



THE INSTITUTE OF
LEADERSHIP
& MANAGEMENT



Leaders at play:
game-changing leadership
from sport to workplace



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Our Research: Why Now?

The world of business often looks to the world of elite sport for inspiration in leadership, management and high performance; in 2017 the Institute asked leaders and managers to draw parallels between sporting and organisational excellence (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2017). We identified key themes of teamwork, clarity, metrics and mindset, themes that organisations might emulate to deliver success. In this research we explored whether participating in competitive sport gives people a leading edge or “X-factor” in their working lives.

Economists have shown that student athletes achieve greater professional success than their non-athletic peers earning between 5% to 15% more (Sugar, 2015). Other research identified there were greater expectations on former athletes to demonstrate more leadership skills, greater self-confidence and greater self-respect in the workplace than there was on peers who had participated in non-sporting extracurricular activities at school. The same research found that ex-athletes on the whole achieved higher career status and greater levels of leadership responsibilities than non-athletes (Kniffin et al, 2014).

It is asserted that people who compete, or who have competed, in sports work better towards team goals, have greater aversion to failure and have higher levels of self-confidence and self-respect (Fletcher, 2011). Fletcher identified a range of capabilities associated with competitive sports, asserting that former athletes have an ingrained competitive drive making them enticing hires, attributing them with capabilities such as higher levels of determination, greater resilience, leadership, goal setting, confidence and many more attributes.

In this research we test the findings of our previous “Elusive X” report (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2017), asking if people who compete in sports are better at team working, goal setting, giving feedback on performance, empowering staff and are more resilient. We also identify a range of key attributes and capabilities that are associated with people who undertake sporting activities. We find interesting differences between those who have never undertaken competitive sports and those who have, and identify the sectors that are more likely to see positive associations with people who participate in competitive sporting activities.

Research Highlights

- 75% who have played sport competitively believe that it gives skills and capabilities that provide a workplace advantage
- Teamworking is believed to be the top capability developed through competitive sports
- Playing competitive sport builds confidence and mental toughness
- People working in the private sector are most likely to have played sport competitively
- 40% of employers support staff in participating in competitive sporting activities
- Only 10% of employers provide time off to compete in sporting activities
- Public sector workplaces are most likely to provide health and fitness, or sporting facilities,
- Third sector organisations are the least likely to provide health and fitness or sporting facilities
- 60% of people who have not played sport competitively do not believe participation in sport leads to improved career opportunities

In Depth Findings

Who Participates in Competitive Sports?

Before exploring people's perspectives on the impact of competitive sports on workplace capabilities and performance we wanted to understand the extent to which the respondents participated in competitive sport. We initially found that three out of every four (75%) respondents have participated in competitive sports at some point in their lives (figures 1 & 2a), with 28% stating they currently participate in competitive sports, 25% saying they have never competed in competitive sports and 17% saying they have coached competitive sport (figure 2a).

We found that around 10% more male than female respondents currently participate in competitive sports, while around 20% more female respondents have never competed in competitive sports (figure 2b). We also found that the third sector has fewer people who have participated in competitive sports compared to the public sector and the private sector, who have the most (figure 2c). These demographic differences are important as the research reveals differences between perceptions of people within the groups, as discussed later in the report.



Figure 1. Proportion of respondents who have participated in competitive sports

Figure 2a. Proportions of respondents who have participated in competitive sporting activities

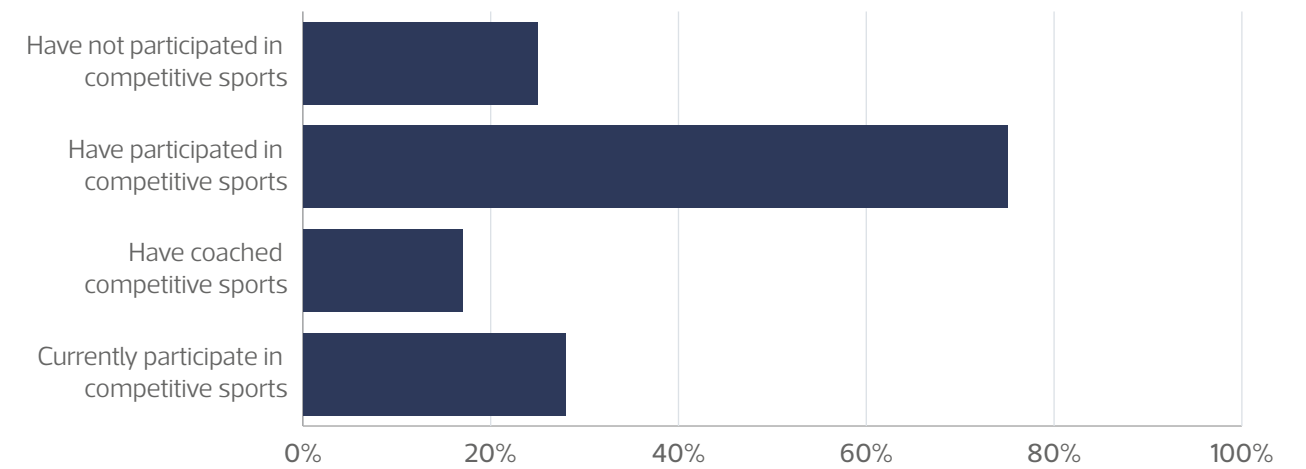


Figure 2b. Proportions of respondents who have participated in competitive sporting activities by gender

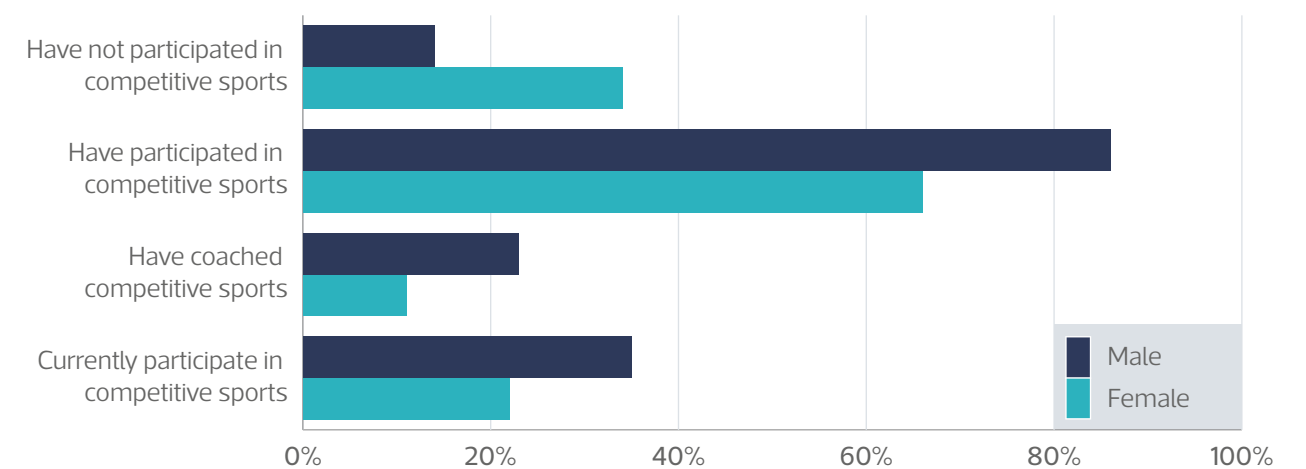
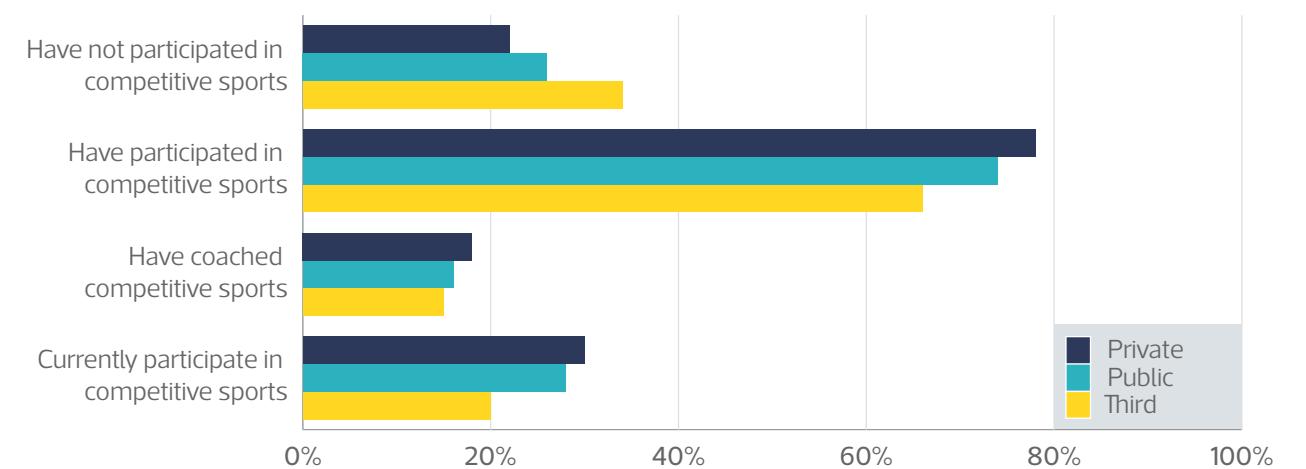


Figure 2c. Proportions of respondents who have participated in competitive sporting activities by sector

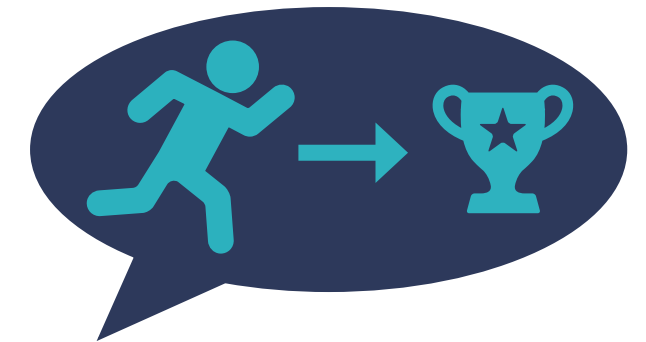


Does participation in sports develop skills and capabilities that give a workplace advantage?

