

UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON

# **Comparing Strategic Management between the United Kingdom's and Finland's Ice Hockey Organizations, from the Point of View of Two Same Levelled Teams.**

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# 1. Introduction

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Ice hockey is a sport played on the ice, where each team has a maximum of 20 players on roster for a match event. The game is played so, that six players from each team are on the ice at the same time, from which one is a goaltender and five are playing on the field. The idea of the game is to try to get a black, round, hard and flat rubber “puck” into the opposing team’s goal. In ice hockey the players have protective equipment as well as a stick, which is the tool used by players to move the puck around. The game is very physical, as players are allowed to body check each other while in the rink, in which the game is played.

The rules for now-a-day ice hockey was invented in 1875 by a Canadian named James George Aylwin Creighton (June 12, 1850 – June 27, 1930). The sport was accepted as an Olympic sport in the year 1920 and has had a great impact on sports fans around the world. The game is a very popular sport around the world and attracts a lot of people to participate and cheer for teams on their gaming events.(Vaughan 2001)

The game of ice hockey is an attractive sport and receives recognition in very many countries around the globe. Even though the origin of the game is unknown, the game has grown into a profitable business for many as the centuries have past. KHL, NHL, SM-league, Elitserien and many other leagues are filled with competitive organisations, which attract millions of consumers who follow their events.

The sport of ice hockey attracts a great amount of people to its games, no matter if it is a professional team such as in the NHL (National Hockey League ) or a smaller team such as one from the ENL (English National League) or the Finnish equivalent series; Division II.

Ice hockey as a whole in the UK seems to be doing well, seeing as according to Aykroyd (2010) the national team of Great Britain is on the verge of making a breakthrough into the highest series of the World Championship games where Finland already plays, by taking second place in the World Cup Division I (second highest level), when losing with only one point to Kazakhstan. The problem though, which Finland does not have and which the UK does, is that most sports are in the shadow of the sport soccer, which is commonly known as a big sport in the UK and thus ice hockey for example does not receive much recognition from either consumers or sponsors. Finland on the other hand has a terrific situation when considering the sport of ice hockey, as they are the world champions of 2011 and consider ice hockey as their national sport, seeing as the climate in Finland is cold enough to have natural ice on for example ponds or lakes during the winter, which encourages many people to play the game outside and for free, thus raising their enthusiasm for the sport.

The situation in the UK has been changing though, seeing as for a long time now migrants and settlers from Canada, who have played ice hockey all their lives, have come to the UK and have brought the game of hockey to a more noticeable level within the UK (Maguire 1996). This can be seen by the growing amount of new ice hockey teams being created within the UK (Elite prospects 2012).

The potential of making a profit from the game of ice-hockey is relatively common, not only for professional teams, but also lower levelled teams, thus they have the potential to grow as an organisation. The UK's highest level called the Elite Ice Hockey League (EIHL) attracts a lot of viewers and thus makes a lot of profit from ticket sales and fan equipment. According to marketing and communications executive for the team Cardiff Devils, Evans-Determan (2010), in the season 2009-2010 the ice hockey team from Nottingham Panthers (EIHL) attracted on average 4234 fans per game. This shows that the demand for ice hockey is relatively high in the UK and not as small as what is commonly thought.

This paper will compare the two same levelled team's strategic management from two diverse market environments and determine the structural differences in how they operate. Additionally, it will show what potential growth opportunities these organisations have and what ideas and operations they could adapt from one another in order to be more successful than what they currently are. The study will provide research of customer demand, as well as point out what business theories the teams are using or should be using in order to achieve their mission and vision statements. The two teams chosen for this research are Blackburn Hawks from the United Kingdom, who play in the ENL-league (England National League) and Vuosaaren Viikingit from Finland, who play in the Division II-league (4<sup>th</sup> highest level in Finland).

The following chapter will introduce the theories, which these organisations should operate with in order to ensure the best possible outcome, whilst striving for their goal.

