

Sports Events and Risk Management in New Zealand: How Safe is Safe Enough?

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Abstract

Along with the growth in sports events, an increasing concern over risk and safety management strategies and other legal issues within the New Zealand events industry has been observed in recent years. Various issues that lead to lawsuit continue to plague the sporting event industry. Risk management is the primary tool for reducing the incidence of injury and managing an organisation's potential exposure to loss and legal liability. The significant increase in the amount of litigation in sports has created an additional dimension in managing risk for today's sports event organisers. Along with the growing controversy and uncertainty about legal liability issues in New Zealand, there is a large gap in literature, particularly relating to event risk management in sports. Thus, this thesis critically examines the risk and safety management strategies of sports event organisers in New Zealand. A sample of twelve sporting event organisers in Otago were personally interviewed about the current level of risk management. Their perceptions and responses concerning the importance of risk and safety management strategies were discussed. In-depth qualitative interviews have been conducted including commercial and non-commercial venue and non-venue based organisations.

Despite a recent movement towards more formal organisation and planning, the results indicate that only few sporting event organisers use strategic risk management plans. The main hindrance appears to be a lack of information and expertise available on risk management for sporting events. Risk management plans varied to a large extent, which may be due to the absence of accepted national standards for managing risk for sporting events and to the heterogeneous nature of sporting events. Another reason may be that 'risk' is variously defined and is characterised by its subjectivity, multidimensionality and complexity, and is hard to operationalise. Therefore, more support from government organisations, industry associations and local authorities is required, that may include information on legal issues and specific information on event risk management in sport. It was also discovered that policy-makers should reconsider the extension of regulatory codes of practice and standards to specifically serve the sporting event sector. Nevertheless, event organisers must become much more risk aware and proactive, both from a physical and a legal perspective, as they were mainly unaware of guidelines for risk management in sport, legal issues and safety standards. Moreover, they seem to be ignorant towards the changing legal environment, which requires them to change current general attitudes towards legal obligations and to adopt a more realistic view and not regard lawsuits as a personal attack. A distinct need for further research has been identified, encompassing not only sporting event organisers but also other relevant stakeholders such as government organisations, industry associations, sport participants and volunteers in order to gain better insights in the dilemma of risk management in New Zealand.