The Institute recognises the importance of participation in sport for general fitness and well-being, but in this research we wanted to explore perceptions of the transferability of any benefits of participation to the workplace.

We found that three out of every four people who participate in sporting events believe it supports the development of skills that are advantageous in the workplace (figure 3). This view is not so widely shared with the respondents (25%) who have never participated in sporting activities with over half claiming that competing in sporting events does not give a skills advantage. Over 90% of those who either participate in, or coach, sport believe participation develops transferable workplace skills.

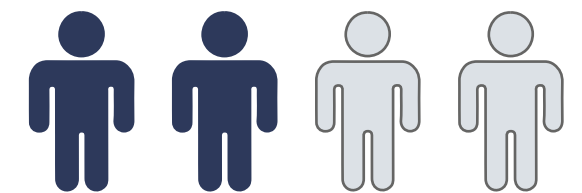
We found a difference between sectors; private and public sector workers are more likely to believe that skills are built through competitive sports than those in the third sector who value this less (figure 4). It is notable that participating in competitive sport is evidenced to lead to higher incomes (Sugar, 2015) and is viewed by many as the reason why they got certain competitive jobs (Kiffin, 2014).



People who participate in competitive sports develop skills and capabilities that are an advantage in the workplace, according to:



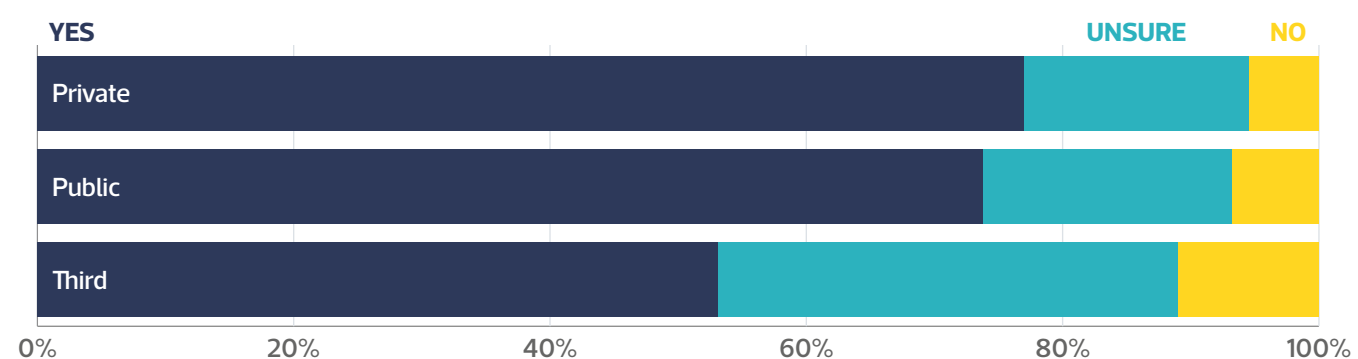
Three out of four who have competed in sports



Two out of four who have never competed in sports

Figure 3. Does competing in sports develop skills and capabilities that are an advantage?

Figure 4. Sector comparison of respondent's perceptions; do people who participate in competitive sport develop skills and capabilities that are an advantage in the workplace?



"I believe people who take part in sport have a more balanced approach to working with people"

Experienced private sector manager (male)

"My experience is that the types of people who are successful in competitive sports already have the skills that are transferable to the workplace; hence their success."

First-time private sector manager (male)

Do people who participate in sports benefit from improved career opportunities?

We asked if respondents felt that participation in competitive sports enhanced career opportunities; overall 41% said yes, 42% were unsure and 17% said no. For those who have not participated in sport we found a shift in perspectives, six out of ten compared to two out of ten, saying that participating in sports does not improve career opportunities (figure 5).

“I believe the advantage of competitive sport is more about attitude and confidence than hard skills.”

Experienced public sector manager
(female)

Male (51%) respondents were much more likely than female (32%) to believe that participating in sport improved career opportunities, more than half of females (53%) were unsure as to whether this was a benefit (figure 6a). Figure 6b shows third sector workers felt there was less of an association than public or private sector worker. The most decisive opinions were in the financial sector with engineering and manufacturing and professional services also more inclined than other sectors to clearly see the benefits, or otherwise, of participation in competitive sports. (Figure 6c).

Figure 6a. Gender comparison: Do people who participate in competitive sports develop skills and capabilities that are an advantage in the workplace?

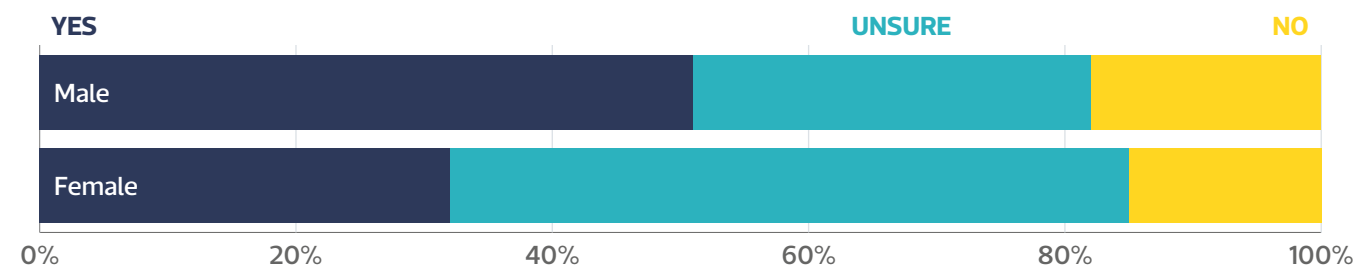


Figure 6b. Sector Comparison: Do people who participate in competitive sports develop skills and capabilities that are an advantage in the workplace?

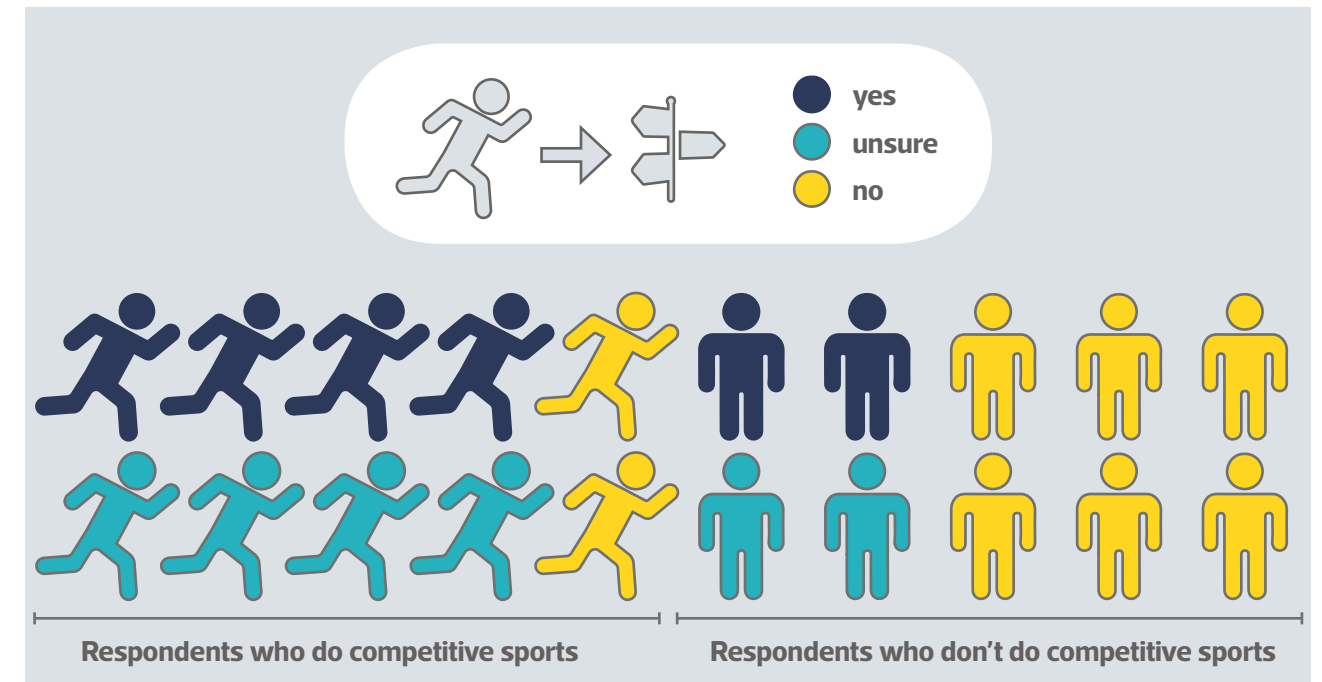
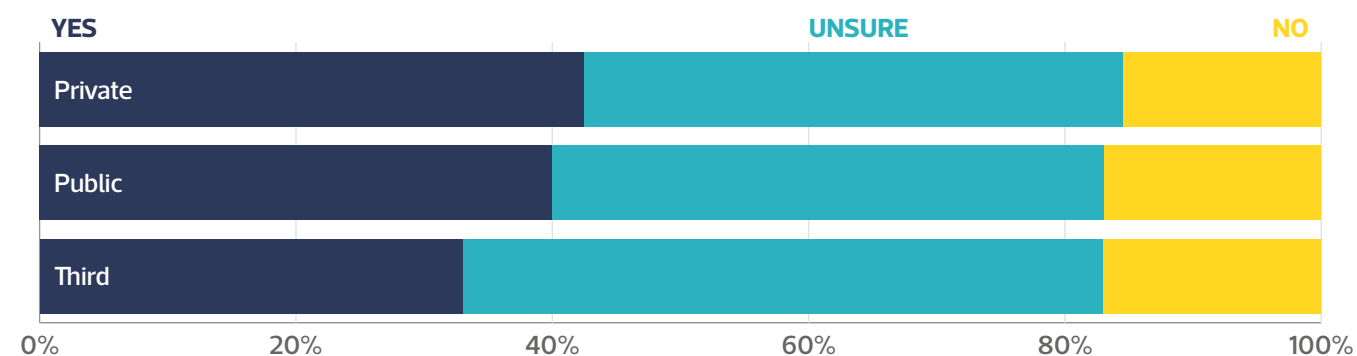
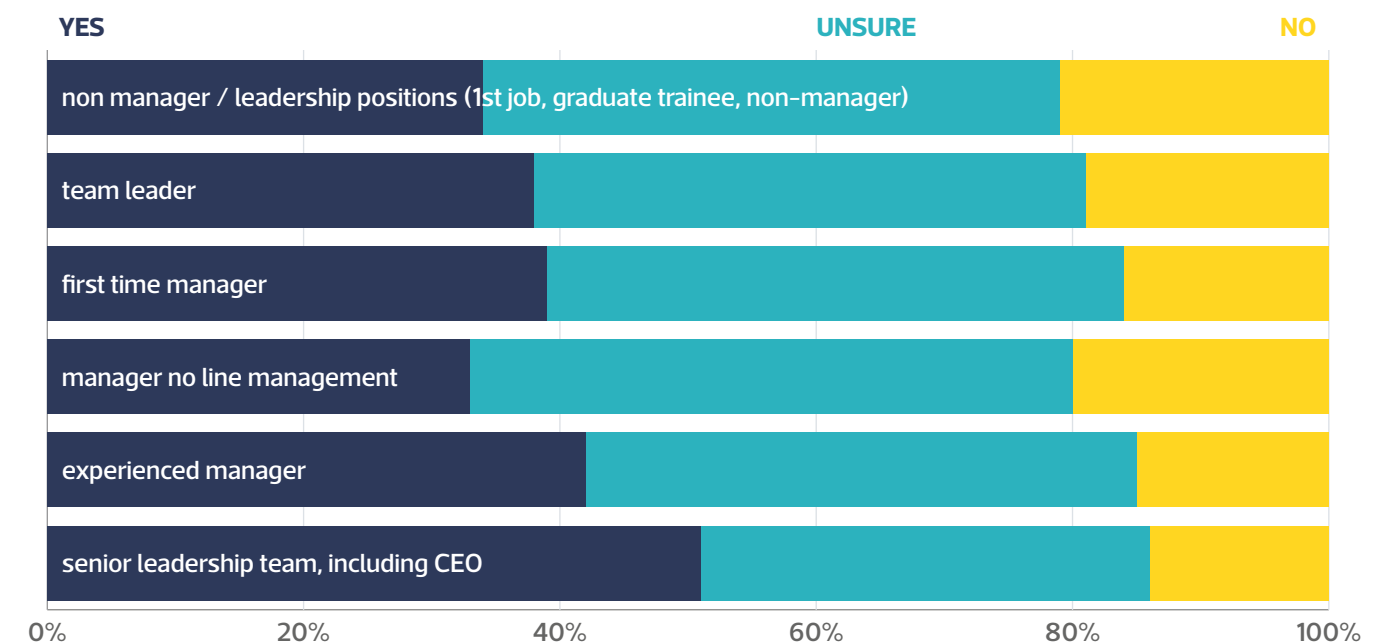


