



STRENGTHENING THE PLAYER DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING WORKFORCE IN THE AFLW

ENABLERS OF WELLBEING,
DEVELOPMENT, AND RETENTION
OF WELLBEING STAFF IN ELITE
WOMEN'S SPORT

POWERED BY

BHP



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project aimed to solidify the Player Development Manager (PDM) workforce in AFLW by identifying strategies to strengthen development, wellbeing and retention. A systematic review of the literature exploring protective factors to promote wellbeing and reduce burnout for development and wellbeing staff working in elite sport was undertaken. Following this, a qualitative study was conducted using a roundtable methodology with PDMs from AFLW.

Results highlighted a range of organisational, social and individual factors that contribute to a strong and effective PDM workforce. These included **flexible workloads alongside clearly defined role scope, enhanced blackout periods, mentoring, peer support and team connection, clear professional boundaries, a focus on Player empowerment, a sense of accomplishment in work, and growth of career development and progression opportunities.**

Recommendations include strengthening role clarity and capability frameworks, expanding professional development and career pathways, fostering collaboration, and strengthening boundaries and recovery periods.



A large, semi-transparent orange graphic overlaying the top half of the page. It features a collage of AFLW players in action, including a player kicking a ball, players in a ruck, and players running. The word "BACKGROUND" is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the center of this graphic.

BACKGROUND

The AFLW is Australia's elite national women's Australian Rules football competition, launched in 2017. AFLW is a rapidly evolving competition that has seen accelerated growth over a short period, with 2025 marking its tenth season.

From 2020, all AFLW Clubs in the Australian Football League were supported to employ a dedicated Player Development Manager (PDM), initiated as part of an AFLW and BHP partnership. Player development programs act as the off-field guidance and support for elite athletes to ensure their non-athletic endeavours are nurtured during their time in the sport. These programs include life skills, education, personal development, transition planning, vocational training, and wellbeing, allowing Players to maximise on-field performance and prepare for life beyond the game (AFL, 2020). The integration of a PDM in each AFLW Club was designed to enhance both the personal and professional development of female athletes and to ensure equitable Player development resourcing was enabled across the competition.

The current project was undertaken in recognition of the consolidation of the PDM workforce in AFLW through identifying ways to enhance PDM workforce wellbeing, development and retention. **Promoting and empowering the Player development workforce for AFLW benefits both the holistic wellbeing of athletes and the future of the Game.**

AIMS

Wellbeing is a key predictor of staff retention and workforce sustainability within elite sport (Oglesby et al., 2021). Accordingly, the aims of this project were to understand the factors that protect the wellbeing of PDMs working within AFLW programs and to identify avenues for promoting and strengthening the PDM workforce.

METHODS

A systematic literature review was conducted to identify existing evidence related to protective factors that support the wellbeing of staff working in elite sport environments. Search terms included sport support staff, athletic trainer, entourage, player development, wellbeing, burnout, resilience, and mental health to identify literature that reported on protective factors, factors that promote wellbeing, or reduce burnout of staff in elite sport. Data were synthesised narratively, with results grouped by type of protective factor (e.g., individual-level, organisational).

Following the literature review, a roundtable methodology was used to generate insights into enablers and support needs of PDMs in AFLW. AFLW PDMs from 12 Clubs took part. The roundtable was conducted using a semi-structured discussion guide, developed from the literature review, which allowed for open exploration of perspectives. Discussion was facilitated by an external moderator, with a mix of large and small group discussions to encourage equitable participation. Data were analysed using descriptive content analysis, with an iterative inductive coding process to identify, refine, and interpret key domains.



FINDINGS

Findings across the literature review and qualitative components of the project are summarised in Figure 1.