## 2. Literature Review

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### 2.1 Strategic Management in Sports

Strategic management is the means used by an organisation in order to create a competitive advantage within its market. Additionally, it helps determine the mission and vision as well as helps the organisation stay on its route to achieve its goal. It takes into consideration the external and internal factors an organisation has and accordingly decides on actions which need to be taken in order to stay competitive within its market. Additionally, it helps an organisation act upon advantages and disadvantages that might occur through changes in the market environment. (Thompson, Martin 2010)

When considering strategy within the line of sports it is important to remember that the main idea is to appeal to the buyers and suppliers with the management of events. In this case particularly when discussing lower levelled ice hockey within the UK and Finland, one must consider the major threats and potential benefits that are at arm's length of these organisations.

The management of a lower levelled ice hockey organisation is quite straight forward compared to many other businesses. In order for an ice hockey organisation to grow or maintain itself, a team needs to acquire fans or in other words supporters (buyers), which will attract sponsors (suppliers). The higher resource the team has in this part allows the team to invest in better players and game night events. The better players and the better the entertainment (atmosphere) in the game night events are, potentially increases the possibility of being a successful ice hockey team with a lot of fans. The more successful

the ice hockey team, the better its chances are of rising to a competitive level of ice hockey, which in turn attracts even larger crowds and through them, even more sponsorship as well as larger ticket sales.

In some cases, such as in the case of the Finnish team Vuosaaren Viikingit, a team might set out to make its revenues from not only a representative adult team such as like the United Kingdom's Blackburn Hawks does, but additionally by being a valued junior ice hockey organisation, which attracts parents who wish their children would learn the talent of playing ice hockey.

## **2.2. Strategic Planning**

Strategic planning is an important feature for any organisation, especially small growing ones such as the two lower levelled ice hockey teams Vuosaaren Viikingit and Blackburn Hawks, which this study concentrates on.

The ever changing external factors, such as the market environment needs to be followed and monitored continuously, whilst simultaneously altering it in order to stay on track of the overall goal, which the organisation has set when its mission and vision statements (Rao, P. 2010).

The strategic plan is a very important role carried out by top management and it is important that they acknowledge when changes are needed also with internal factors, such as for example in this case, a possibility would be to reconstruct the team's staff and players (strategic human resources management) in hopes of recruiting a better working group. Another option would be to modify the actual event held at games into a more



consumer friendly happening, with for example activities which consumers can attend to during breaks in the game. A good example is the Blackburn Hawks, who arrange lotteries and mid-game events such as the “chuck a puck” competition in which the supporters can buy a numbered puck for a pound and then through it as close to the centre of the ice as possible. The person to get his puck closest to the centre wins a prize.

### **2.2.1. Mission and Vision**

Setting an organisation’s mission and vision is of high importance to a company. It can be defined as guidance for an organisations strategic planning. It is a tool that reminds a company of its purpose, thus allowing it to stay on its path towards its goal, whilst making decisions upon what actions it will take in the present in order to determine its direction in the future. (Kotler 2003)

When an organisation defines its mission it sets out to manufacture, provide or accomplish something. As the organisation evolves it may sometimes change its mission according to the external or internal environmental changes. In order for a business to have an optimal mission statement it is important for it to define what it wants to be, where it is headed and how it will get there.

The vision is equally important as it clarifies the goals, which the organisation has set out to achieve. Additionally, it is important that an organisation makes its vision realistic and achievable as well as motivational to the workers, who are in this case the players and coaches, in order for them to believe in what they are doing.

When considering sports, the two organisations in question have set out to provide entertainment and accomplish a certain image in order to attract consumers and suppliers. Additionally, the Finnish team Vuosaaren Viikingit concentrates on also providing a service in the form of teaching ice hockey to children, thus having two mission statements. It is important for the mission to be clear, as it guides the entire staff of the organisation to move towards the same direction.