Figure 5. Perception of respondents when asked: Do people who compete in sports benefit from improved career opportunities?

“Personally, I’m not sure taking part in sporting activities improves leadership – however being involved creates networks that puts those involved at an advantage with prospective jobs over those that don’t take part.”

Public Sector first time manager (male)

Figure 6c. Role type comparison: Do people who participate in competitive sports develop skills and capabilities that are an advantage in the workplace?



Key transferable workplace capabilities developed through competitive sports

Respondents were asked to select the top three capabilities that they felt were developed through participating in competitive sports. Figure 7 shows the rankings in order of importance by the proportion of people voting for each capability. Respondents had the opportunity to say if they did not believe competitive sports developed transferable capabilities; 4% stated this was the case.

Team working was ranked as the top capability from all demographic groups, 58%. Confidence came in second place both overall, 38% and in all the demographic groups with the exception of third sector respondents, who placed resilience as the second highest rated capability (36%) compared to confidence (33%). Overall we found that people who had never participated in sports ranked skills lower than those who had participated in sports or coached (with the exception of team work), while 12% of people who had never participated in sports said they do not believe that sporting activities develop transferable workplace capabilities, in contrast to the 13% of those who do participate in, or coach, competitive sports.

“I believe that competitive sports allow individuals to be self-critical and build a number of transferable skill sets.”

Experienced private sector manager (male)

“Competitive sport can promote traits that are disadvantageous in the workplace. Aggressive rivalry and competitiveness can be problematic at the workplace within teams. It can also be a problem if managers are overly competitive and push/ pressurise teams & individuals.”

Experienced public sector manager (female)

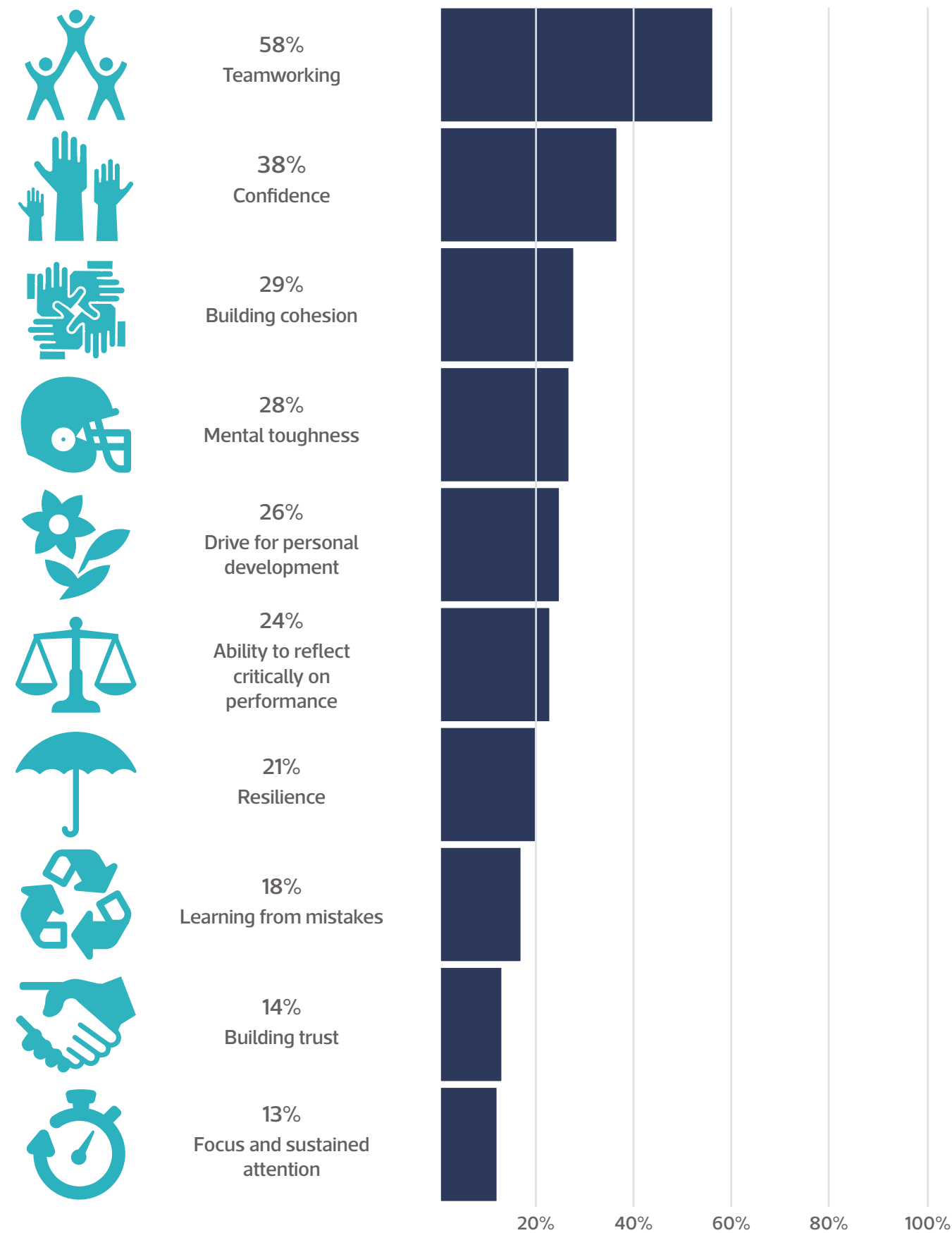


Figure 7 (opposite). Top ranked transferable capabilities associated with participating in competitive sport



Thoughts from Elite Sport



Kris Chesney, former England Sevens, Saracens and Toulon rugby player, and Institute of Leadership & Management Sport Report Ambassador said: "There are so many similarities between the emotional experience of playing elite sport and the day-to-day life of organisations. In sport, when you're benched, or told you haven't made the squad, those feelings of rejection are similar to those you feel when you're excluded from an important client pitch or meeting. This is the time you can call on the mental toughness or the confidence you've developed in sport to help you deal with disappointments in the workplace."

Kris commented specifically on developing teamwork through competitive sport: "I learnt, playing rugby, that when you're in a team of people and you have some useful feedback for one of them, you may not necessarily be the best person to deliver that feedback for it to be the most effective. Similarly, in the workplace, when you see someone in your team could benefit from some feedback, in order to achieve the desired outcome, who delivers that feedback is absolutely as important as what the feedback is."



