

RISK MANAGEMENT AND CONTINGENCY PLANNING IN EVENTS: PARTICIPANTS' REACTIONS TO THE CANCELLATION OF IRONMAN NEW ZEALAND 2012

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ABSTRACT

Previous event studies on risk and risk management have predominantly been undertaken from the perspective of event organizers, whilst the perceptions of event participants in relation to risks, their eventuation, and management have received less attention. This paper presents an exploratory case study of amateur athletes' reactions to the cancellation of a participation-based sporting event, with particular reference to their perceptions of risk management and contingency planning initiatives deployed by event organizers. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews with participants of the cancelled 2012 Ironman New Zealand triathlon it was found participants perceived the situation as diligently and competently handled. Some criticism was directed however, towards event organizers' communication strategies and aspects of their contingency initiatives. This research highlights the role comprehensive risk management and contingency planning can play in preventing damage to an event's image and reputation if adverse circumstances are encountered.

KEY WORDS

Risk management; Contingency planning; Amateur athletes

INTRODUCTION

Events comprise a range of activities that generate potential for the eventuation of risks and crises (Reid & Ritchie, 2011). A comprehensive risk management plan to "control the impact of unforeseen issues or accidents" (Hanstad, 2012, p. 190) is essential for organizations hosting events. Risk management entails proactively assessing possible risks to an event and its stakeholders by "strategically anticipating, preventing, minimizing, and planning responses to mitigate those identified risks" (Leopkey & Parent, 2009a, p. 187). In addition to assessing and managing potential hazards, risk management planning may encompass contingency planning or establishing viable alternative actions to respond to risks should they eventuate (Yeoman, Robertson, Ali-Knight, Drummond, & McMahon-Beattie, 2004).

Outdoor events have considerable exposure to risk (Fuller & Drawer, 2004). One particular area of risk pertinent to outdoor events is adverse weather conditions (Getz, 2002). According to Dawkins and Stern (2004, p. 3) “the ‘right’ kind of weather” can influence many facets of events, from attendance to revenue generation and, in extreme cases, the actual occurrence of the event. There is growing scientific evidence that the frequency and severity of extreme weather is increasing (Gössling & Hall, 2006). The Asia Pacific region is particularly susceptible to such changes, with the region having an apparent increase in temperatures and more frequent extreme weather events, such as floods and cyclones (Keogh, Apan, Mushtaq, King & Thomas, 2011). Arguably these trends are significant because of the potential risk presented to outdoor events, and their concomitant implications for risk management and contingency planning.

The risks adverse weather conditions engender for outdoor event participants have been exemplified by events such as the 1998 Sydney to Hobart yacht race. The race took place during a severe storm and resulted in six fatalities (Guest, 1999). In 2011, an ultra-marathon in Western Australia was conducted on a day forecast for extreme fire danger and a number of competitors became trapped and badly injured in an ensuing bushfire (Brady, Holloway & Green, 2012). Clearly, for organizers of outdoor events, the potential impacts of extreme weather conditions need to be considered and managed as an integral part of fulfilling occupational health and safety requirements and legal duty of care.

Legal obligations associated with risk scenarios have prompted outdoor event organizers to adopt risk management guidelines and procedures (Getz, 2005). Academic interest in risk management in events has grown concurrently. However, whilst existing literature has considered the perspectives of event managers (Reid & Ritchie, 2011), spectators (Toohey & Taylor, 2008) and other stakeholders (Leopkey & Parent, 2009a, 2009b) in the area of sport events the experiences of participants have largely been overlooked (Hanstad, 2012). In particular, participants’ experiences of event cancellation arising from the implementation of risk management plans have not been explored. Exploring participant experiences is warranted as participants can be directly affected by the eventuation of risks and the implementation of contingency plans. Indeed, a central consideration in risk management planning is protecting participants from injury, death, or other forms of loss.

