

Athletic Advantage

A study by EDHEC's NewGen Talent Centre spotlights the surprising link between the sports that students practise and the professional roles they aspire to take on, as the centre's associate director, **Geneviève Houriet Segard** relates here; with additional input from director **Manuelle Malot**

Monday mornings often bring a slew of social media posts from CEOs and senior managers detailing the weekend sporting competitions they entered (and may even have won), along with details of the athletic trials endured – all in the name of building physical strength and improving leadership skills. The benefits of sports for physical and mental health are well documented, but today more than ever they are also linked to professional growth and career success.

Business school students are keenly aware of this trend and – despite what older generations may think about

youth and their screen habits – they are passionate sports enthusiasts. We surveyed 2,600 students at EDHEC Business School in France to explore the connection between sports and careers. We asked them about the sports they practise, how they have shaped their personalities and the skills they have developed as a result of their athletic activities.

We also asked them to imagine themselves in their future career and analysed how their favourite sport might influence this choice. The resulting study by the EDHEC NewGen Talent Centre reveals a stronger link between the sports we play and the jobs we perform than some might have suspected, as well as providing tips on how business schools can help students reach professional and personal goals.

Social, physical & competitive aspects of athletics

Young people today almost unanimously define their relationship with sport as “fun and stimulating”. Three out of four play sports regularly, more to challenge themselves than to win, while two-thirds know how to motivate themselves without needing a coach. However, if they play a club sport, such as soccer or rugby, they do so to make friends and enjoy social time with their teammates.

Our study also revealed some variation in sports practice by gender, with young women expressing a more urgent desire to excel and win. Meanwhile, young men claim to participate more frequently in club sports, with an emphasis on team wins and less on individual victories.

We used our study to discover whether specific soft skills could be linked to a particular sport or athletic activity. To find out, we categorised sports by how they are practised: in teams (eg football, basketball, rugby), in pairs or one-on-one (eg tennis, judo, fencing), solo with a time or score



(eg swimming, running, archery) and solo with a score set by a judge or panel of judges (eg dance, gymnastics, ice skating, diving).

Overall, we found that individual sports, especially those that are timed or scored, are more likely to shape women's personalities. Men were more often influenced by one-on-one or team sports.

Student comments go some way to explaining this phenomenon. For instance: "The team spirit I found in football taught me how to defend my personal interests, while working to achieve collective goals. What's more, the idea of pushing yourself physically, combined with the necessary creativity, particularly when it comes to dribbling, has taught me values that are indispensable to me today."

Another respondent said: "Participating in competitive equestrian sports from a very early age has enabled me to develop a fighting spirit, never giving up in the face of failure and difficulty, always pushing forward. It has also enabled me to develop a highly organised way of combining my sporting, academic and social life."

Sport seems to act as a catalyst for the development of management skills among young graduates. Resilience, enthusiasm and agility are the skills that the younger generations tell us they have developed the most – whatever the sport – and these are the self-same traits for which recruiters are looking.



BIOGRAPHY

Genevieve Houriet Segard, PhD, is associate director of the EDHEC NewGen Talent Centre, a centre of expertise on youth career aspirations and job skills. With in excess of one million data points from surveys of more than 80,000 business students and recent graduates, the mission of the centre is to detect, understand and explain the changing career expectations of young people. Co-author Manuelle Malo is the centre's director and a frequent guest on conference panels, having addressed over 10,000 executives and managers to date

This trio of skills is also the one that tennis players have developed the most. It's worth noting, too that the 38 per cent of students surveyed who play tennis said it has helped them to improve their critical thinking skills. Soccer is the sport that stands out for enhancing collaborative skills (83 per cent), as well as reliability (46 per cent). Dancing, meanwhile, develops attention to detail for eight out of 10 students, plus creativity for more than half.

According to respondents, while all sports develop enthusiasm and agility, each type is more particularly conducive to the acquisition of certain skills. Collaboration for instance is the hallmark of team sports; artistic and judged sports help with improving precision in work tasks; competitive sports create opportunities to become more resilient; and timed or scored sports boost dependability.

The link between sports & professional roles

If we imagine the company as a team sport, 32 per cent of respondents see themselves in the role of captain, 27 per cent as coach, 19 per cent in an attack position, 14 per cent on defence and eight per cent as a referee.

To better understand the ambitions implicit in these choices, we asked students to self-identify according to three career ambition profiles taken from a previous study.

Competitor: Students who are ambitious and have high expectations for career success. They seek management positions, responsibility and attractive remuneration.

Committed: These mission-driven individuals want to take on global CSR issues and work for companies with a positive culture and strong values.

Entrepreneur: These respondents crave creativity and the challenges of inventing new products, company structures and so on. They need autonomy in their work life and the freedom to take risks commensurate with their role.

Students told us that team captains are most often proactive, ambitious and dynamic leaders. Moreover, they remarked that coaches must be good at listening and motivating team members. Coaches must also be able to connect and engage with others.

Looking at the role of an attacker, or offensive player, they explained that this type is always looking for ways to move the team forward, inching closer to the ultimate goal no matter the challenges ahead. Defenders are the heart of the team, protecting others and turning the tables on their adversaries through hard work and determination. Referees are the voice of wisdom, those who moderate disputes and ensure that the rules are respected.

A company needs people to fill all these roles to function well and succeed in a complex and competitive global economy. For business schools, supporting students in their athletic endeavours is also a way to help them determine what role they want to play in the workplace and how best to reach their career goals. 