Danny Powell, Skill Acquisition Developer, British Para-Swimming and Institute of Leadership & Management Sport Report Ambassador confirms that sport develops transferable capabilities, saying: “My experience of working with athletes and coaches across a range of sports has helped me to see first-hand how the skills we work to develop are extremely beneficial when transitioning into a new field.”

Danny’s experience supports The Institute’s findings that teamwork, confidence and resilience are three capabilities, among many others, which can be developed in sport and provide an advantage off the pitch. He continued: “In sport,

the qualities needed to succeed and to cope with setbacks must emerge by necessity, as this can be the difference between winning and losing. In the highly pressurised and competitive world of elite sport, this means acquiring skills including leadership, teamwork, focus, communication, ownership, adaptability, resilience and self-reflection. Through my work with the Paralympians at British Swimming, where athletes with a range of disabilities compete at the highest level, I have also witnessed the transformational power of sport and how it provides confidence and self-belief, qualities essential to future life success.”



Gemma Morgan, speaker, former Army officer and Wales lacrosse captain, and Institute of Leadership & Management Sport Report Ambassador highlights the positive effect of sport on mental health: “I do agree that when ‘sport’ is coached well and positive environments are created then it offers an often inspiring opportunity to develop personal skills that may become life long and transferable to other contexts. The key challenges we face in society today centre around obesity, wellness and resilience. My view is that the primary impetus for sports participation, whether at work or at school, must come from reasons of health and wellbeing. The benefits of leadership, team work, goal-setting are fantastic additions, and indeed skills that have been of benefit to me personally, but they are secondary gain.”

However, Gemma adds a significant caveat: “Sport is not a panacea of good for all. Perceptions are often derived from deeply embedded but unhelpful narratives. Problems arise when we perceive sport as a metaphor for virtue. Too often through sport we consciously or unconsciously promote unrealistic expectations of perfection in performance and perfection in behaviour. We promote unhelpful stereotypes relating to heroic leadership and macho culture. We promote unhelpful models of resilience such as the athlete ‘pushing through’ in order to keep going. Lift the lid a little further and you will find a damning picture of exclusion of minorities, arrogance, hypocrisy and racism often justified by the belief of pushing the rules and playing hard. In summary, the sport narrative that drives our perceptions is not necessarily grounded in reality.”

Is the X still elusive?

In the Institute's original "Elusive X" research (The Institute of Leadership & Management, 2017), which was undertaken through focus groups (Figures 8 and 9), we identified four attributes that respondents felt people who participated in competitive sports brought to the workplace, these were:

- Managers who participate in competitive sports are better at empowering staff
- People who participate in competitive sports provide better feedback on performance
- People who participate in competitive sports are better at setting clear obtainable goals
- People who participate in competitive sports have better team working skills than those who do not

Figure 8. Dominant areas of discussion in Elusive X Focus Groups

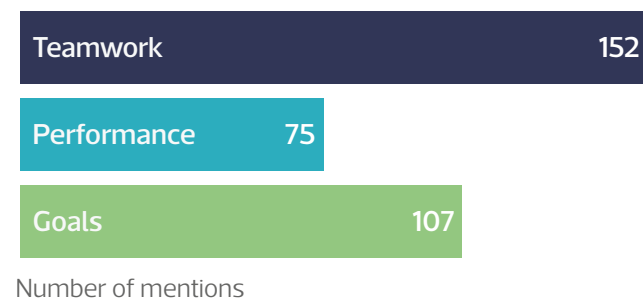
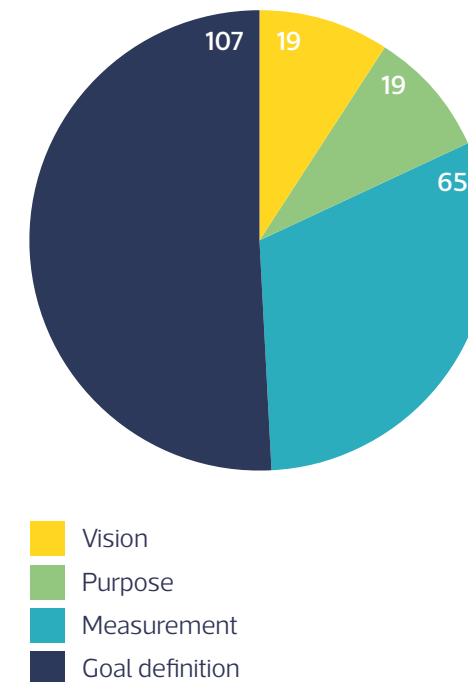
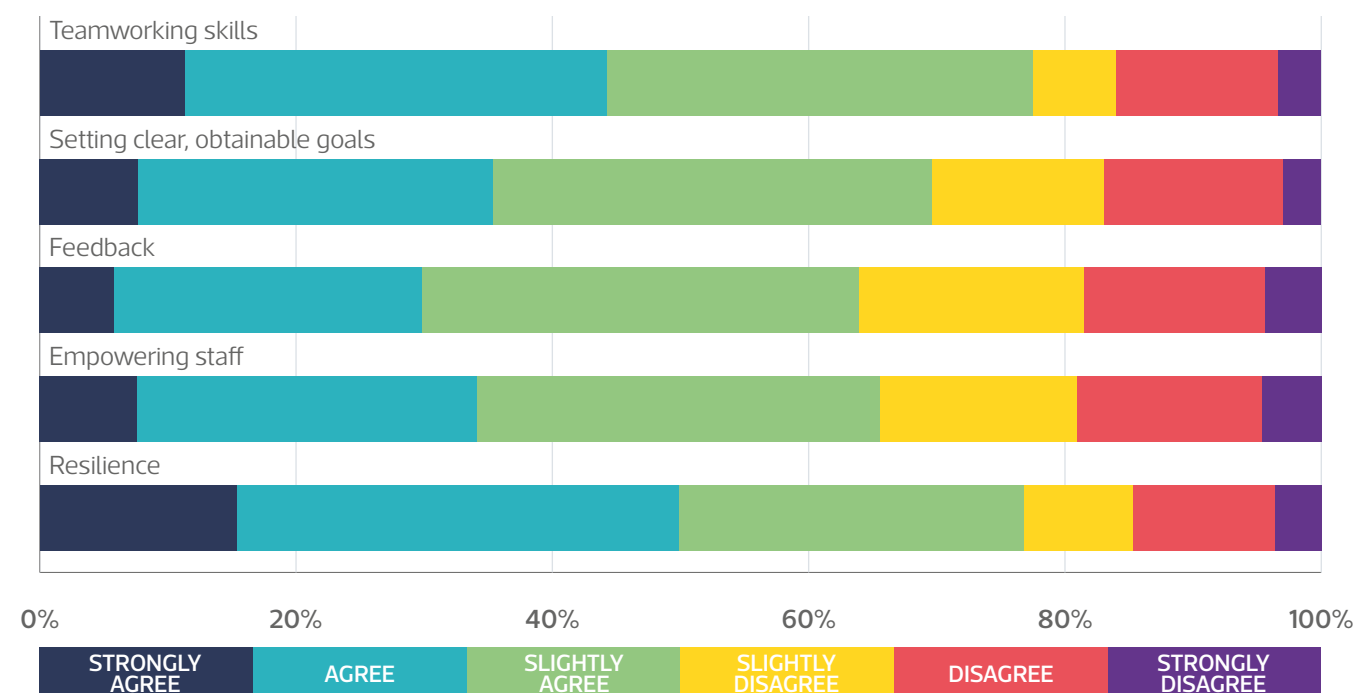


Figure 9. Where clarity helps



We wanted to test these more rigorously, so asked research respondents the extent to which they agree that people participating in sporting activities have strong ability in these four capabilities, and we also added resilience. We found the majority of respondents agreed with the statements confirming our original focus group research in the "Elusive X" (figure 10). Over 77% of respondents felt that people participating in competitive sports were better at teamworking and more resilient in the workplace than people who did not participate in competitive sport. 64–70% of respondents felt participation in sport enables managers to be better at setting clear obtainable goals, empowering staff and providing feedback on performance. There were differences between subgroups of the research population such as sector, age and gender differences as discussed below.

Figure 10. Extent of agreement with attributes derived from participation in competitive sports



"My experience is that the types of people who are successful in competitive sports already have the skills that are transferable to the workplace; hence their success."

First time private sector manager (male)

"I am ex - military and was told from the beginning that sport is a great leveller. Everyone who steps onto a pitch or into an arena are equal. The only difference is the drive, the ability and the intention. If you can master all three then anything is possible. Take this in to the workplace and the same applies. Success is born out of determination, drive and mental awareness."