### **2.2.2 Swot Analysis**

In order to determine the strategic opportunities an organization has, it is important for it to acknowledge its internal factors, which consist of its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its external factors which consist of the macro-environmental opportunities and threats (Kotler, Keller 2006).

With this tool an organisation, such as an ice hockey team can identify the area's which needs development as well as prepare a team for any external threats. Additionally, an organisation can identify its position in the market by comparing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats it has, with its competition.

It is important for an organisation such as an ice hockey organisation to monitor its external environment as it can affect its potential profit making. For example, the attendance of supporters in an ice hockey game can be affected by a concert which is held on the same day and at the same time as the ice hockey match. If managers continuously monitor external factors such as these and reschedule their games according to when there are no other events, the team will most likely have more supporters at their games.

### **2.3. Strategic Brand Management (The Image of a Sport Team)**

“A brand is thus a product or service that adds dimensions that differentiate it in some way from other products or services designed to satisfy the same need. These differences may be functional, rational, or tangible – related to product performance of the brand. They may also be more symbolic, emotional or intangible – related to what the brand represents.”

(Kotler & Keller 2006)

The image of an ice hockey team can be a turning point for the organisation. A successful team with a strong brand image attracts valuable assets, such as skilled players who want to join and reinforce a highly respected team, supporters who are loyal to the organisation and sponsorship from companies who wish to be associated with a successful name.

Although it is commonly thought that most buyers wish to go to games located close by to where they live, many fans are willing to travel distances to see proper quality hockey, especially if they find some sort of connection between themselves and an ice hockey organisation that they then support. If a team can sustain a certain image that touches ice hockey fans either emotionally or symbolically, they have the potential to make them loyal supporters.

The branding of an ice hockey organisation is determining the organisations diversity from other organisations. This can be in the form of numerous ways, such as appealing to fans, who want to watch rough ice hockey, as being the toughest team in the league or to for example parents whose children wish to play ice hockey, as being the best junior hockey organisation within the country the team operates in.

In strategic brand management of an ice hockey team, the whole organisation is responsible for upholding the team's image, which determines how they are perceived as, in the eyes of the buyers and suppliers. The way the management team operates determines the value that is given when operating the team, whilst the players and coaches determine what quality of ice hockey is played. The ultimate strategic part of this would be for an organisation to determine through analysing the market, what sort of team it should be. Which type of ice hockey team would attract the most consumers that would attend the team's games.

### **2.3.1. Customer Loyalty**

Loyalty of a supporter is a key factor for an ice hockey team. It sustains the team as well as allows it to grow. If a team loses its image it is no longer the same team that the customer has originally related to and thus it may wish to change its mind on which team it supports.

Kotler and Keller (2006), argue that the customer perceived value is when the consumer is educated about the product offered and seeks the best possible outcome for the money he or she spends on that particular product, especially when it has alternative options.

The perception of what value a consumer gives to an ice hockey organisation is an important factor for teams. The consumer has a powerful weapon, which is the word of mouth and has the ability to manipulate other people of a bad or good experience with the ice hockey event he or she has attended. Therefore, hockey teams should strive for consistency in events and maintain or improve every happening they produce.

## **2.4. Strategic Marketing Management**

With strategic marketing management an organisation can choose its target market and consumers. Additionally, it helps an organisation identify its target customers, thus most likely leading it to find out about other marketing opportunities, which may have been neglected. (Kotler & Keller 2006)

Before a company can market its product it has to identify its competition. An ice hockey organisations competition in the market does not only consist of other forms of sports, but also of entertainment in any other form, thus its competition is a high variety of activities, which consumers spend money on in order to experience amusement.

### **2.4.1. Marketing Planning**

According to McDonald (1984), the marketing planning enhances the chances of an organisation succeeding in creating a competitive advantage within its own market.

It is most likely that the success of high level ice hockey organisations is, at least partly, from the reasons of its marketing efforts, thus even amateur teams such as the Blackburn Hawks and Vuosaaren Viikingit should adapt this method, as both teams visions consist of playing at a professional or semi-professional competitive level of ice hockey.

