in the range 31–36%). All three ways of *knowing*, as well as the aggregated career capital variables have high correlations, with the highest one between *knowing-why* and career capital (Person's  $r = 0.78$ ). On the other hand, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sports clubs was slightly negative ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). The shock was of a comparable scale for both for-profit and not-for-profit clubs (joint-stock company:  $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ; limited company:  $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ; sports society and other:  $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) as well as for clubs of different sporting competition levels (top division:  $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ; lower division:  $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ; athletes' individual competition:  $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ).

In order to verify the role of the respondents' characteristics in the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their three career capital elements simultaneously, while excluding the influence of the shock for their club, a multivariate covariance analysis was applied ([Table 2](#)). The overall MANCOVA results indicate that the shock for the clubs had a considerable and significant impact on the changes to the career capital elements ( $F(3,210) = 17.61$ ,  $P = 0.000$ , Wilk's  $\Lambda = 0.75$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.25$ ). The other overall significant variables are position ( $F(6,420) = 2.89$ ,  $P = 0.009$ , Wilk's  $\Lambda = 0.90$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.05$ ) and age, albeit smaller in significance and effect size ( $F(6,420) = 1.82$ ,  $P = 0.094$ , Wilk's  $\Lambda = 0.94$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ ).

The univariate MANCOVA results show that for the variance of *knowing-how* the only independent significant variable is position ([Table 2](#)). The Sheffé's posthoc tests of pairwise comparisons among the subgroups in this variable indicate that the top personnel's change in *knowing-how* was less favorable than that of the other respondents. This is also the case with the change among the members of management boards compared to those of the administration, and people 50+ years old versus those under 30.

In terms of *knowing-why*, the situation is comparable: the only variable significant for the overall variance of the dependent variable is position, while the post hoc tests show higher means for *knowing-why* for the managers vs. top personnel, as well as for the respondents from the administration vs. management board. Additionally, there was a slight worsening in the *knowing-why* of people 50+ years old, while the two younger groups registered an improvement.





**Table 2.** Multivariate analysis of covariance: The differences in the changes of three ways of *knowing*

Independent variables	Dependent variables					
	Knowing-how		Knowing-why		Knowing-whom	
	F (P)	M	F (P)	M	F (P)	M
Gender	0.05 (0.82)		1.21 (0.27)		0.29 (0.60)	
Men		4.49		4.22		3.94
Women		4.69		4.615		4.15
Age	2.09 (0.13)		2.09 (0.13)		4.82 (0.01)	
Under 30 years old		4.83 <sup>b</sup>		4.52 <sup>a</sup>		4.41 <sup>b</sup>
30–49 years old		4.61 <sup>a,b</sup>		4.46 <sup>a</sup>		4.01 <sup>a,b</sup>
50+ years old		4.08 <sup>a</sup>		3.81 <sup>b</sup>		3.53 <sup>a</sup>
Position	3.19 (0.04)		4.20 (0.02)		7.28 (0.00)	
Top*		4.18 <sup>a</sup>		4.05 <sup>a</sup>		3.72 <sup>a</sup>
Managers		4.95 <sup>b</sup>		4.75 <sup>b</sup>		4.34 <sup>b</sup>
Specialists**		4.53 <sup>a,b</sup>		4.21 <sup>a,b</sup>		3.96 <sup>a,b</sup>
Functional area	0.16 (0.85)		0.45 (0.64)		0.97 (0.38)	
Management board		4.17 <sup>a</sup>		3.98		3.73
Sports department***		4.62 <sup>a,b</sup>		4.42		4.24
Administration****		4.79 <sup>b</sup>		4.54		4.04
Remuneration	0.22 (0.64)		0.03 (0.86)		0.60 (0.44)	
Paid-work		4.58		4.33		3.95
Volunteering		4.35		4.35		4.40
Working hours	0.06 (0.81)		0.04 (0.85)		6.56 (0.01)	
Full-time		4.63		4.41		3.89
Part-time		4.41		4.21		4.23

Notes: 1) Covariant variable = club shock AV.