Experienced public sector manager (male)

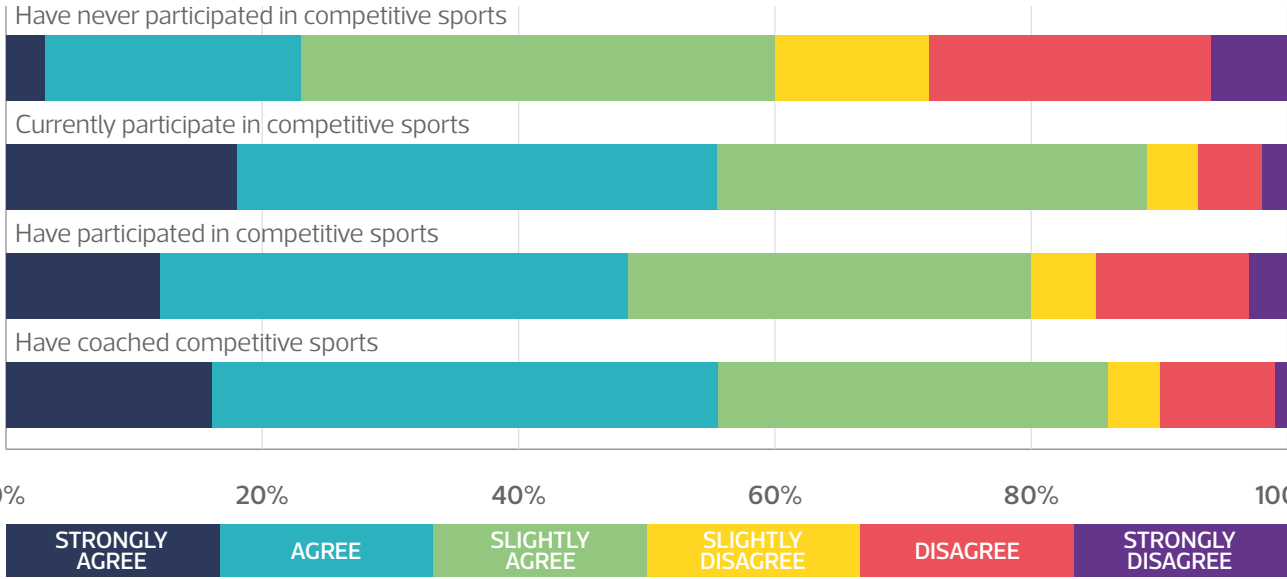
People who participate in competitive sports are perceived to be better at teamworking than those who do not

When we asked to what extent people agreed with the statement “people who participate in competitive sports have better team working skills than those that don’t,” an overwhelming majority of respondents agreed with this statement at least to some extent. The lowest level of agreement with this statement came from people who did not participate in competitive sports, where we found 60% of people agreed with this statement compared to 80-90% of people who have competed or have coached at some point in their lives (figure 12). We found male respondents were slightly more likely than female respondents to agree with this statement at 81% compared to 75%, there were only small differences between the other demographic groups.



Figure 11. People who participate in competitive sports are perceived to be better at team working than those who do not

Figure 12. To what extent do respondents agree that people who participate in competitive sports have better teamworking skills than those who don't



“I think there is a strong link between competitive sport and leadership / teamwork. It helps to nurture these areas in an enjoyable way, while enjoying downtime away from the office. It helps to develop confidence, respect and ability to make quick decisions.”

Experienced private sector manager (female)

People who participate in competitive sports are perceived to be better at goal setting than those who do not

The majority of respondents (70%) agreed with the statement “people who participate in competitive sports are better at setting clear obtainable goals,” (figure 13). Of those who have never competed in sports just under half, 49.5%, agreed with this statement compared with 73–88% of people who had competed or coached.

A majority in the third sector, 55%, agreed that competing in sports makes people better at setting clear obtainable goals, increasing to 68% in the public sector and 72% in the private sector.

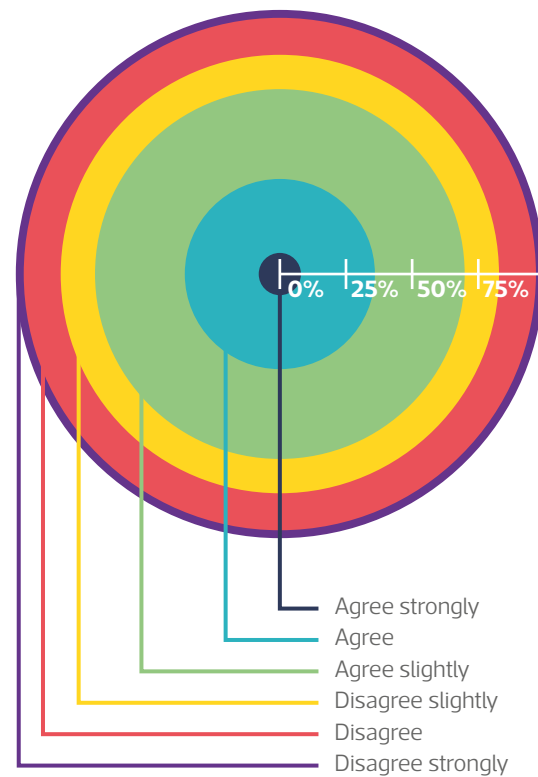
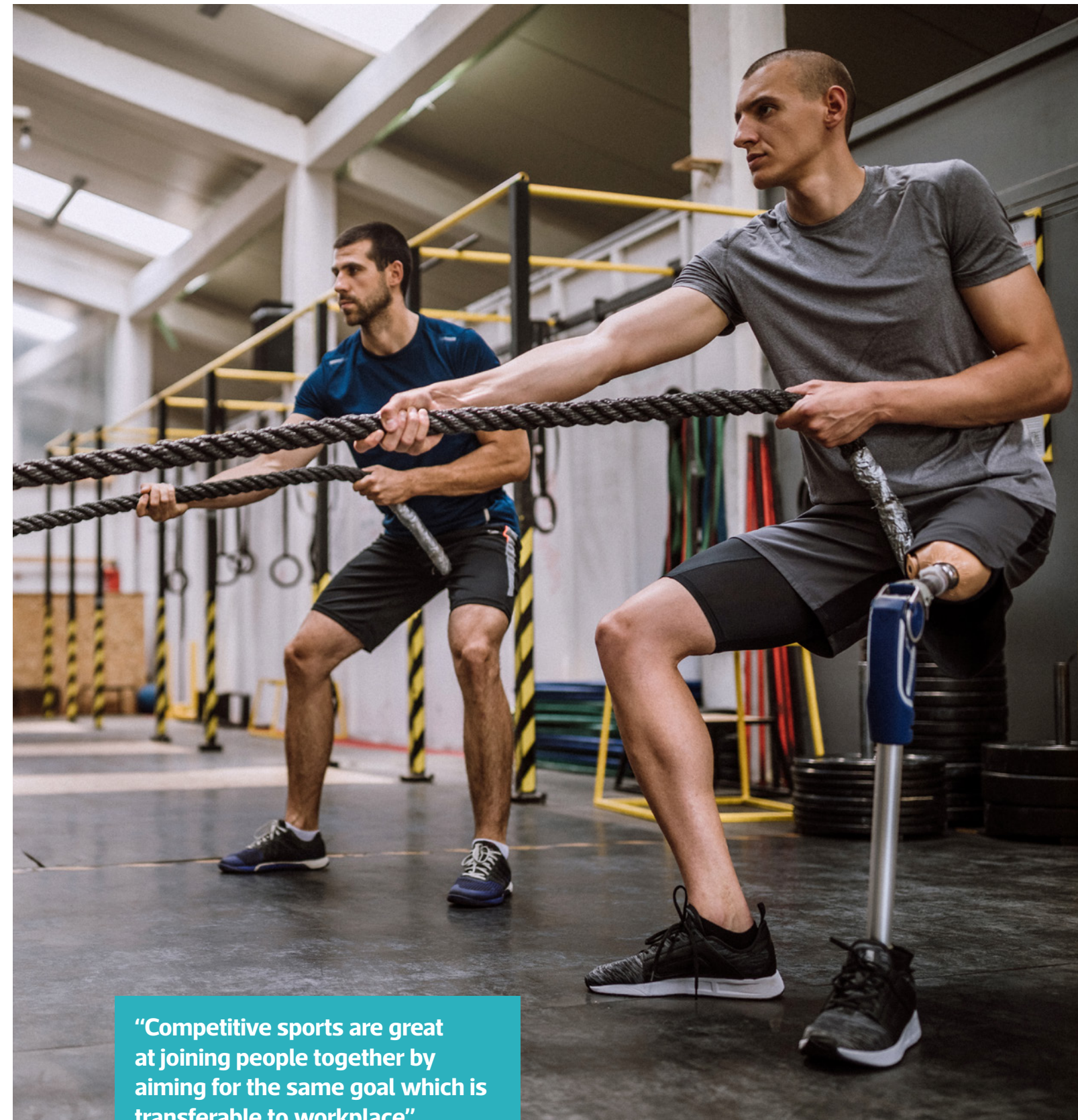
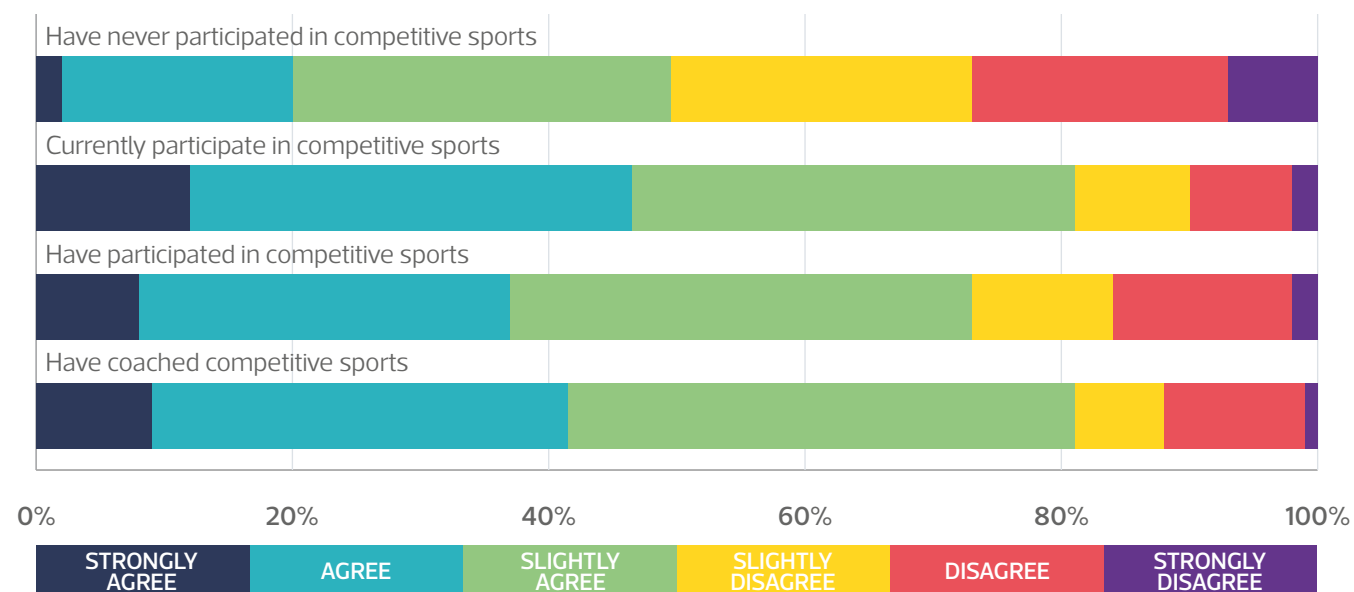


Figure 13. People who participate in competitive sports are perceived to be better at setting clear obtainable goals

Figure 14. To what extent do different respondents agree that people who participate in competitive sports are better at setting clear obtainable goals



“Competitive sports are great at joining people together by aiming for the same goal which is transferable to workplace”

Public sector worker (female)

People who participate in competitive sports are perceived to be better at giving feedback on performance than those who do not

Overall there is a perception that people who compete in competitive sports give better feedback on performance (60%) (figure 15). However, only 50% of people working in third sector organisations agree with this statement compared to 62% from the public sector and 68% from the private sector. Almost half of those who have not played competitive sport agree it helps develop feedback skills.