The marketing plan operates at two levels, the strategic marketing plan and the tactical marketing plan. The strategic marketing plan clarifies the benefits the organisation promises to offer (value proposition), as well as establishes which market it will enter (target market). The tactical marketing plan clarifies what methods will be used and how

they will be used when introducing the product merchandised to the consumer. (Kotler, Keller 2006)

### **2.4.2. Strategic Marketing Process**

The strategic marketing process has many steps and there is no one exact correct way to determine the best solution in how to implement it, especially in an ice hockey organisation, where the product marketed is in a form of visual entertainment and emotions created by an atmosphere of fans. The following steps are modified from the basis of Kotler's proposed framework.

Firstly, the organisation must identify its mission. The mission statement is usually developed by the top managing group and there is no exception in the sports of ice hockey. Secondly, it should identify its vision, which is also created by the top management group and which clarifies the ultimate goal of the organisation. A vision can be short or long termed.

The third step would be for it to analyse the competitive environment with the use of a PEST analysis (originated from the PESTLE analysis), which consists of the political, environmental, social and technological aspects.

Fourthly the organisation should make an analysis of the teams own internal factors, which are its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its external factors which are its opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis) within that market.

The fifth step would be for it to identify its target group to which it wishes to advertise its product, in this case the product being the ice hockey team and their game events. It should consider perhaps what type of potential customers are most likely to come to game events.

Sixthly the team should then consider its marketing strategy, in other words the marketing mix, which consists of introducing the product, setting a price on it, choosing a promoting method and locating the product in a place where it is available for the targeted consumers to purchase it.

The seventh step would then be to plan the actual implementation of the marketing plan, which leads us to the final step of controlling it (managing the marketing effort).

## **2.5. Porter's Five Forces**

According to Porter M. (2008) the five forces consist of five competitive sections: the buyers, suppliers, substitutes, competition and new entrance.

The buyers are usually the ones who have the power to play one organisation against the other by forcing an organisation to drop its prices by purchasing from rivals. The suppliers have the possibility reduce an organisations profit, by raising their prices. Substitutes can potentially strip a company of its customers, by providing a similar product. Competitors are an organisations direct competition, which are within the same market and strive for the same customer basis. New entrances usually ring something new with them, which attract consumers. (Porter 2008).

According to Porter (2008), “the configuration of the five forces differs by industry”, thus

When considering ice hockey, the Porter’s five forces are applicable as a team may fall under the same risk factors as any other organisation in a different industry.

Direct competition, for example other ice hockey teams, other sporting events or any other entertainment event may lure away supporters of an ice hockey organisation if they are held on the same day. In the United Kingdom, it is typical for an ice hockey organisation to set its matches on days when for example soccer matches are not played (seeing as soccer known as the sport which attracts the highest consumer volume within the United Kingdom), in order to avoid buyers from having to make a decision on which sporting event they will go to.

The suppliers of a lower level ice hockey organisation are also a risk factor, as usually the contracts they agree to, is no more than for a single season. Additionally, lower level teams usually rely on local suppliers, which are small in size and might not be able to always fulfil the agreement made. Furthermore, these teams find it hard to attract suppliers, as their media coverage and visibility is limited, due to the lack of funding.

New entrants are a major risk factor within the lower levelled ice hockey market.

Especially, in the market area of Finland’s Vuosaaren Viikingit where there are so many opportunities for new organisations to enter. Finland has a large amount of ice hockey arenas, thus renting ice time is fairly cheap due to the competitiveness of the market.