This research makes a contribution by exploring amateur athletes’ reactions to the cancellation of the 2012 Ironman New Zealand (IMNZ) triathlon due to severe weather conditions. It considers athletes’ perspectives on the event organizers’ decision and actions. “Ironman” is a triathlon series catering for professional and amateur athletes (Kennelly, Moyle & Lamont, 2013). Ironman events consist of a 3.8km swim, a 180km cycle, and a 42.2km run. Annually around 30 Ironman events are held globally, including IMNZ at Taupo on New Zealand’s North Island. IMNZ has a chequered history with weather conditions. In 2006 the swim leg of the event was cancelled as a result of dangerous weather and instead a reduced cycling (90km) and running (21km) event was held. In 2012 event organizers were again faced with a forecast for extreme rain and winds exceeding the parameters for safe conduct of the event (World Triathlon Corporation, n.d.). As outlined in the event’s contingency plan, when wind speeds exceed 40km/hr and rainfalls surpass 80mm in a 24-hour period race organizers can abandon the event or choose to shorten one or more leg/s of the event, delete a leg of the event, or start the event earlier or later (IMNZ, 2012). In 2012, race organizers first called off IMNZ and then enacted their

contingency plan to hold a half-distance event the following day. Using the cancellation of IMNZ 2012 as a case study, this research seeks to identify and discuss implications for risk management and contingency planning in events.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Toohey and Taylor (2008) described how risk and risk assessment have historical links with gambling in the seventeenth century, and subsequently with maritime insurance and the study of economics. In the twentieth century the issue of risk became more focused on the avoidance of both genuine and perceived hazards (Toohey & Taylor, 2008). This focus on the deleterious aspects of risk is evident in some contemporary definitions of risk, such as Bowdin, Allen, O'Toole, Harris and McDonnell's (2006) description of risk as "any future incident that will negatively influence the event" (p. 318). Other researchers note the connection between risk and opportunity, such as Silvers (2008) who defined the objective of risk management as to "minimize liabilities and maximize opportunities" (p. 22). Thus, the management of risk may be enmeshed within a broader suite of strategies aimed at optimizing events (Peters & Pikkemaat, 2005).

Large-scale events are subject to a broad spectrum of risks due to the nature of event execution and it is critical that salient responses to unforeseen occurrences are planned for (Getz, 2009). In a study of the Olympic Games, Chappelet (2001) argued that due to the duration, cost, and complexity of large sporting events it is inevitable that unforeseen setbacks will occur because of the almost infinite range of risks that may arise. Similarly Dwyer and Fredline (2008) argued that mass participation sport events face substantial risk associated with human resource management, creating and maintaining brand image, meeting policy objectives, forming business networks to deliver the level of service required, and the challenges of managing crowds and security. Effectively addressing these issues in events requires a strategic approach to risk management and the intertwined notion of contingency planning.

A contingency plan is a process that prepares an organization to respond coherently to unplanned events (Stamatakis, Gargalianos, Afthinos, & Nassis, 2003). Contingency plans set out an alternative course of action aimed at ameliorating adverse, unforeseen circumstances. Contingency planning therefore involves developing a strategic scaffold designed to limit negative organizational exposure to probable hazards and risks identified through risk assessment (Gnulu & Aktas, 2006). Mallen and Adams (2008) suggest a contingency plan should include a mechanism or trigger point for activating the plan, a list of possible crises that may occur, a set of objectives to be achieved, and an outline of potential worst-case scenarios. Previous research has identified that before a situation emerges simulation exercises should be enacted to test contingency plans according to probable scenarios (Gunlu & Aktas, 2006). Marinstein (1998) identifies upper management support and involvement in developing the planning process as essential for coordinating the plan, ensuring its effectiveness, and securing cooperation of affected stakeholders.