2) For each independent variable, the means for different subgroups with the same superscript (<sup>a</sup>) are not significantly different ( $P < 0.05$ ) based on post hoc Scheffe's tests.

3) The sample for the MANCOVA is 223 as three observations with no gender specification were withdrawn from the total sample.

\* top managers and owners.

\*\* including interns and juniors.

\*\*\* including medical department.

\*\*\*\* including technical department.

Source: author.

Finally, considering the variance of *knowing-whom*, the statistically significant variables are position, working hours and age. However, the post-hock tests reveal significant differences at  $P < 0.05$  only for the means across the subgroups of two variables: 1) position – once again, managers showed higher improvements in the dependent variable than the top personnel,



2) age – this time, 50+ years old managers registered a worsening of their *knowing-how* while the younger groups showed an improvement.

Altogether, when accounting for difference in the COVID-19 shock for the sports clubs, the top personnel declared lower improvements in their *knowing-how*, *knowing-why* and *knowing-whom* than others (mainly managers) while people who were 50+ years old reported a worsening in their *knowing-why* and *knowing-whom*, contrary to an improvement stated by the younger groups. In contrast, there are no significant differences at  $P < 0.05$  in terms of respondents' the gender, gratification, or working hours spent in their clubs. The differences in the respondents' functional area are only limited to *knowing-how*.

The subsequent analysis of the qualitative data aimed to explore the sources of the changes in all three ways of *knowing* and the main differences observed between the groups of respondents (across the different position and age groups for all kinds of *knowing* and functional area for *knowing-how*).

## 5.2. Sources of changes in career capital

**5.2.1. *Knowing-how*.** The *knowing-how* is the element of the career capital that registered both the highest average improvement (Table 1) and the highest number of improvement cases with the lowest number of deterioration cases in the sample (Table 3).

Disorganisation of a former routine and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the respondents to learn how to operate in a state of chaos, uncertainty and under stress. They learned new ways of working or increased their competencies in relation to online work, agile project management, time management, team-work, conflict solving, and strategic as well as short-term planning. It was an occasion to improve their autonomy, decision-making, efficiency, and patience at work. The respondents were particularly aware of their increased competencies of adaptability, flexibility and creative problem solving – they innovated in terms of different forms of trainings (online, hybrid or outside the usual infrastructure), content of the trainings (focusing on the athletes' motivation or their return to their previous sporting performance after a longer period of inactivity or a COVID-19 infection), the different forms of sport competitions, communication and relationship building with their stakeholders (athletes, fans, sponsors, media, and other sport organisations), the forms of contracts with the sponsors and the services provided for them, ways of showing sports competitions and emotions without spectators being present on the field, revenue sources, sports products, and, last but not least, interpretations of the regulations induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. For some respondents, the turbulences of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of financial and human capital resources in their clubs' development.

Nevertheless, it was the information technology skills that were mentioned the most often by the sports club personnel (Table 3). They either learned or increased their efficiency when using online communication tools (various applications and social media) as well as various software (e.g. for graphics or customer relationship management) and platforms (e.g. for public administration's services).

On the other hand, many respondents declared having enlarged their knowledge principally (in some cases uniquely) to do with COVID-19 related issues including: frequent updating of the sanitary restrictions, COVID-19's impact on health and athletics training, changes in passive and active sports consumption, and the ways that other organisations (including foreign