Additionally, the amount of ice hockey arenas leaves a lot of free ice time to rent, as there are not as many teams in comparison to how much time there is to rent. This results in a lot of possibilities for new teams to be established as they have the possibility to train as much



as they want, opposed to the United Kingdom's Blackburn Hawks market, where renting the ice for training and games is very limited, due to the small amount of ice hockey arenas built. Finland's second contribution for new entrants is the amount of ice hockey players looking for teams, which allows an ice hockey team to be established very easily. Finally, the new entrants in Finland can enter into a lower level league without paying any additional fees (with the exception of renting ice time for home games) and potentially lure opposing teams assets (players) and lure away buyers and suppliers.

The substitutes in ice hockey are the methods that fans use in order to experience game events without actually appearing at them. Now-a-days the internet is a major source for fans of ice hockey, as they are able to satisfy their needs to see games. Another source is the television, which usually broadcast most top league games for a minor fee. Access to such easy methods of seeing games from the comfort of an ice hockey fans home, has an effect on attendance at games. Therefore ice hockey organisation must concentrate on making their events more memorable by emphasizing on making the atmosphere at games the reason for attendance.

## **2.6. PEST analysis**

It is important for any organisation to analyse its external environment in order to avoid or prepare for any complications that could have any negative effect on an organisations path to its objectives. Alternatively, the external environment factors could be favourable towards the organisation in question, which could then benefit the company if the advantage is noticed and acted upon in time.

The PEST analysis stands for political, economic, social and technological factors, which managers should analyse and be aware of, if they wish to cope with the continuously changing external environment. External factors such as technological improvements can be of great help in achieving an organisations goal.

When managing an ice hockey organisation the political environment could be considered as the countries ice hockey association that a team plays in. Each country has its own association, which change the rules of, for example, how many imports a team can have per season. The countries government can also have an effect on taxation laws; although more often it is the ice hockey association that will have an influence on the environment changing for ice hockey teams.

The economic aspect is affected by the financial situation of the world, determining how much consumers are willing to spend on leisure events such as an ice hockey game. At the current moment, the global economic recession has definitely had an effect on the attendance of supporters at games, as people have either lost their jobs or are otherwise just cautious about what they spend their money on.

The social aspects are the factors that are dependent on the socio- culture of a country. This would consist of people's attitudes towards the sport of ice hockey and interests of individuals, about actually playing the sport.

The technological advantages or disadvantages in ice hockey are the technological changes occurring within the equipment industry, which can affect the maintenance of ice hockey arenas or player equipment. New technological advantages in maintaining the ice in arenas

usually bring down costs of the ice renting time. Alternatively, some investments in new technology might not, such as new lighting systems, which might raise costs, but also add to customer experience in providing better atmosphere as well as better entertainment, which is ultimately what the buyer is looking for when attending an ice hockey game.

## *Summary*

As reviewed, strategic management plays a big role in an organisation and covers a large section of the overall success an organisation can potentially have to achieve its targeted goal. The theories apply well in the management of sports in general and can have a major positive effect on the outcome of lower levelled and growing organisations such as amateur ice hockey teams, if implemented correctly.

In lower levelled ice hockey, strategic management can play a vital part of the organisations growth. Teams in search of ways to become more successful need to at least take into consideration, the implementation of these strategic management theories, especially if their goals are to play in a competitive level of ice hockey.

Image (Branding) of a team plays perhaps the biggest role in the case of this sort of event management. As the product is a visual mode of entertainment, a statement is needed which appeals and relates to consumers who wish to be amused by the atmosphere and emotions they encounter when supporting something they find relatable with themselves. As stated above it is important for an ice hockey team to consider what the consumers demand and then according to that market itself to the majority of the fans, who are most likely to attend the games.

Additionally, marketing is not to be overlooked. Many smaller ice hockey organisations do not want to invest in marketing as they tend to think it is a waste of resources, from their already small funds. If implemented correctly, this stage could make a major difference, especially in the United Kingdom, which has a large population, from which only a tiny section knows what ice hockey is. With the current British national hockey team on a potential rise to the highest series of the world tournament, the market can potentially grow into a very profitable one.

The next chapter will present the research methods used in order to explore the two teams a little closer.

