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|**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Strategic Planning Approaches and Operational Challenges in Sports Event Management

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the intersection of strategic planning and operational execution within the sports event management domain. While strategic planning is often heralded as the driver of long-term legacies and economic benefits, operational realities, ranging from logistical bottlenecks to financial volatility, frequently undermine these high-level goals. By synthesising existing literature and analysing key operational friction points, this study identifies a critical strategy-execution gap and proposes frameworks for more resilient event management.

1 INTRODUCTION

The contemporary sports event industry has undergone a radical transformation over the last three decades, shifting from a landscape of amateur volunteerism to a hyper-commercialised, multi-billion-dollar global ecosystem. From mega-events like the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games to recurring community marathons, the management of sports events has become a critical driver of economic development, tourism, and social capital. As noted by Parent and Smith-Swan (2013), sports events are no longer merely competitions; they are complex socio-economic projects that require sophisticated management architectures.

In this context, the dichotomy between strategic planning (the long-term vision, legacy goals, and stakeholder positioning) and operational management (the immediate, logistical, and tactical execution) has emerged as a central theme in academic discourse. Strategic planning in sports events is often characterised by high-level ambitions: destination branding, infrastructure regeneration, and the cultivation of soft power. Conversely, operational management is grounded in the granular realities of risk mitigation, crowd control, volunteer coordination, and financial liquidity.

However, a critical examination of the sector reveals a persistent strategy-execution gap. High-profile failures in event management, ranging from the financial deficits of the 2004 Athens Olympics to the logistical breakdowns at various Champions League finals, suggest that strategic visions often fail to translate into operational realities. The complexity is compounded by the temporary nature of events; unlike permanent organisations, event management bodies (often referred to as OCOGs - Organising Committees for the Olympic Games) are pulsating organisations that expand and contract rapidly, making the alignment of strategy and operations uniquely difficult (Hanlon & Jago, 2004).

This paper seeks to dissect this alignment problem. It argues that the failure of sports events is rarely due to a lack of ambition (strategy) but rather a failure to operationalise that ambition through resilient systems. By exploring the theoretical underpinnings of strategic planning and contrasting them with empirical operational challenges, this research aims to provide a robust framework for understanding how modern sports events can bridge the divide between promise and delivery.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature surrounding sports event management is multidisciplinary, drawing from strategic management theory, project management, and tourism studies. This review categorises existing scholarship into three primary streams: Strategic Leveraging, The Resource-Based View (RBV) in Sports, and Operational Risk Dynamics.

Strategic Planning and Event Leveraging

The concept of leveraging is central to modern sports strategy. Chalip (2006) revolutionised this field by arguing that an event itself is merely a seed capital. The strategic value lies not in the hosting, but in the leveraging of the event to achieve secondary benefits such as tourism growth or social cohesion. Research by Ziakas (2014) expanded this into Event Portfolio Theory, suggesting that destinations should move away from ad-hoc bidding strategies and instead curate a holistic portfolio of events that serve different strategic purposes, some for economic impact, others for community building.

Strategically, organisers are increasingly adopting Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) to navigate the complex web of sponsors, government bodies, and local communities. Parent (2008) highlights that in sports events, stakeholder salience is fluid; a sponsor may be the dominant stakeholder during the planning phase, but the local community becomes the dominant stakeholder during the operational phase (e.g., via protests or support).

The Resource-Based View (RBV) and Capabilities

Applying the Resource-Based View (RBV) to sports events, Smart and Wolfe (2000) argue that an event's competitive advantage stems from its internal resources, specifically its human capital and intangible assets (brand reputation). However, the literature points to a unique fragility in sports: the reliance on volunteers. Cuskelly et al. (2006) posit that while volunteers are a strategic asset (lowering costs), they represent a massive operational liability due to lack of professionalisation. This creates a tension where the strategic financial model relies on unpaid labour, but the operational delivery requires professional-grade reliability.

Operational Challenges and Pulsating Organizations

Operational literature focuses on the how of delivery. Tooma (2012) identifies financial risk as the primary operational challenge, noting the Winner’s Curse in bidding, where the cost of winning the bid often exceeds the economic return. Furthermore, the concept of the pulsating organisation (Hanlon & Cuskelly, 2002) describes the extreme stress placed on operational systems that must scale from 50 employees to 5,000 in a matter of weeks.

Recent studies have also integrated Agile Project Management into sports. Schnitzer et al. (2020) argue that traditional Waterfall planning methods (linear and rigid) are ill-suited for the volatile environment of sports events (weather, security threats, pandemic disruptions). They suggest that operational failure often stems from a rigidity that cannot accommodate the dynamic nature of the strategic environment.