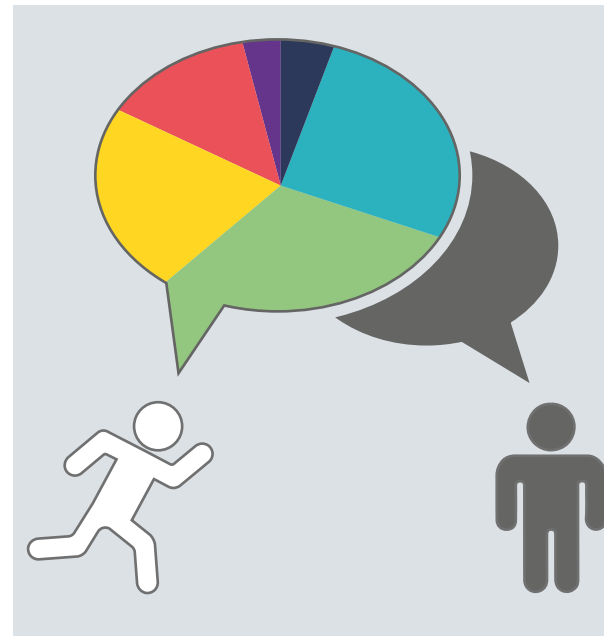
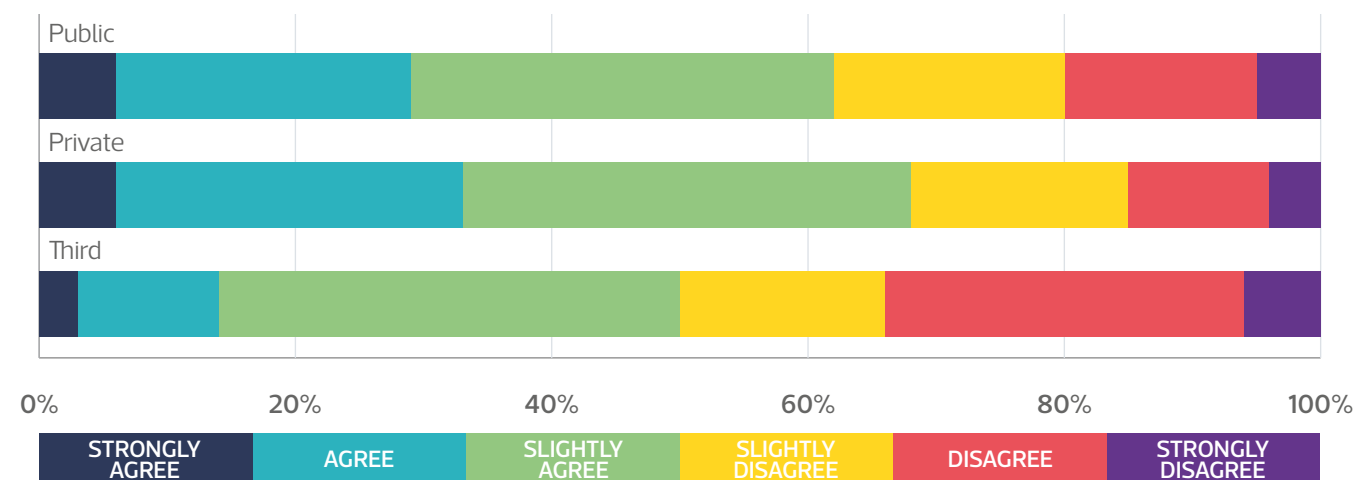


Figure 15. People who participate in competitive sports are perceived to be better at giving feedback on performance

Figure 16a. To what extent do people working in different sectors agree that people who participate in competitive sports give better feedback on performance



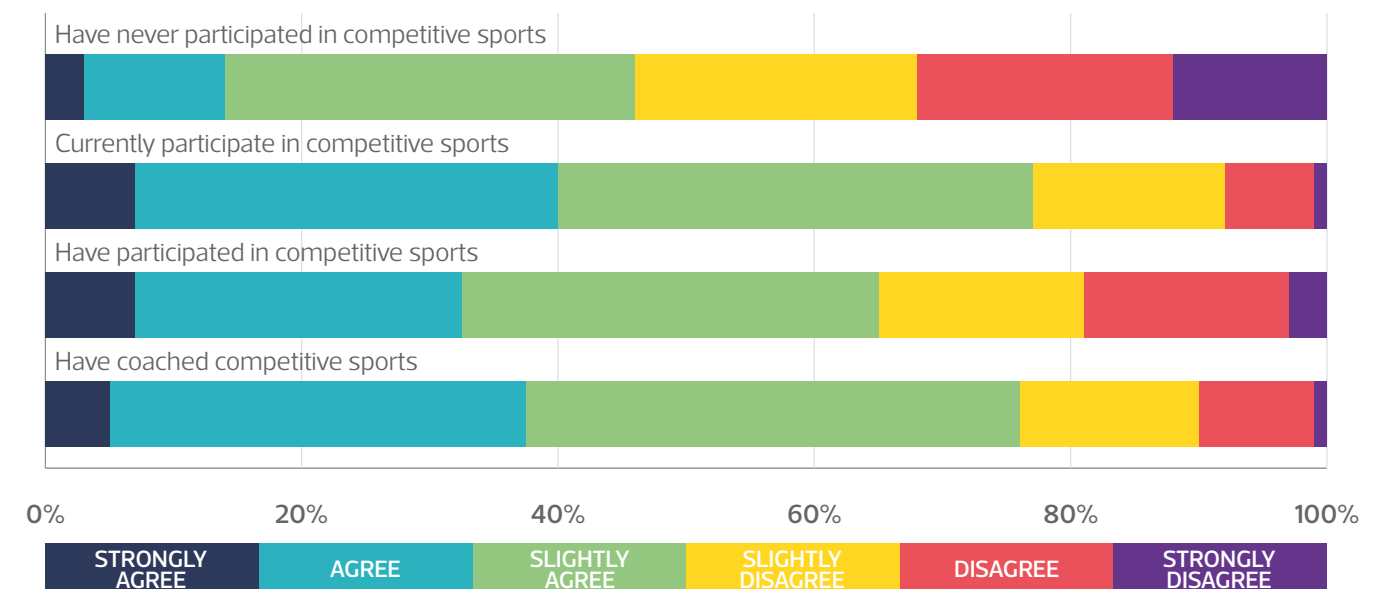
“In my experience, any increased performance within the workplace very much depends on a variety of factors: firstly, the type of professional sports, whether team orientated or not; secondly, their own coaching experiences and how these transfer into their general persona and work life; thirdly, participating in competitive sports might generate a competitive edge, but this alone is not an attribute that can generally be seen to measure success.”

Public Sector CEO (male)

“There is certainly a link between performance and sport.”

Public Sector CEO (male)

Figure 16b. To what extent do respondents agree that people who participate in competitive sports give better feedback on performance



People who participate in competitive sports are perceived to be better at empowering staff

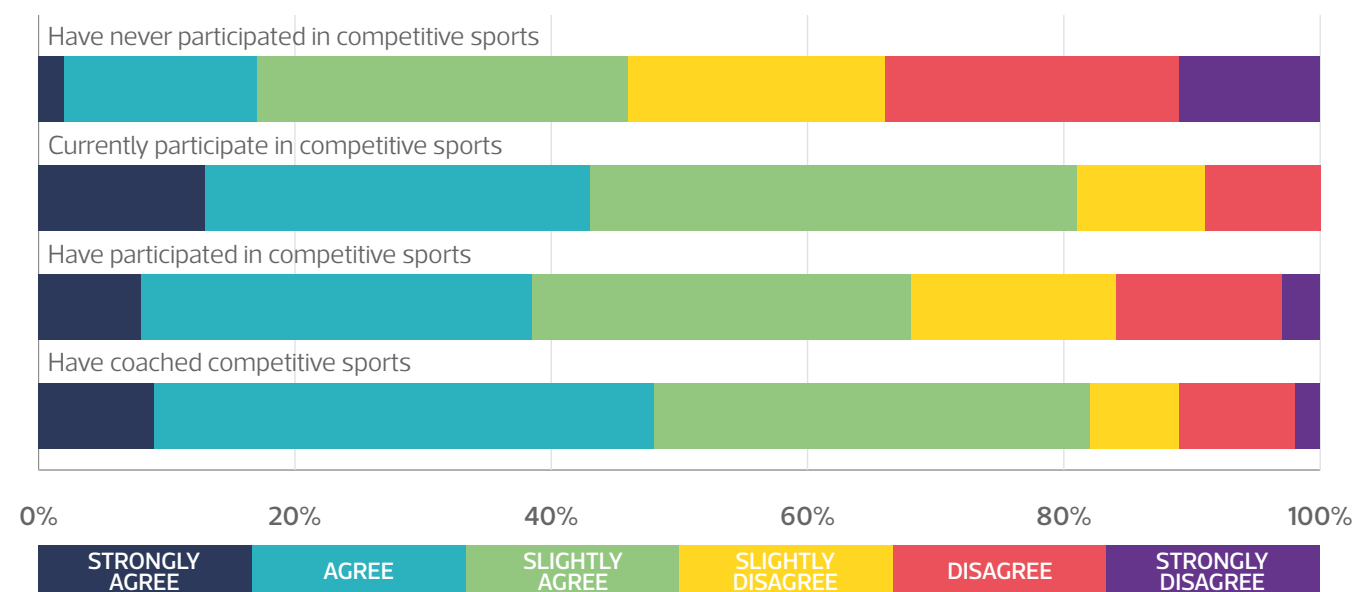
The majority agreed with the statement that people who participate in competitive sports are better at empowering staff (66%) (figure 17). Again, non-participants (46%) were less likely to agree with the statement (figure 18).