## 3. Research Methodology

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The research executed is exploratory, as there is no earlier study to refer to for any information about the two teams discussed in this paper. The research is conducted with both qualitative and quantitative methods. The research is inductive as it moves from specific to general and theories will be applied to the data received in the next chapter. The data is collected from a wide range and does not give a conclusive solution to any of the issues raised, but does give guidance to what areas could be developed in order for the organisation to succeed in their mission.

(Collis, Hussey 2003)

In this survey only primary research is used, as there is no record of any similar study to have been done for either of the two teams in question. This research is for illustrative purpose only, in order to give a better understanding of how these two organisations are managed.

The purpose of this research is to determine where there is need for improvement in management within the organisations, as well as to determine the status they have gained in the eyes of consumers. With this information, it is possible to link what could be done in order to improve from or maintain the current position the two organisations are currently in.

The limitation to this research were that information about historical and current statistics, for example consumer attendance in games, team budgets and team incomes and expenses

were unavailable for public viewing from either of the organisation. Additionally, the quantitative research was offered to only 50 people out of a crowd of 700 people from a game event in Blackburn Hawks and to only 50 random people in Helsinki, who lived close to the home arena of Vuosaari Viikingit. The questionnaire relates to only consumers who have some sort of understanding about ice-hockey.

### **3.1. Qualitative Research**

The qualitative research was made in order to determine the internal strengths of both organisations as well as to get a better understanding of both team's current situation. Additionally, it was made to find out how far into the future each team planned and what is their strategy to achieve their goal, as well as how they have or are going to act on implementing their decisions made. The point of this type of interview was to obtain enough information in order to conduct a SWOT analysis, evaluate both team's strategic planning and strategic marketing management implementations, which will be presented in chapter 5.

The qualitative research consisted of three open ended questions, which resulted in broad sufficient answers about both organisations activities. The main idea of these questions was to get a better understanding of how the teams operated and what methods and channels are they using in order to achieve their goals. The people interviewed were Blackburn's PR and Media manager Graham Lomax and Vuosaari Viikingit's adult's team manager Timo Backman. All interviews were done separately, were conducted face to face and consisted of the same questions.

The qualitative section consisted of the following questions:

1. What is your ultimate goal (Mission and Vision statement) as an organisation and what are the plans to achieve them?
2. How do you advertise the organisation?
3. What would be the biggest challenges that are keeping you from succeeding in achieving these goals?

### **3.2. Quantitative Research**

The first quantitative research was conducted for the Blackburn Hawks and was made in order to get a better understanding of what the consumers in general thought of the organisation. With this section of the research, it was possible to determine what kind of consumers the Blackburn Hawks attracted to its events. Additionally, it gave a better understanding of what the supporters valued in the team, thus giving a good evaluation of if the organisation is fulfilling its consumer demand. This type of research was made in order to determine the significance of a team's brand image as well as customer loyalty. The subjects of the questionnaire were randomly selected consumers from the crowd of a Blackburn Hawks home game.

Since all the same questions could not be asked about the two teams, as their situation within their own markets were too diverse the quantitative research conducted for Vuosaaren Viikingit had to be modified and thus two different quantitative surveys were constructed. With the quantitative research conducted for the Vuosaaren Viikingit, it was possible to determine what kind of consumers they attracted. This type of research was made in order to determine the significance of a team's brand image, as well as if the team would attract consumers to the adult team's games if it played at a higher level. The

subjects of the questionnaire were randomly selected customers of a Shopping Mall located nearby the organisations home arena.