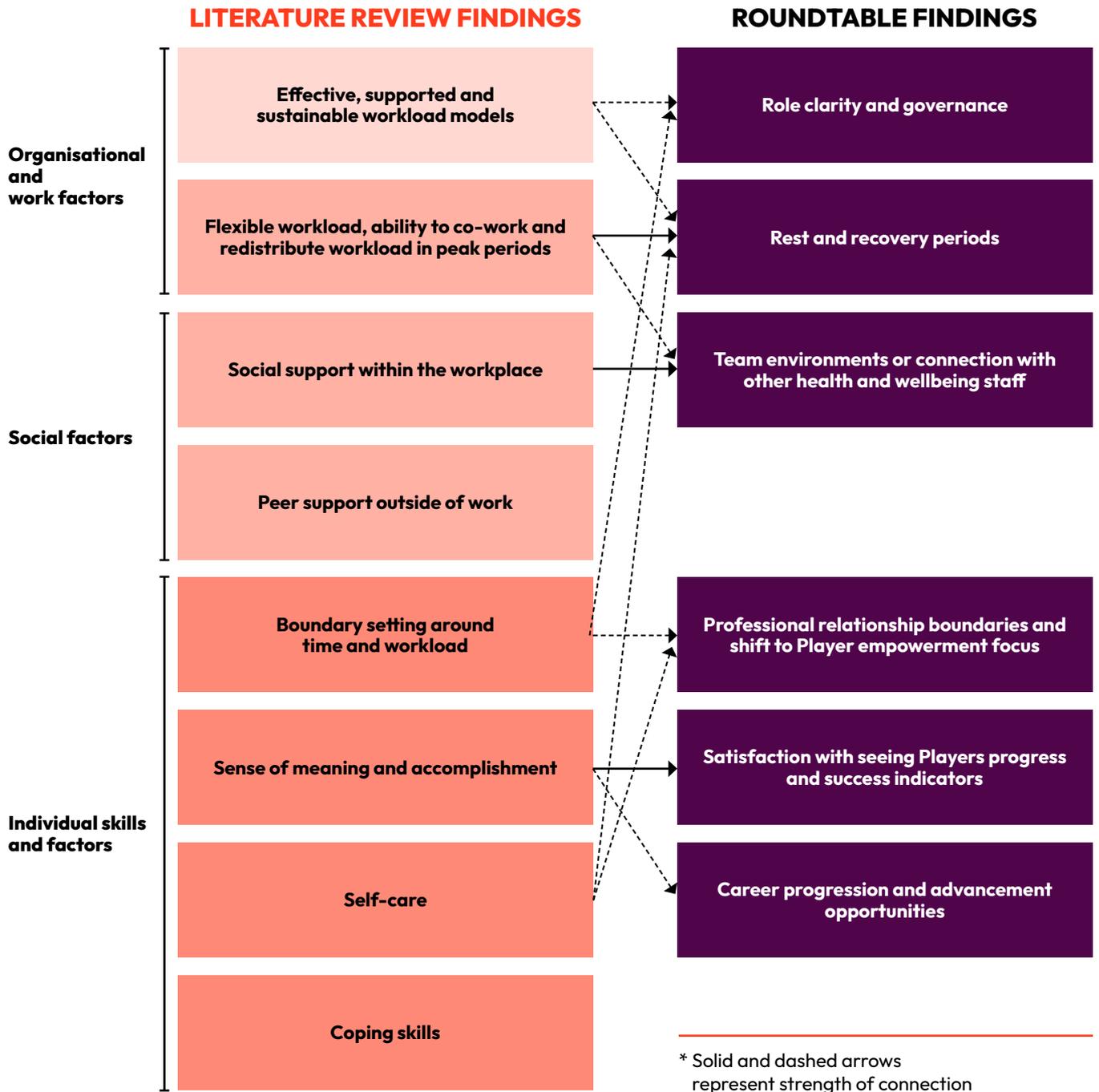


Figure 1: Factors that promote wellbeing of player development and wellbeing staff working in high-performance sport, and the interconnection between literature review and roundtable findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In total, 5858 articles were retrieved. After removal of duplicates (n = 2316), 3465 articles were excluded during title and abstract review. At full text review, 65 of the 77 articles were excluded. Reference lists of included articles were reviewed, with one additional reference added, bringing the total of included studies to 13. Of these, five were quantitative, and eight were qualitative. Various sport staff were included as participants across the studies, such as athletic trainers, psychologists, physicians, sport scientists, high-performance directors, nutritionists, strength and conditioning staff, and athlete wellbeing and engagement officers. Participants worked in a range of collegiate, Olympic or professional sport settings across the US, UK, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and Belgium. Results highlight that there is a range of organisational, social, and individual factors that are protective for maintaining wellbeing and mitigating stress and burnout in high-performance sport environments.

ORGANISATIONAL AND WORK-RELATED FACTORS

A range of organisational and role design factors were found to be related to lower stress and burnout and improved wellbeing. Specifically, higher organisational support, stable organisational structures, adequate staffing, and teamwork-oriented cultures buffered workload pressures and improved occupational satisfaction and wellbeing (Hill et al., 2021; Mazerolle et al., 2011; Romero et al., 2018). Given that workloads typically fluctuate across the sporting calendar, with periods of higher work and travel demands, time for recovery can also vary (Cairns et al., 2024). Accordingly, sport settings that have flexibility and autonomy in workload, foster collaborative ways of working, or allow for redistribution of work during peak periods enable staff to manage competing professional demands more effectively, improving work-life balance and wellbeing (Hill et al., 2021; Mazerolle et al., 2011; Mazerolle & Goodman, 2014).

**TEAMWORK-
ORIENTED CULTURES**

**BUFFERED
WORKLOAD
PRESSURES**

AND IMPROVED

**OCCUPATIONAL
SATISFACTION
AND WELLBEING**





SOCIAL FACTORS

Within the workplace, supportive coworkers and social support can meaningfully buffer against burnout and support wellbeing (Mazerolle et al., 2011; Mazerolle & Eason, 2013). Mentoring and embedded social support structures within organisations, especially for newer staff members, can also reduce professional isolation and enhance wellbeing (Hill et al., 2021). Additionally informal peer and family support networks outside of work are key protective factors that can reduce burnout and stress (Quartioli et al., 2022; Mazerolle & Eason, 2013; McCormack et al., 2015).