"I feel it gives you a strength in mind to think under pressure"

Public sector Senior manager (male)

Figure 18. Comparison of the perceptions of participants and non-participants as to managers ability to empower staff



What are people's main motivations for doing competitive sports?

To understand people's motivations for undertaking competitive sports we asked respondents to identify the reasons for doing competitive sports. The top two reasons given were for overall fitness (31%), closely followed by to improve health (29%). The third reason was to challenge or compete with themselves (21%), and the fourth, manage their mental health (18%). The fifth most popular reason was to socialise (15%). Reasons associated with personal development, transferable skills, and building networks were less popular. Although there is clear recognition of the benefits of participation in sport in the workplace, the impetus comes from reasons of wellbeing rather than the development of transferable skills.

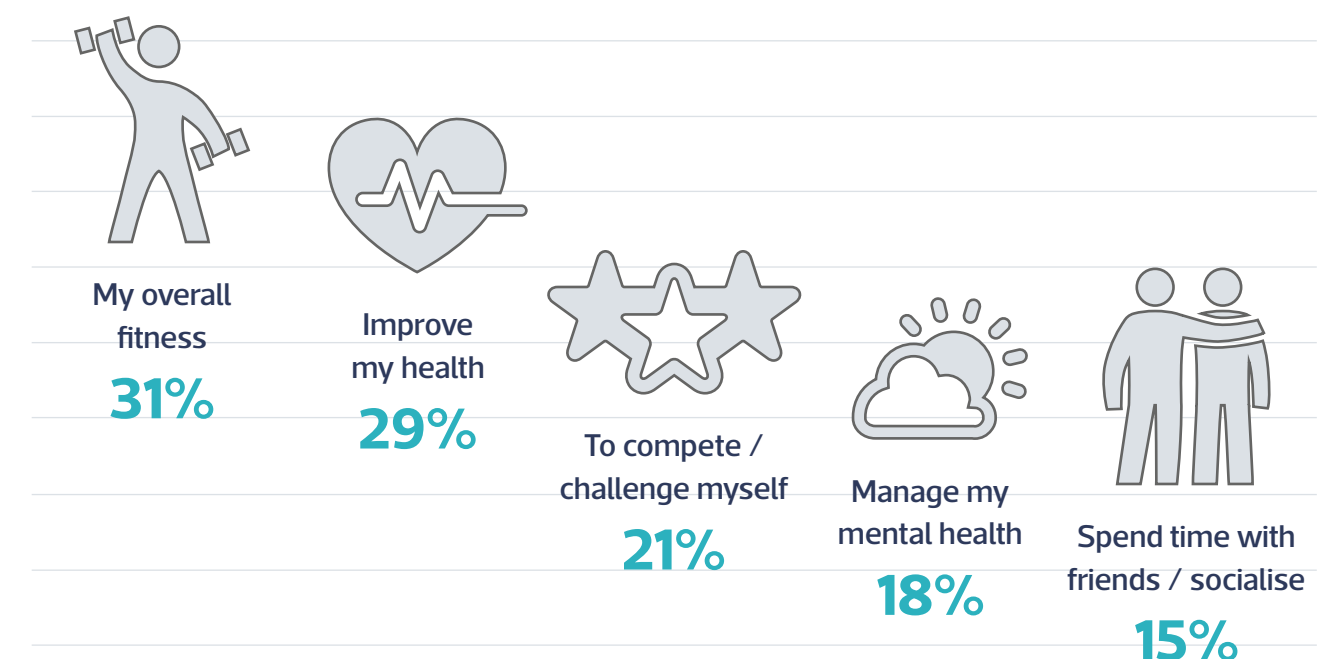
"Sporting activities assist with mental and physical fitness that can help with self-discipline in the workplace"

Public Sector worker (male)

"Participating in sporting activities gives you focus. I've found that planning and preparing for distance running helps me focus on targets, and training runs improve my mental health and wellbeing."

Experienced public sector manager (female)

Figure 19. Respondents motivations for participating in sports



How well do employers support sporting activities?

We wanted to know how well employers supported sporting activities. Two out of five said they were supported in competitive activities (figure 20). There were differences in responses at both sector and industry level; public sector employers offering most support with 45%, (10% higher than private and 20% higher than third sector) of respondents reporting that competitive sporting activities are supported. While workers in the financial industry reported the highest levels of support for participating in competitive sports 60%, in contrast only 28% of people in health industries and 30% of people in charitable industries stated they were supported in participating in sporting activities (figure 21).

“It depends upon employers’ attitude to sport; I always had sympathetic bosses and as a boss I was keen on my staff participating in sport”

Male research participant

Figure 21. Proportions of people supported by their employer to participate in competitive sports

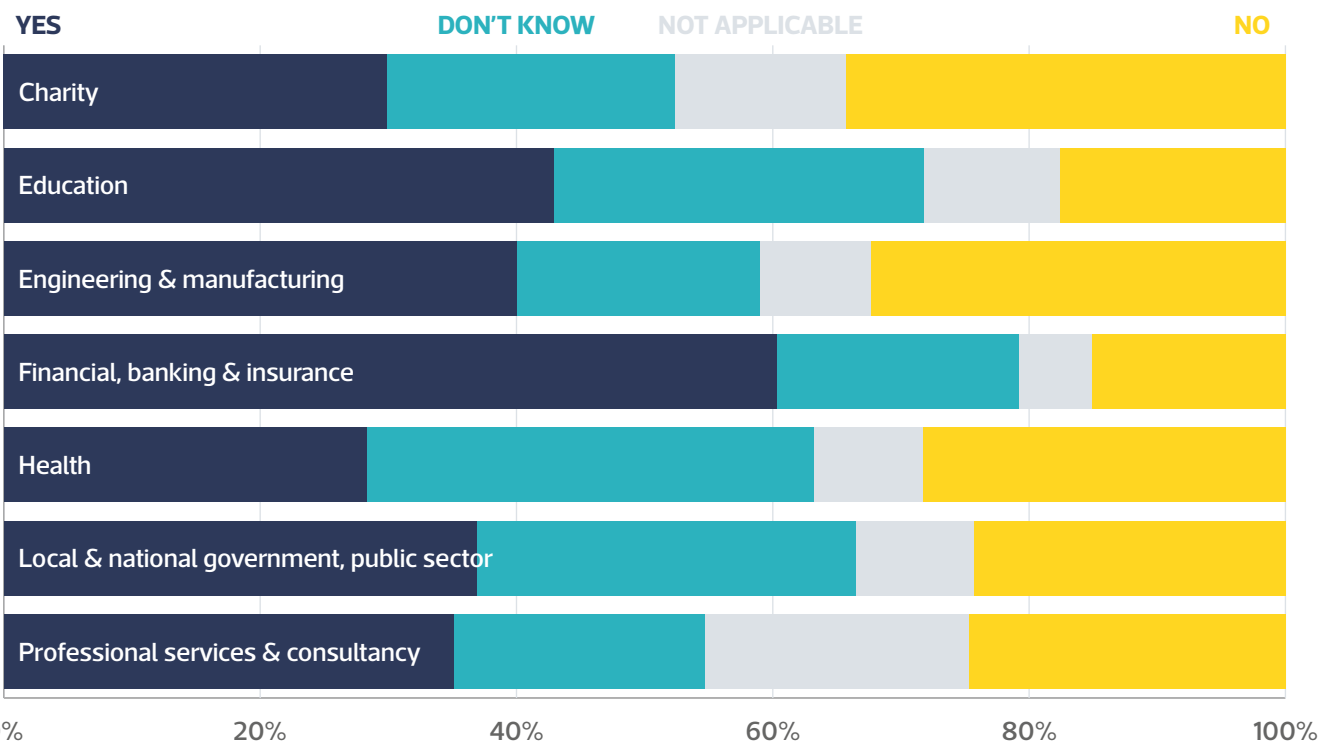


Figure 20. Two in five employers support staff in participating in competitive sporting activities

What support does your employer provide for you to participate in sporting activities?

It is well evidenced (Sport England, 2017) that participating in sporting and physical activities is good for general physical and mental wellbeing which reduces workplace absenteeism. We wanted to know the extent to which such activities are supported by employers.

37% of employers provide no support for participation in sporting activities. Where support is available, the most popular is through gym membership schemes, provided by 28% of employers), followed by Workplace gym (23%), workplace sports teams (18%) and Access to sporting facilities 17% (figure 22).

“I believe sport and fitness is key to improving staff wellbeing and mental health, especially if it is encouraged in and around work.”

First time private sector manager (female)

Public sector workplaces are more likely to provide support than either private or third sector employers; 50% of third sector, compared to 29% and 40% of public and private sector don't provide support for participating in sports. A gym was provided by 35% of public sector employers, 13 % private sector and 6% third sector employers (figure 23).