**Table 3.** Number of respondents mentioning the most important themes related to the changes in their *knowing-how*

	Total (N = 226)	Change in <i>knowing-how</i>			Position			Age			Functional area		
		Deterioration <sup>1</sup> (N = 35)	No change <sup>2</sup> (N = 87)	Improvement <sup>3</sup> (N = 104)	Top (N = 97)	Managers (N = 64)	Specialists (N = 65)	Under 30 (N = 47)	30-49 (N = 123)	50+ (N = 56)	Administration (84)	Management board (N = 83)	Sport department (N = 61)
Information technology	65	9	17	39	22	21	22	21	31	13	34	21	10
New methods of work	38	8	5	23	13	14	9	12	18	6	15	14	7
Elasticity and creativity	45	4	12	28	16	15	13	16	20	8	20	13	11
Working under uncertainty	26	6	3	15	10	8	6	5	15	4	10	9	5
COVID-19	27	4	6	17	11	10	6	4	15	8	9	8	10
More time	27	0	5	20	6	11	8	6	17	2	8	7	10
Learning and education opportunities	44	2	6	36	8	23	13	13	26	5	14	9	16
Knowledge and skills downgrading	9	3	2	4	2	3	4	4	3	2	3	1	5
Less learning	7	3	1	3	1	3	3	3	0	4	2	1	2
No impact	40	0	40	0	22	12	6	3	24	13	15	18	7
N/A <sup>4</sup>	32	8	10	12	18	4	8	5	14	11	8	16	6

<sup>1</sup> *knowing-how* scores of 1-3

<sup>2</sup> *knowing-how* scores of 4

<sup>3</sup> *knowing-how* scores of 5-7

<sup>4</sup> statements of a general nature or non-related to the *knowing-how*.

Source: author.

professional clubs) were adapting to the new reality. They also had to learn how to implement this knowledge and how to deal with the imposed sanitary restrictions in operational practices.

Apart from learning while facing the COVID-19 pandemic challenges, some respondents deliberately studied on their own because of fewer professional obligations and more spare time. They increased their knowledge and competencies in their professional area (e.g., match analytics or tactics, training methods, sporting skills, and sports management) as well as in personal development (e.g., mental well-being, foreign languages). On this occasion, some of them discovered and appreciated online learning possibilities.

Other sports club personnel, however, suffered from limited possibilities for live professional education as not all educational activity could be transferred online or the respondents were not aware of these. In some cases, the financial struggle forced cuts to educational and developmental spending. Other respondents were too overworked, stressed or pessimistic about their career prospects to undertake an effort of education on their own.

On the bright side, the COVID-19 pandemic was not reported to cause an important downgrading of former knowledge and skills. Even if few respondents declared a certain loss in training skills, speed of match analytics or relationship building competencies, they found it temporary and reported no serious problems returning to their former routine.

Exploration of the relative frequency of the main themes (Table 3) shows that the main reason for a lower positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on *knowing-how* for top personnel seems to lie mainly in fewer new possibilities for learning. This may be i.a. due to less frequent increases in spare time that could be devoted to self-education than in other groups. A similar image emerges when one looks at the respondents from the management boards compared to those from the administration and sports departments. Additionally, it is clear that people working directly with athletes (sport and medical staff) experienced fewer changes in information technology use and in their work methods. Finally, the older workers were less affected by the changes in information technology use and work methods. Moreover, they experienced fewer developments in their elasticity and creativity or they did not consider these experiences to be positive ones. They also benefited less from more spare time and saw fewer new opportunities for education and learning.

**5.2.2. *Knowing-why.*** In terms of *knowing-why*, the numbers of cases of improvement, deterioration and status quo are comparable in the sample (Table 4), while the numerical score shows an improvement on average (Table 1).

The development of *knowing-why* resulted i.a. from a deeper understanding of one's career. The two main reasons for this were the increased job uncertainty and more spare time caused by the slowdown in their clubs' activities. The former factor was of particular importance especially for the personnel working in understaffed sports clubs who therefore felt work overload. It turned out to be a good occasion to establish some distance from their professional career and to reconsider their work-life balance. Some respondents recognised the priority of their health and family while others reconsidered their career and professional goals.