The first quantitative questionnaire was conducted with 12 closed questions and 1 open question, which was given to 50 people, from a crowd of 700 during a Blackburn Hawks ice hockey game at the Blackburn Arena. The first quantitative survey conducted for the Blackburn Hawks consisted of the following questions:

1. Gender
2. Age
3. How did you hear about the team Blackburn Hawks?
4. How often do you come to watch the Blackburn Hawks play?
5. How long have you been coming to see these games?
6. Do you think you will come and support the team in the future seasons?
7. When you come to games do you usually come alone/with a friend or family member/in a group of 2-4/in a group of more than 4?
8. How far do you have to travel in order to see a game?
9. Is Blackburn Hawks the closest ice hockey team from where you live?
10. What do you enjoy most about the event?
11. What do you enjoy most about the team?
12. If there is a soccer match at the same time as a Blackburn Hawks game, which would you rather go support? (Assuming that both matches are equally important).
13. In your own words, what would you develop within this event in order to make it more enjoyable?

**(See appendix for the question sheets with closed ended answers available.)**



The second quantitative survey was conducted with closed questions and given to 50 at a shopping mall, located close to the home arena of Vuosaaren Viikingit. The quantitative survey conducted for this team consisted of the following questions:

1. Gender
2. Age
3. Have you heard of the ice hockey team Vuosaaren Viikingit?
4. How have you originally heard of them?
5. Have you ever seen the adult team play?
6. Would you be interested in coming to watch the team's games (again/ for the first time), which are played in the Division II series?
7. If Vuosaaren Viikingit would play at a higher level, for example Suomisarja (semi-professional level), would you be more interested in coming to games?
8. The reason for this is, because of the atmosphere/ level of ice hockey is more enjoyable to watch.

**(See appendix for the question sheets with closed ended answers available.)**

## *Summary*

The research methods used were both quantitative and qualitative. The research was conducted as an exploratory research and the limitations considering the information received can only be interpreted for illustrative purposes.

The following chapter will present the results of the questionnaires and interviews, as well as provide an analysis of the data received.

## 4. Data Presentation and Analysis

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After making a qualitative research of the teams, it was determined that both teams mission was to play at a higher level of ice-hockey and become a semi-professional team. After interviewing the PR and Media Manager of the Blackburn Hawks Graham Lomax as well as the manager of the Vuosaaren Viikingit Timo Backman, they were both indirectly after the same goal of more awareness for their team.

### 4.1. Blackburn Hawks (United Kingdom)

#### 4.1.1. Qualitative Research Data Presentation and Analysis

The Blackburn Hawks are owned by the Blackburn arena. The team is responsible for all its marketing and recruitment, but the arena makes the decisions on when the team trains and how much ice time they get. The arena gathers the money rose from ticket sales and uses it for the costs of the organisation. The arena supports the team with the profit they make from the ticket sales, if there is any. The team currently attracts approximately 500-700 supporters per game. Tickets cost 6£ for adults and 3£ for children.

The team makes its plan annually, having as a determination the fact of how well they think they will do in that particular season. This season for example, the team planned to attract more consumers, thus attracting more sponsorship, by the means of investing in a highly skilled foreign import player, which is a rarer case in this series. The team operates on the basis that success within the series they play in, will bring the organisation the means (funding from supporters, which will lead to more sponsorship) to achieve their

ultimate goal and eventually play at a higher level in the EPIHL, which in turn will attract even more supporters, due to the high and competitive level of ice hockey being played.

Even though the ultimate goal is to play in the EPIHL series, the short term plan is to still play the ENL series they currently play in, for a while longer. The main issue is the fact that in order to play the higher series and be as successful in it as they are in their current series; the team needs proper funding in order to stay competitive. The competition in the EPIHL hire 4-5 quality import players, which raise the level of their teams, the downside is that quality imports that could be an asset to the team do not come cheap. Housing, transportation (cars) and salary, which the EPIHL teams offer import players, are expenses that Blackburn cannot currently afford until the proper funding is acquired.