Figure 23. Sector comparison of support provided by employers to participate in sport and fitness activities

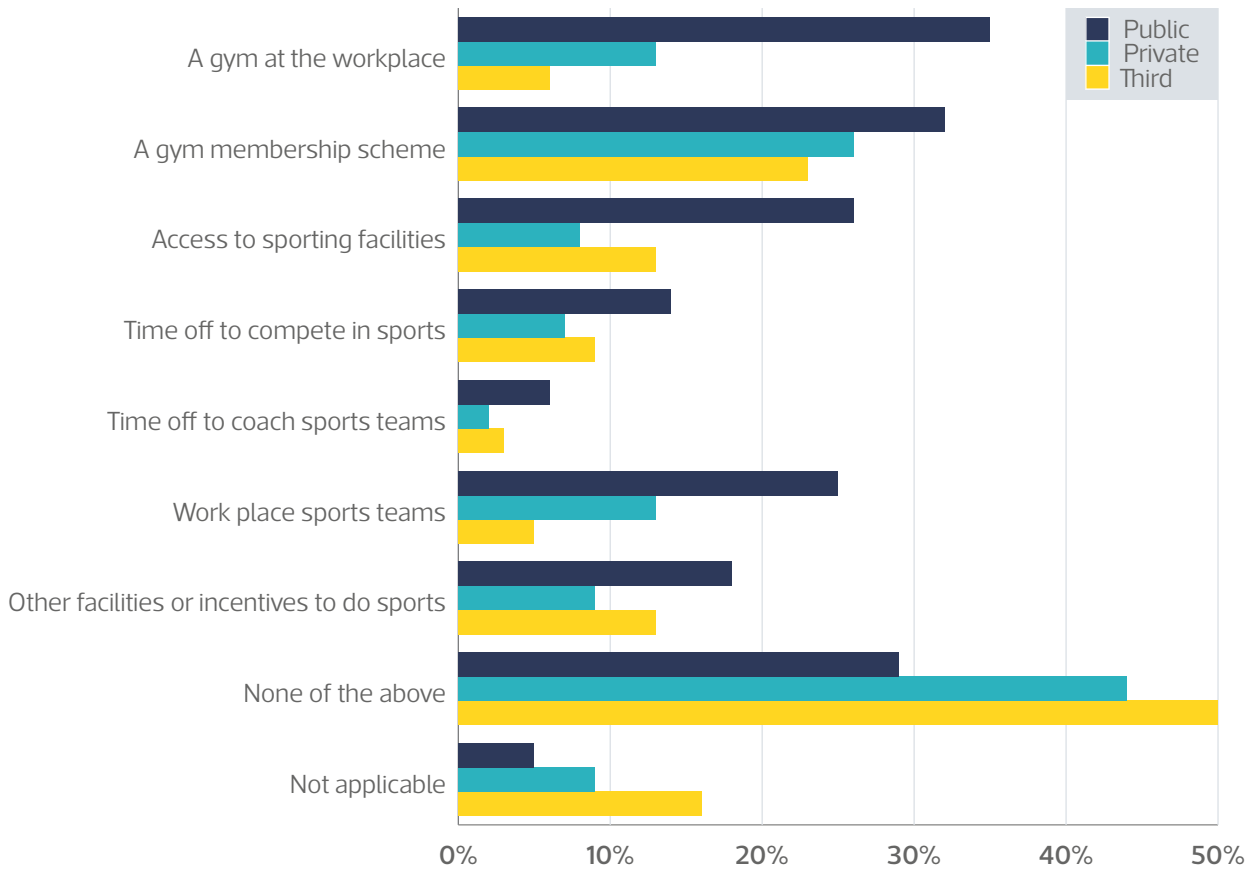
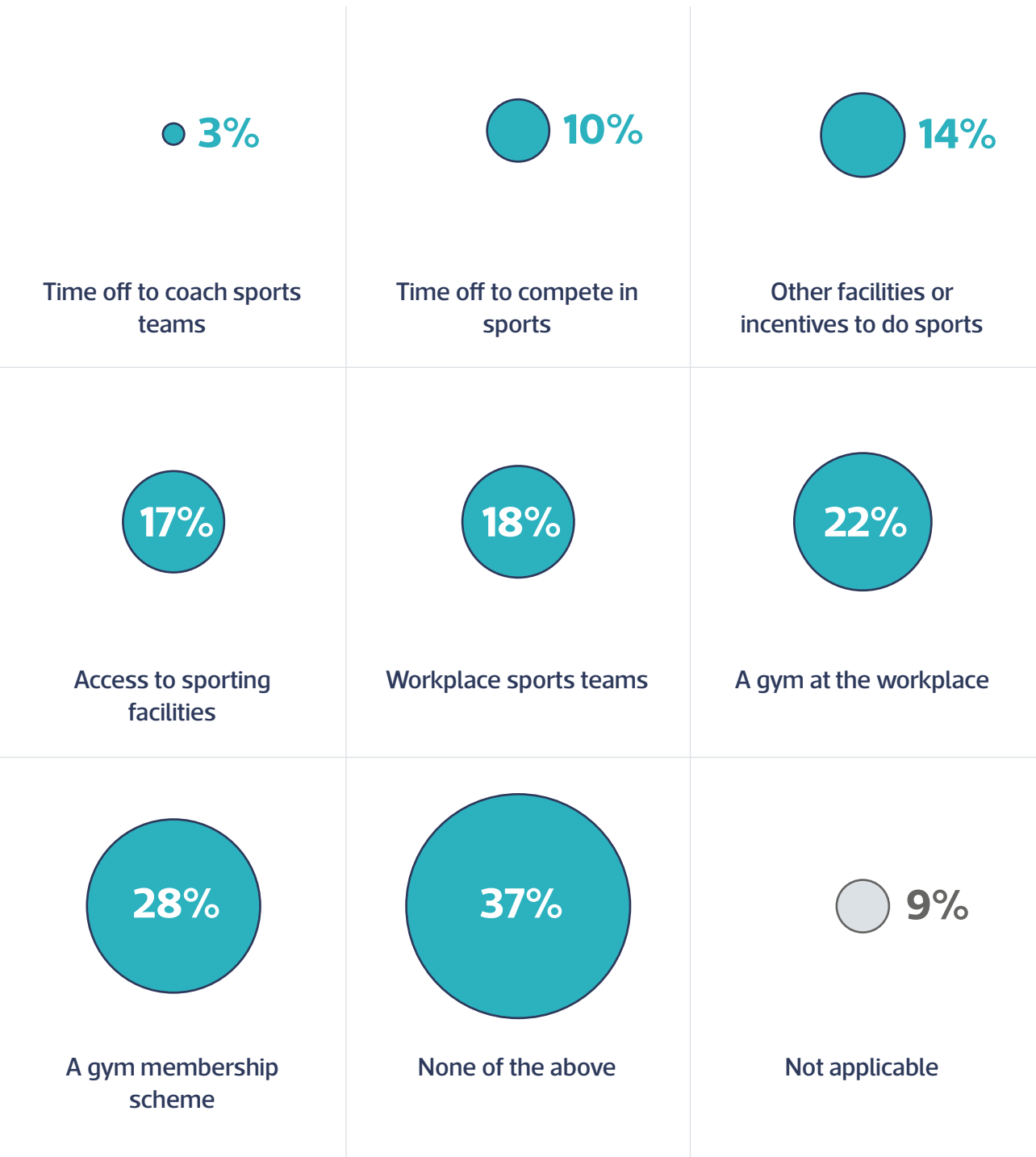


Figure 22. Support given by employer to participate in sport and fitness activities



Conclusions

Competitive sports and workplaces are high performance environments. There are opportunities for the corporate world to learn lessons from elite sport (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2017).

This new research demonstrates that the majority of people perceive that competing in sports builds transferable capabilities and gives career advantages. The majority associate people who do competitive sports as performing better; they are better team workers, more resilient, better at goal setting and empowering their staff. People who have competed in sports themselves are more positive about the impact of undertaking competitive sports on workplace skills. In contrast, people who have never competed in sports rated the strengths from sports lower, often highlighting through free text comments that individuals can develop the same attributes through other non-sporting activities outside of the workplace.

Other free text comments, examples of which are shared within this report, offer great insight into the respondents' perceptions and emphasise the importance of not conflating cause and correlation. Some of our respondents reflected that individuals participating in sports have the attributes discussed and are high performers using those skills for sports as well as the workplace, rather than gaining those skills through sports participation, while some respondents shared concerns that too much association with competitive sports may have a negative impact within the workplace. Some were of the opinion that the attributes people developed through doing competitive sports could be developed equally well through other non-sporting activities, hobbies and interests.

Many of our respondents also talked about the importance of non-competitive sporting activities on both physical and mental health.

Recommendations

The Institute is running a series of round table events where the findings of this research will be discussed and pragmatic advice formulated from the insights gained. The report will be updated once the discussions are completed.

“While participating in sporting activity can aid the development of team working skills etc. I don't believe that sports are the only or best route to these skills”

Experienced third sector manager (female)

“I have noticed overconfidence and arrogance from those who mention their outside sporting activities at work. Their competence and empathy is no better and is sometime worse. The sporting types often set up cliques.”

Experienced private sector manager (male)

“Learning to play e.g. golf helped inclusion into groups when asked, providing both friendship and networking”

Senior private sector manager (male)

Methodology

During 2018 The Institute of Leadership & Management undertook an on-line survey, over 900 respondents participated in the research, mostly based within the UK. Participants were answered a series of ten closed questions selecting fields that most closely applied their own experiences and perceptions, this included some Likert style questions. In addition, participants were offered the opportunity to contribute further perspectives through a non-directed open free text question.

Results were analysed for the whole population and for demographic subgroups of the population (experience participating in and coaching competitive sport, gender, age, role type, sector and industry).

The survey was conducted in line with the Market Research Society (MRS) Code of Conduct. All responses were anonymous, but respondents were asked if they would be willing to be contacted for PR purposes and were also incentivised to participate in the research.

The Institute of Leadership & Management is the professional membership body for leaders, managers, coaches and mentors. We believe inspirational leadership holds the key to personal fulfilment, social wellbeing and economic prosperity. By connecting like-minded people, we aim to influence and inform and be the source of pioneering thought leadership and commentary in our field.

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