On the other hand, many respondents suffered from job uncertainty and realised a need for flexibility in their career planning as the COVID-19 pandemic made it clear to them that their careers largely depended on other people and external events. Therefore, it may not be useful to make long term career plans. One has to be ready to change jobs or even industry, therefore there is a need to continually develop competencies and skills (of a transversal nature). If the





**Table 4.** Number of respondents mentioning the most important themes related to the changes in their *knowing-why*

	Total (N = 226)	Change in <i>knowing-why</i>			Position			Age		
		Deterioration <sup>1</sup> (N = 59)	No change <sup>2</sup> (N = 79)	Improvement <sup>3</sup> (N = 88)	Top (N = 97)	Managers (N = 64)	Specialists (N = 65)	Under 30 (N = 47)	30-49 (N = 123)	50+ (N = 56)
Changes in life and work priorities	20	1	4	15	6	8	6	4	13	3
Sense and direction of career	30	13	3	14	10	9	11	9	15	6
Need for flexibility and proactivity in career	10	1	1	8	1	8	1	3	7	0
Desire for, need, and benefits of continuous learning	11	0	2	9	2	7	2	5	5	1
Important career success factors	34	5	6	23	11	11	12	10	18	6
Valuable aspects of the work	16	5	1	10	6	3	7	8	4	4
Improvement in self-evaluation	11	1	1	9	3	5	3	2	7	2
Increased professional adaptation	24	4	4	16	9	6	9	6	13	5
Chance for career development	22	2	4	16	4	13	5	4	16	2
Barrier to career development	23	18	3	2	15	4	4	6	9	8

(continued)

Table 4. Continued

	Total (N = 226)	Change in <i>knowing-why</i>			Position			Age		
		Deterioration <sup>1</sup> (N = 59)	No change <sup>2</sup> (N = 79)	Improvement <sup>3</sup> (N = 88)	Top (N = 97)	Managers (N = 64)	Specialists (N = 65)	Under 30 (N = 47)	30-49 (N = 123)	50+ (N = 56)
Instability of the professional situation	18	9	4	5	7	5	6	4	9	5
No impact	46	0	46	0	23	12	11	4	30	12
N/A <sup>4</sup>	45	19	11	15	25	7	13	7	23	15

<sup>1</sup> *knowing-why* scores of 1-3

<sup>2</sup> *knowing-why* scores of 4

<sup>3</sup> *knowing-why* scores of 5-7

<sup>4</sup> statements of a general nature or non-related to the *knowing-why*.

Source: author.



club does not create opportunities for such a development, it should be done individually. Consequently, the respondents stressed the need for elastic career planning and proactive behaviour.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic made the respondents discover other factors that were important in their work and career (e.g. the need to be competitive, professional, creative and obstinate, to have good business relationships or live contact with athletes in the training process). Additionally, the respondents realised the value of some of the previously undervalued aspects of their work: live contact with people, fans' reactions in the stadiums, travel opportunities, or the joy of sporting emotions. In the sports clubs or jobs sheltered from layoffs, the stability of employment was appreciated. Others rediscovered the importance of their work for society (the role of sports for fans, children, athletes, and people's health) or for their organisations. Others realised their preference for online work and the possibilities to build their careers in that direction.

Another positive aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to *knowing-why* was an improved self-evaluation for some respondents. The challenges they had tackled made them believe in their capacities to adapt, competencies, and their value in organisations. This was a source of a satisfaction, but it also increased their subjective career resilience and optimism. They also saw, grasped, and appreciated chances for new jobs created by the COVID-19 pandemic – e.g., a better job after a layoff from previous sports clubs, a lecturing contract at a distant university made possible by online education, enlarged responsibilities or transfers in their current organisation.

In contrast, the respondents who negatively evaluated the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on their *knowing-why* focused on its destructive aspects in relation to their professional goals and development. This was clearly seen in the case of persons witnessing a fall in sports club activities and their incomes or a layoff, as well as feeling anxious, helpless or demotivated, seeing no good perspectives, questioning the sense of work in their organisation or in the sports sector in general, experiencing difficulties in finding a new job in other sports organisations, and realizing that the sports club job market is closed for people without the right relationship network. However, this was also the case for people who were fully engaged in tackling the current problems at the cost of planned professional development activities. Additionally, some of the planned career development goals were temporarily impossible to achieve (e.g. some vocational training was cancelled, foreign travel suspended). In some despairing cases, a movement out of the sports sector was seen as a big improvement in career development. On the bright side, in the cases of some pessimist respondents, the end of the COVID-19 waves and the general softening of the sanitary restrictions gave them wings and inspired plans for their career development.