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS AND STRATEGIES

The ability to uphold work and life boundaries, prioritise personal time and recreational activities outside of work, and engage in self-care, thereby fostering work life balance, are key factors to reduce burnout for sport staff (Kegelaers et al., 2023; Pilkington et al., 2022; Mazerolle & Goodman, 2014; Pitney, 2006; Quartioli et al., 2022). In addition, further individual factors that promoted wellbeing included feelings of motivation and a sense of personal accomplishment in work (Kegelaers et al., 2023; Oglesby et al., 2021), as well as deriving a sense of meaning from work (McCormack et al., 2015). Task-oriented coping styles (Cropley et al., 2016) and an adaptable mindset (Mazerolle & Eason, 2016) were also associated with lower exhaustion and enhanced wellbeing for sport staff.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS



During the roundtable discussion, PDMs discussed their role function, key enablers and challenges. A range of support avenues and enablers were identified, which are presented as five domains below.

ROLE DEFINITION

Despite the importance of PDMs, role ambiguity is common. Limited role definition, especially around scope, was described as leading to role creep, ill-defined role boundaries, and inconsistent expectations of PDMs across the Industry. Consequently, the PDM role was perceived as, at times, lacking understanding within Clubs. Relatedly, everyday oversight and guidance around role and scope were often limited. Clearer role definition and development of success indicators were reported as avenues to enhance role clarity, as well as to build an individual sense of achievement and perceived value within Club environments.

WORKLOAD SUSTAINABILITY

The PDM role was described as involving many diverse and varied tasks. The varied nature of the work was highly valued by PDMs; however, they also noted that the broad role scope commonly resulted in multiple competing demands. The workload implications of the broad role scope, at times, was also perceived to limit time for rest and recovery, furthered by requirements around travel and out of business hours work. Having high workload demands across the year, including the off-season, also limited the perceived ability to take annual leave. Expanding blackout periods for staff were thus seen as valuable. Further, in navigating workload demands, PDMs also outlined the need to draw their own professional boundaries with Players. Many PDMs reflected on shifts over their careers from a sense of needing to do everything for Players, to a focus on building capacity and empowering Players. This shift in approach supported them to enact boundaries, thereby enhancing work-life balance.

EMOTIONAL DEMANDS

The close working relationships with Players and opportunities to have a meaningful impact were additional aspects of the role that were valued by PDMs. Relatedly, PDMs highlighted the emotional load that can accompany these close relationships, especially at times of critical incidents, induction and Player exits. Variations in structured debriefing or supervision pathways for managing this load were described. Learning to build emotional strategies (i.e. avoiding overinvestment) and professional boundaries to manage the emotional load were seen as key skills to enable success in the role, with PDMs emphasising the importance of maintaining professional - not personal - relationships.

TEAM ENVIRONMENTS

Where PDMs were integrated into broader wellbeing teams or had connection with other health and wellbeing staff - such as through working with men's programs, Indigenous Player Development Managers, or collaboration with Club psychologists - this was seen as beneficial for providing connection and peer support, the ability to share ideas and resources, and to share workload. Without these team or collaborative structures, a sense of professional isolation was reported to develop, with connection and collaborative team environments described as desirable.

CAREER PROGRESSION AND DEVELOPMENT

Opportunities for professional development were identified as an area for growth for the workforce. PDMs reflected on limited pipeline development into the role, alongside unclear career progression and advancement opportunities. Uncertain career trajectories were described as potentially limiting workforce sustainability, with PDMs describing a tension between their current job satisfaction and a desire for professional growth and progression.

**CONNECTION
AND PEER
SUPPORT, THE
ABILITY TO
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AND RESOURCES,
AND TO SHARE
WORKLOAD**



SUMMARY

The findings highlight that there is an interplay of organisational, social, and individual avenues for enhancing workforce sustainability, which, in turn, strengthens AFLW Player support and development. Areas of opportunity include greater clarity around role definition, governance structures, and expanding rest and recovery periods. Social connection within and beyond the workplace, including mentoring and team-based collaborative working environments, is also a key enabler.

At the individual level, maintaining boundaries, prioritising personal time, a focus on Player capacity-building, and self-care practices also support wellbeing and sustainability, especially where staff experience a sense of meaning, motivation, and personal accomplishment in their roles. Finally, enhancing professional development pathways and career progression were identified as opportunities to strengthen the PDM workforce. Taken together, these enablers form a foundation for maintaining a strong and effective workforce.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enhance clarity around role scope, responsibilities, and boundaries, which may include integration of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) or success measures
- Encourage and continue to foster peer networks, collaboration and mentoring for PDMs (e.g., through Community of Practice, the Player Development Gathering)
- Develop an aligned workforce capability framework to ensure core competencies of the role are defined, articulated and supported through professional development
- Expand structured professional development opportunities and career progression pathways to develop and retain PDMs
- Support blackout periods for PDMs working with Players
- Encourage cross-collaboration with other health and/or wellbeing staff in Clubs
- Promote self-care practices, including implementing and strengthening professional boundaries and relationships



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