3 RESEARCH GAP

Despite the breadth of literature available, three distinct gaps exist that this paper aims to address:

- *The disconnect between Legacy Strategy and Operational Budgeting:* Extensive research exists on what legacy *is* (Preuss, 2007), but there is a scarcity of literature analysing the operational mechanisms required to sustain it. Most studies stop at the closing ceremony, failing to analyse how operational decisions made *during* the event (e.g., venue construction materials) impact the *post-event* strategic legacy.
- *The Small-Scale Event Bias*: The majority of high-impact journals focus on Mega-Events (Olympics, World Cups). There is a significant lack of research on the strategic-operational alignment in small-to-medium scale events, which make up 90% of the industry and operate under tighter resource constraints.
- *Human Resource Integration:* While volunteer motivation is well-studied, few papers link volunteer management directly to strategic outcome failure. There is a need to understand how operational HR failures (e.g., high attrition) directly dismantle high-level strategic goals (e.g., service quality branding).

4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Based on the identified gaps, this research paper posits the following objectives:

- To map the dominant strategic planning models currently utilized by sports event managers and assess their flexibility in the face of external shocks.
- To identify and categorize critical operational challenges (Logistical, Financial, Human Resource) that act as barriers to strategic execution.
- To analyse the causal relationship between operational rigidity and the failure of long-term legacy objectives.
- To propose an integrated management framework that harmonises the long-term vision of stakeholders with the short-term realities of operations.

5 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Methodological Note: This section synthesises qualitative data from meta-analyses of event case studies (2015 - 2023) and theoretical application.

The Friction of Financial Strategy vs. Operational Liquidity

A primary finding in the analysis of event management failure is the misalignment between financial strategy (revenue generation) and operational spending. Strategically, events often rely on back-loaded revenue; sponsorships and broadcast rights are often paid in tranches, with significant portions arriving late. Operationally, however, events are front-loaded regarding costs (venue deposits, marketing, procurement).

Discussion: This mismatch creates a liquidity crisis. As noted by Flyvbjerg et al. (2016), this often forces operational managers to cut corners on invisible aspects like security training or contingency planning to maintain cash flow, directly endangering the strategic goal of a safe and secure event. The data suggests that strategic planners often overestimate the speed of revenue inflow, leaving operations teams underfunded during critical setup phases.

The Volunteer Paradox: Strategic Asset or Operational Liability?

The data highlights a profound contradiction in the use of volunteers. Strategically, volunteers are viewed as cultural ambassadors, a core part of the event's brand and social legacy. Operationally, however, they are often treated as free labour.

Analysis: High attrition rates (drop-outs) among volunteers were found to be the single highest operational risk in non-mega events (Doherty, 2009). When operational teams fail to treat volunteers with the same rigour as paid staff (training, perks, respect), they leave.

Impact: When volunteers leave, the service strategy collapses. This indicates that the strategic reliance on volunteers is fundamentally flawed unless matched by an operational investment in their management. The cost saving (Strategy) is negated by the service failure (Operations).

Infrastructure: The White Elephant in the Room

Analysis of venue utilisation reveals that strategic Legacy plans are frequently decoupled from operational Maintenance realities.

Discussion: The Edifice Complex, the desire to build grand stadiums for strategic prestige, often ignores the operational complexity of retrofitting these venues for post-event use. The data shows that operational teams are rarely consulted during the architectural design phase. Consequently, venues are built for the *peak* capacity of the event, not the *operational* reality of the community afterwards. This results in the White Elephant syndrome, where the operational cost of the building destroys its strategic economic value over time (Alm et al., 2016).

Crisis Management and Agile Operations

The analysis of post-COVID events (2021-2023) indicates a shift in successful management models. Events that stuck to rigid, multi-year strategic plans struggled to adapt to health protocols. Conversely, organisations that empowered operational teams to deviate from the strategy (Agile methodology) survived.

Key Finding: Strategy must be viewed as a compass, not a train track. The most successful events utilised decentralised command structures where operational managers could make budget decisions on the fly without waiting for strategic board approval.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The key recommendations and managerial implications are as follows -

- Bridging the Strategy-Execution Gap
- Adopting Agile Strategy and Rolling Wave Planning
- Restructuring Governance: The Dual-Authority Model
- Financial Engineering: The Legacy Endowment Protocol
- Human Capital: Professionalising the Volunteer Workforce
- Digital Integration: The Digital Twin for Operational De-risking
- Managing Stakeholder Salience through Unified Value Propositions

CONCLUSION

In summary, the path to successful sports event management lies in the desiloing of strategy and operations. The recommendations provided here- Agile Planning, Dual Governance, Legacy Endowments, Volunteer Professionalisation, and Digital Twins form a cohesive framework. They move the organisation from a fragile hierarchy, where strategy dictates impossible orders to operations, to a resilient organism where operations inform strategy and strategy empowers operations. By implementing these measures, event organisers can ensure that the magic of the event is supported by the logic of robust management.

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