The relative frequency of the main themes (Table 4) shows that the reason for the lowest mean of *knowing-why* changes among the top personnel (in particular compared to the managers) is their less frequent realization of a need for flexibility and proactivity in career crafting and for continuous learning. On the one hand, this observation corroborates the changes in their *knowing-how*. On the other hand, it may indicate a high level of awareness in both areas before the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the top managers saw the COVID-19 pandemic as a barrier to their career development more often than others. Considering the slight deterioration of *knowing-why* in the group of people who were 50+ years old compared to the improvements in the younger groups, a general reduction in reflection on their was career is



observed, as well as a lower increase in the awareness of the importance of continuous learning. This may be explained by the cases of people engaged in non-profit sports clubs. Their involvement in sports clubs is often a part-time hobby and they do not reflect on it in terms of their career.

**5.2.3. *Knowing-whom.*** *Knowing-whom* registered a non-significant decrease in its average level in the sample (Table 1). The respondents, however, reported very heterogeneous experiences in this area.

Many respondents suffered a decrease and weakening of their networks. They mainly deplored the loss of live contacts with their colleagues, sponsors, fans, athletes, public officials, and customers. They also stressed about the loss of personal interactions during live sports events, conferences, and vocational trainings – during both the formal and informal activities present at these occasions. These developments were seen as an obstacle to their professional and career goals.

The respondents who observed an increase in their *knowing-whom* reported new contacts and the strengthening or refreshment of the existing ones. In some cases, this was caused by having more spare time that could be spent on building relations but in most situations it resulted from the collaborative combating of the adversities brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, or the new activities undertaken during this time. In the former two cases it led to an appreciation of one's network or team quality, and the realisation of the value of a network in the sports sector.

The common theme for both the winners and losers of *knowing-whom* was the reflexion on the importance of contacts in general, and live contacts in particular, for their professional and private lives. Many from both groups had to transfer their relationships to online channels and most of them saw the limitations of this form of communication for relationship building. However, the optimists appreciated the simplicity and potential of online communication to meet new people or maintain existing contacts.

The relative frequency of the main themes (Table 5) shows that the top personnel (who registered the lowest mean for the *knowing-whom* score compared to the managers and the specialists – Table 1) had the lowest frequency in terms of having experienced challenges that strengthened their relationships. On the other hand, many of the top personnel reported no changes in their relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the loss of *knowing-whom* was particularly visible among the older people, who hardly reported any strengthening of their networks. Additionally, in MANCOVA at  $P < 0.1$ , a deterioration in *knowing-whom* was reported by the part-time personnel and volunteers. This is often the case of retired coaches in non-profit sports organisations who did not face many COVID-19 pandemic-related challenges. Furthermore, the older people benefited the least from enlarged information technology and online communication skills (Table 3) which may also explain their network losses.

## 6. DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the literature on career construction theory as it displays the ways in which a career shock impacts career capital which, in turn, plays an important role in the self-management of modern careers. The study also answers the call by Akkermans et al. (2021b) for





**Table 5.** Number of respondents mentioning the most important themes related to the changes in their *knowing-whom*

	Total (N = 226)	Change in <i>knowing-whom</i>			Position			Age		
		Deterioration <sup>1</sup> (N = 73)	No change <sup>2</sup> (N = 88)	Improvement <sup>3</sup> (N = 65)	Top (N = 97)	Managers (N = 64)	Specialists (N = 65)	Under 30 (N = 47)	30-49 (N = 123)	50+ (N = 56)
Importance of relations	45	14	8	21	12	22	9	17	19	7
Online vs live communication	36	12	11	12	11	15	9	9	19	7
Strengthening of the network	46	3	6	35	19	12	13	13	27	4
Weakening of the network	79	58	14	6	39	17	22	15	40	23
Hardships strengthen relations	14	0	3	11	3	9	2	6	7	1
No impact	59	0	59	0	24	20	15	4	42	13
N/A <sup>4</sup>	21	9	4	8	8	4	9	4	9	8

<sup>1</sup> *knowing-whom* scores of 1-3

<sup>2</sup> *knowing-whom* scores of 4

<sup>3</sup> *knowing-whom* scores of 5-7

<sup>4</sup> statements of a general nature or non-related to the *knowing-whom*.