Risk management practices have been widely adopted in the event industry. However, empirical research examining risk management in the context of events, particularly sporting events, is still growing with some exceptions. Leopkey and Parent (2009a, 2009b) examined organizing committees' and key stakeholders' (i.e. sport organizations, government departments, media,

and sponsors) perceptions of risk management of two major sport events in Canada. They concluded that the majority of event stakeholders considered risk management to be critical to an event's success (Leopkey & Parent, 2009a) and also identified a range of strategies event organizers and stakeholders employed to manage potential risks, including transferal of risk, insurance, and avoidance (Leopkey & Parent, 2009b). Toohey and Taylor (2008) sought to understand how visitors to the 2004 Athens Olympic Games framed their decision to attend in light of heightened awareness of terrorism and security risks post-September 11, 2001. They found that while some attendees reported feeling unsafe, others expressed defiance and even indifference to potential terrorism threats at the Games (Toohey & Taylor, 2008). Furthermore, Reid and Ritchie (2011) used the theory of planned behavior to explore event managers' attitudes towards risk planning; however, this study was not restricted to sporting events. Their research discovered that event managers' experience as well as the size and professionalism of the event organization influenced attitudes and beliefs regarding risk management (Reid & Ritchie, 2011).

Hanstad (2012) argued that extant literature on risk management in the context of events has predominantly focused on the perspectives of event organizers. Event organizers face significant risks and challenges in organizing and delivering events, especially outdoor sporting events. However, as identified by Leopkey and Parent (2009a, 2009b) other event stakeholders, such as participants, also experience risk and their perspectives also warrant attention in event management literature. In particular, little research has explored amateur athletes' reactions to the cancellation of an event as a consequence of risk management procedures, after having undertaken significant preparation. Thwaites and Chadwick (2005) noted that contemporary sport consumers, "are becoming more sophisticated, discerning and more inclined to complain" as well as "less loyal and prepared to seek alternative suppliers when their needs are not met" (p. 321). Thus the lack of research examining demand-side perspectives of event risk management and contingency planning seems a considerable oversight given increasing competition for people's leisure budgets in today's society. The aim of this research is to explore amateur athletes' reactions to manifestations of risk management and contingency planning in light of the cancellation of an outdoor sport event, IMNZ 2012.

METHOD

This research was embedded within an interpretive-constructivist paradigm, acknowledging multiple, subjective realities constructed by individuals of equal merit (Ponterotto, 2005). A qualitative, grounded approach was selected as the key purpose was to explore athletes' experiences of risk management and contingency planning, rather than to test any pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This design made it possible to elicit in-depth insights into how research participants were affected by the race cancellation. In particular this approach facilitated probing beyond the initial reactions of athletes to the cancellation, to viewpoints on risk assessment and communication, and the contingency plan enacted by event organizers.

To recruit and select respondents theoretical sampling (Merriam, 2009) was utilized. First an invitation was posted on an online triathlon forum, resulting in five participants being recruited. A second strategy involved using personal networks and snowball sampling, which has been identified as useful for tapping into specialized populations such as triathletes (Lamont &

Kennelly, 2012). This generated a further four participants in the research. Finally, a series of targeted emails were sent to four triathlon clubs in Australia and New Zealand, uncovering another five participants. Recruitment and data analysis occurred simultaneously until the researchers concluded theoretical sufficiency had been achieved. Theoretical sufficiency was defined by Jennings (2001) as the point at which there is replication in information gleaned through each interview and in the coding process, prompting the researcher to determine that identified themes are sufficiently well founded. This does not preclude the possibility that continuing the data collection could have elicited additional themes and is acknowledged as a limitation of the research. However, the researchers identified redundancies in the empirical data at 14 interviews and were also hesitant to extend the data collection time frame as this could have influenced potential participants' recollection of events and their feelings.

Prior to interviews the study was explained to participants and their voluntary informed consent was obtained verbally. Interviews were conducted in person, over the phone, or via Skype depending on the participant's location. The interviews were semi-structured and asked triathletes to describe how the cancellation of IMNZ 2012 unfolded for them, how they reacted to the circumstances, and their perceptions of how event organizers dealt with the situation. A three-stage coding process pioneered by Glaser and Strauss (1967) consisting of opening, axial, and selective coding was utilized in analyzing the data. Open coding identified a broad range of concepts embedded within the data that were relevant to the objectives of the study. During axial coding interview transcripts were revisited based on the broad range of codes identified during open coding. Here core concepts were identified, along with any sub-themes embedded within each core concept (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the selective coding phase deeper thematic patterns were identified and conclusions drawn (Neuman, 2011).