Source: author.

more research on shared career shocks among different populations and on the mechanisms explaining how career shocks influence individual career development.

Regarding the mechanisms of an impact of the shock, this study shows the most important and positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the *knowing-how* of career capital. This result is due to limited losses in skills and knowledge, as the majority of the respondents had already returned to their previous work routines. More importantly however, for many sports personnel, the COVID-19 pandemic was an occasion for additional learning, be it on the battlefield against the challenges of the pandemic or through self-initiated activities in the spare time suddenly available. However, not all respondents experienced the turbulences as learning opportunities, nor did they see a possibility or need for extra learning. The effect of a shock to this area of career capital therefore seems to be influenced by the differences in adults' learning readiness, due to the variance in attitude, cognition, behaviour and personality, as well as the contextual characteristics (Smith et al. 2015). Significantly, Heslin et al. (2020) identified learning as the key meta-competency in sustainable careers. Even more diversified effects due to the COVID-19 pandemic are observed in the area of *knowing-why*. Whereas increased job uncertainty and hardships were motivators for more active and flexible career management and for more intensive capability building for some respondents, others surrendered to pessimism and passivity. The option of a transfer to a job outside of the sports sector was seen as a challenge by the first group and as a doom or deliverance by the second. These kinds of differences in coping strategy are due to variances in the cognitive appraisal of a stressful event, as well as personality traits and the perception of internal and external supporting resources (De Jong – Dormann 2006; Lu – Chen 2007). An important part of external resources when coping with a stressful situation is social support which relates to the *knowing-whom* of career capital. The career shock of COVID-19 put forward the importance and quality of one's relationship network which confirms the significance of this particular career competency for career development as found in the previous literature (e.g., Colakoglu 2011). In addition however, this study shows that the shock, even if neutral on average in the sample, had also quite heterogonous, both negative and positive, impacts on the scope and intensity of the respondents' networks.

In terms of effects of the shock across different populations, this study shows a less positive impact of the shock to all career capital areas among personnel older than 50 compared to the younger one. This relates to a lower readiness to learn, including online capabilities, a less active attitude towards one's career, fewer recognised benefits in terms of flexibility and creativity, and more frequent losses in scope and strength of their professional relationships. Interestingly, the top personnel also reported fewer improvements in their career capital relative to other echelons, mainly the managers. In their case, the reason may lie in all three ways of *knowing* already being at a high level before the shock, suggesting that the impact of the career shock may depend on the initial level of career capital. Another explanation, based on the relatively frequent reports of increased barriers to career development and rare reports of hardship benefits (such as the strengthening of relationships or more spare time), may point to their struggles in the battle for the survival of their clubs and the dependence of the shock outcomes on the subjective magnitude of the shock (as implied by event system theory - Morgeson et al. 2015). On the other hand, in this sample, no differences in terms of gender, remuneration, working time, or between the sports and administration departments in the sports clubs were observed. Altogether, the observed heterogeneity in the total sample is only to a small degree explained by



the demographic and professional characteristics of the respondents. This highlights the role of an individual's cognitive, behavioural and characterological traits.

Besides these general insights, this study offers some shock and industry specific observations. Regarding the specificity of the COVID-19 pandemic as a career shock, its important trait was a slowdown in the professional lives of many respondents. This phenomenon was already shown in the literature (Hite – McDonald 2020). This study, however, shows that this extra free time was often used for vocational learning, personal development, reflections on life, career or work priorities, strengthening relationships, and additional jobs – impacting all three ways of *knowing*. Another peculiarity of the shock was the restriction on live contacts and the transfer of communication into virtual reality. Consequently, its impact on career capital depended on the level of individual digital competencies and readiness for their development.