Trustworthiness is a key consideration in qualitative research and is concerned with ensuring conclusions are a truthful and accurate representation of participants' experiences (Merriam, 2009). Member checks are one means of enhancing trustworthiness (Merriam, 2009). As such interviewees were invited to comment on findings and clarify/query them; however, no feedback was received. It was therefore assumed that the codes identified adequately represented the interviewees' positions. Finally pseudonyms are used in the forthcoming analysis to protect the anonymity of respondents.

RESULTS

Participant Background And Significant Personal Investment

Demographic data was solicited from 13 of the 14 respondents interviewed. The sample included eight males and six females. Participants ranged from 32 to 56 years of age. Participants had been competing in triathlons over a variety of distances from a range of two to 27 years. Athletes interviewed reported investing significantly to participate in IMNZ 2012, including financial resources, months of physical training, time off work, and time away from family and spouses. The average number of weeks participants spent training specifically for IMNZ 2012 was reported to be 14.6, with an average of four hours each week spent swimming, 11.3 cycling and 5.5 running. The cost of training for and travelling to IMNZ 2012 ranged from AU\$2,500 to AU\$15,000, consisting of race registration costs, coaching costs, and travel and accommodation costs. Preparing for and competing in IMNZ 2012 was not a trivial undertaking for participants involved. Table 1 presents a timeline of events surrounding the cancellation of IMNZ 2012.

Table 1: Timeline of IMNZ Cancellation

Timeline	Milestone
Thursday March 2, 2012	Evening athlete briefing. Event organizers flagged there was a strong possibility race would be impacted by extreme weather conditions.
Friday March 3, 2012	Competitors instructed to register for IMNZ and deposit personal race equipment as if the race was to proceed. Event organizers held a second athlete briefing where the cancellation was confirmed. Athletes informed of the possibility of a half distance race ("Half Ironman") on the Sunday, weather permitting. Compensation announced, consisting of discounted entry into other Ironman branded events as well as guaranteed entry into IMNZ 2013. Athletes were asked to retrieve personal race equipment and event organizers dismantled event infrastructure in preparation for severe weather.
Saturday March 4, 2012	Extreme weather conditions were encountered, though not as extreme as forecast.
Sunday March 5, 2012	Half distance race (Half Ironman) completed.

Athletes' reactions to news of the cancellation predominately revolved around notions of disappointment. For example, Susan explained, "I was so disappointed. I guess I might have cried, you know all the effort that I had put in and it has been cancelled." After initial reactions of disappointment, the general trend was a transition towards viewing the situation pragmatically. Pragmatism was underpinned by an acknowledgement that it is difficult to control the weather, with Jason explaining: "Within half an hour, an hour, I'd reconciled myself, 'Look, there's nothing anyone could do about this'. It's one of those things that happen and we just move on". While more seasoned athletes accepted the decision quickly, one participant noted Ironman debutants from his club were very upset about the cancellation.

Reactions to Risk Assessment and Communication

The majority of respondents agreed that race organizers had made the correct decision to cancel IMNZ 2012. Despite athletes' disappointment, this was an overwhelming sentiment. On Friday 2 March, Tim described being worried about the impending weather, commenting that he:

... began thinking this is so dangerous I'm not sure we should be competing ... when you look at what you could lose or what other people could lose if the race had gone ahead and people could have been killed on the bike, it's just not worth it.

While there was a general consensus that the correct decision had been made, perceptions of how race organizers communicated with athletes about the cancellation were mixed. Some athletes felt race organizers communicated their decision effectively through progressive briefings. Jeremy thought organizers "were upfront, they kept us fully informed", while Susan felt that, "it was handled brilliantly by the race committee".

Other athletes however, particularly those who did not attend the official athlete briefings on Thursday and/or Friday, felt that communications were not so clear, as suggested by Lorraine's

comments: "I thought first of all, they were saying ... that maybe there wouldn't be a swim. That was the first notification we had. Then the second one was actually that the event was going to be cancelled". Jason recounted, "When I first found out I was actually walking through town at Taupo. I saw a guy with a bike and said, 'Mate what are you doing? It's supposed to be racked.' He said, 'No, it's cancelled.'" Similarly, Tim, who chose not to attend the Friday briefing, described how he found out about the cancellation: "I had a sleep in the afternoon ... someone I think banged on my [motel] door ... and said the race has been called off and I thought they were having a joke with me".

These quotes suggest race organizers' efforts to disseminate and manage information about the cancellation of the event were undermined by athletes not attending race briefings. A further challenge faced by event organizers was that messages sent to athletes' mobile phones may not have been received: "when I got back to Australia I turned my phone on and there were a couple of messages they had sent me but because I don't have global roaming I wouldn't have gotten them" (Marc).

Some athletes were confused about what action they needed to take, as some interpreted early communications from race organizers as implying the event would go ahead. As Susan noted:

... the only thing that they could have done better is they didn't have the race briefing on the Friday until after every single person had racked their bikes and we all had to all [sic] go back and get our bikes back out of transition, which didn't go over well.

Some athletes believed the race was going to proceed because on Friday afternoon event organizers were still accepting athletes' registrations and allowing them to deposit their race equipment.

Reactions to the Contingency Event

On the Friday evening, event organizers dismantled the event's infrastructure (tents, transition area, etc.) in anticipation of the predicted weather forecast on Saturday. As weather conditions improved on Saturday evening, and a favorable forecast was given for Sunday, organizers reconstructed the race venue to facilitate a half-distance race on Sunday morning. Hence the primary contingency initiative employed by race organizers was to offer a substitute, albeit abbreviated, event. However, those interviewed expressed mixed reactions to this substitute event. Most athletes were thankful that a substitute was offered and highly commended the efforts organizers went to in arranging this shortened event, especially against the backdrop of such adverse and uncertain circumstances. For example, Marc reflected that: "They did a really good job to get a half organized in one day, so ... Yeah, I think if they didn't run a half people would've been really, really pissed off."

However some athletes were critical of the offering of this abbreviated, substitute event. There was some sentiment that if it was possible to stage this shortened event then the contingency should have been to postpone the full Ironman distance race to the following day. As noted by Steven "At the time ... I guess I felt that if they were able to actually run the Ironman the day after, on a Sunday instead of the 70.3 [Half distance race] then that would have been ideal."

Furthermore, some athletes were critical of the way the contingency plan was implemented by race management. Concerns were raised around the swim and cycle legs, with the water conditions on the Sunday perceived as dangerous by some. Specifically, some critiqued how athletes started the swim together, rather than in age group waves, which resulted in a crowded course. Other athletes were critical of how the shorter event facilitated the prohibited practice of “drafting” during the cycle leg, in which competitors save energy by sitting too close to another cyclist’s slipstream. Despite these concerns, however, most athletes competed in the contingency race and reported to be quite satisfied with how event organizers responded under such difficult circumstances.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research was to explore amateur athletes’ reactions to the cancellation of an outdoor participation-based sporting event, IMNZ 2012. Weather-related risks are particularly relevant to such events and are concerning to organizers as they impact on the success of the event through to the organizer’s legal duty of care (Getz, 2002). This case study of IMNZ 2012 has highlighted how the course of action chosen in response to adverse weather can influence an event’s reputation and, by extension, may also impact its future economic viability. Thus event organizers need to plan to avoid, transfer, or mitigate risks and also formulate contingency plans as a counter-measure if poor weather eventuates. Further, this case study has emphasized how participants are a central stakeholder in participation-based events, and how their needs and expectations should be a central consideration in devising risk management and contingency plans. This underpins the utility of understanding event participants’ experiences of and reactions to an event’s cancellation.