The particularity of the COVID-19 shock to career capital in the sports clubs context relates mainly to the new procedural knowledge of digitalisation in sporting events, communication and relationship building with sponsors, sports fans, colleagues, and athletes (with an emphasis on online and offline training in the case of athletes). In terms of *knowing-why*, the shock prompted questioning of the respondents' possibilities for long-term career developments in this sector (confirming the results obtained by Spennemann and Whitsed (2021) in a study of outdoor recreation in Australia) as well as their perception of the role that sports play in their own lives and the lives of society. In both cases the answers were diverse. Finally, the shock emphasised the importance of a relations network in this small world (previously shown also by Nessel 2021). Interestingly, the study found no gender differences which is in contrast to other research on careers in sports organisations (e.g., Taylor – Wells 2017).

Altogether, this study contributes to the career literature by highlighting a direct effect of a career shock on the career competencies embodied in career capital. In fact, the existing research on careers shocks, both from a conceptual perspective (Akkermans et al. 2021a) and an empirical one (Blokker et al. 2019) argued that it is through the availability and mobilisation of career resources (i.a. career competencies) that a career shock influences career outcomes. This study, on the other hand, demonstrates that some career shocks, like the COVID-19 pandemic, may directly affect career competencies.

Importantly, this study shows that the impact of the shock to all elements of career capital is very heterogeneous. This result is consistent with the career construction model of adaptation (Savickas – Porfeli 2012), implying that people differently experience the shock as they differ in terms of their willingness and ability to address the changing environmental conditions. Previous studies, however, have focused mainly on a variety of possible negative or neutral outcomes of a negative career shock (e.g. Hite – McDonald (2020) in the context of the COVID-19 shock), whereas this study shows the whole range of both negative and positive outcomes.

The empirical demonstration of the positive outcomes of a negative career shock complements the research by Feng et al. (2020) who showed a positive impact of a negative shock on internal social capital, and empirically illustrates the theoretical considerations of Akkermans et al. (2020) regarding the COVID-19 pandemic's career outcomes. Consequently, the direct research implication of this study is the need to include positive outcomes in the response scales in the questions measuring the impact of a priori negative career shocks.

In terms of the practical implications, this study highlights the need to support continuous education in sports organisations. Special support should also be provided to older employees to help them improve their digital literacy. Finally, sports clubs should consider how to strengthen



the relationships among their personnel, and how to manage their aspirations and doubts related to career development.

The contributions of this study are subject to the limitations inherent in the research design. Most importantly, the sample excludes persons who left sports clubs or the sports sector altogether and whose career capital in all three ways of *knowing* may have suffered much more as a result. Another limitation results from the convenience sampling method and low response rate to the survey invitations. Yet another respondent bias may be seen in the questions related to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the situation of the club. Some respondents, especially in bigger clubs, could not have sufficient knowledge to evaluate this objectively. Moreover, the form of this measurement implies a subjective evaluation. These limitations may have impacted the size of the shock effect to each of the career capital elements (and call for further quantitative exploration). They do not however, undermine the observed heterogeneity of the impact and the impact itself. The results may also be non-representative of other countries with different sports systems, different COVID-19 pandemic regulations, different public support measures, and thus different ways in which sports clubs and sports personnel operate compared to Poland. Further studies could therefore extend this research design to other sports systems to get more sports-related insights, but also extend it to other industries to verify the universality of the general insights of this study. It is also worth exploring the experiences of sports personnel moving into other sectors of the economy.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study explored how a career shock due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected the career capital among the personnel in sports clubs in Poland. Although the context of the study was specific in terms of the shock and the sector, its results are mainly of a general nature. They show that career competencies (their level and mobilisation) not only moderate the impact of a career shock on career outcomes (as shown by previous literature) but also in some cases are directly modified by a career shock themselves. The results also show the sources of the changes in all three elements of career capital (*knowing-how*, *knowing-why*, *knowing-whom*) and highlight the heterogeneity of the shock outcomes.

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