This research has contributed insights into how event participants can be impacted upon when an event they have invested significant personal resources into is cancelled. In this instance, due to the complex logistics associated with staging IMNZ and athletes having travelled from around the world to attend this event, simply postponing the Ironman race to a later date was not an option. Furthermore, participants believed that there were few acceptable substitutes to a full distance Ironman race, hence their intense feelings of disappointment. It has been shown how participants can invest significant personal resources to prepare for and attend Ironman events and consequently risk is borne not only by event organizers, but also by event customers.

Leopkey and Parent (2009a) identified that the process by which risk management is interpreted and executed by organizing committees and major stakeholders of events is becoming increasingly important. This study has highlighted that considering other stakeholders’ perceptions of risk beyond event managers themselves is an important consideration. Risk should be explored from all possible avenues including key event planning aspects and from different stakeholder perspectives (Leopkey and Parent, 2009a).

In a study using the theory of planned behaviour to examine the attitudes of event managers towards risk planning behavior, Reid and Ritchie (2011) noted the potential influence of significant reference groups in encouraging event managers to be proactive with their risk planning behaviors. The present study suggests that participants may be a significant reference group exerting influence over event managers to engage in risk planning. In the case of IMNZ 2012, event organizers had developed a detailed contingency plan based around lessons learnt

when the event was first cancelled due to adverse weather in 2006. The findings of this study suggest that because IMNZ “customers” invested significantly in preparing for and attending the event, they expected event managers to have a clear, detailed contingency plan in place, commensurate with their efforts in preparing for and attending the event. Future research may therefore seek to establish, from a demand-side perspective, whether a continuum of expectations surrounding risk management and contingency planning efforts exists according to consumers’ resource investments in participating in that event.

This research has two key applied implications. Firstly, communication is a fundamental consideration in formulating and deploying contingency plans. In this study it was noted how some participants undermined event organizers’ communication during the crisis by not engaging with official event communication such as the pre-race briefing/s, instead relying on information passed on from fellow competitors or via social media. Messages conveyed using unofficial mediums have the propensity to be distorted (Acar & Muraki, 2011), causing confusion and angst among some participants. Consequently, event organizers require strategies for maintaining control of, and responsibility for, information provided to event participants should a contingency plan need to be initiated.

One strategy could entail event organizers nominating a single official channel of communication, such as the event website, while placing the onus on participants to engage with that medium for information should a contingency plan need to be deployed. Regular updates could be provided via this medium as an effort to counteract unofficial and ambiguous information which may be transmitted by various parties via other mediums. Future research on risk management and contingency planning in events might therefore consider exploring the utility of communication theories such as Lasswell’s model of communication (Reddi, 2009) to uncover how best to manage communication between event organizers and participants in times of crisis. In particular, evidence from this study suggests future research should particularly address how the distortion of official messages can be mitigated to ensure accurate information is delivered to participants in a timely manner.

A second implication arising from this study is that effective risk management and contingency plans evidently play an important role in brand image protection in the event of unforeseen circumstances. Without the thorough risk management and contingency initiatives that were in place the reputation of IMNZ could have been irreparably damaged as a result of the circumstances in 2012. By virtue of the well-conceived and executed contingency plan enacted by event organizers, participants generally expressed a willingness to participate in future Ironman-branded events, with a few even expressing a willingness to compete at IMNZ in the future, despite widespread concerns that the event carries a historical track record of weather-related interruptions. In the case of events where participants have invested substantial personal resources to participate, organizers should put more resources into risk management and contingency planning to ensure the integrity of future events is not damaged.

In summary, consideration of risk only from the perspective of event organizers is myopic. Future research should take a more holistic approach in understanding risks pertinent to a broader pool of event stakeholders. It is prudent for event organizers to expect the best and prepare for the

worst by responding to risk from not only their perspective but also the perspective of participants and other key stakeholder groups.

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