According to PR and Media Manager of the Blackburn Hawks, Graham Lomax, the organisation additionally has a junior development programme, but it is not emphasized enough. "Most under 10 year olds to under 18 year olds, who are interested in playing ice hockey, usually go to the big city teams, such as Belfast or Cardiff, seeing as they have a name behind their shirts that can provide proper funding and are able with that method to attract youngsters. The kids look up to the imports as good players and become fans of their favourite player's team; therefore they want to be associated with the team they support". Additionally, unlike Blackburn's arena, EPIHL teams arena's attract enough viewers to games, thus the need for public skating in order to raise money is not as important and better ice times are available for the purpose of ice hockey.

The organisation does however advertise the adult team on local newspapers and local radio channels, such as the BBC Lancashire station, with reviews of games played and

upcoming events. Additionally, the team has created an online Facebook group for the adult team, which includes live updates of the games played as well as conversations between fans and players.

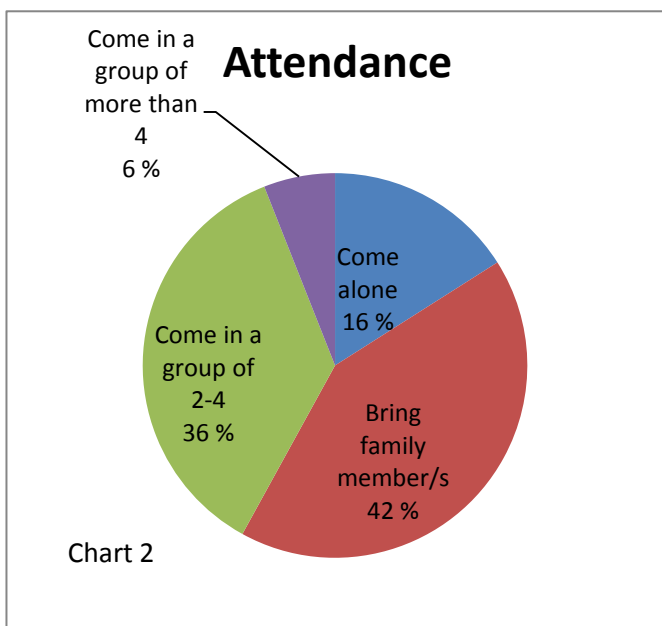
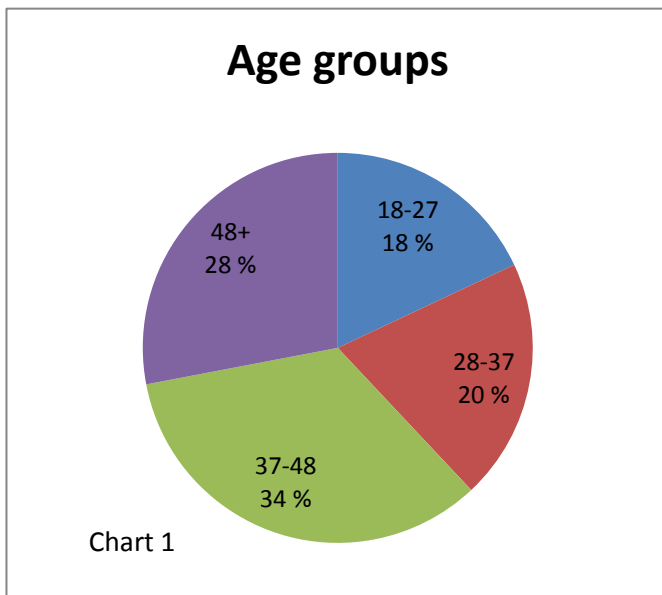
According to Lomax, another major difficulty in achieving their goals is sustaining good British players in the adult team for more than a season, “One of the major issues is that we recruit our players from different parts of the country by offering them compensation for their long trips made.” Unfortunately, not many players are willing to travel these distances for many seasons and usually the team needs to recruit new players each year. This is one of the reasons why they have to plan the teams strategy each year as they cannot verify the successfulness of the team until they have recruited their players and thus make an estimation on the quantity of supporters that will potentially be attending games during the season, seeing as in the past seasons their crowds get bigger, the better the team succeeds in the season.

The interview with Graham Lomax showed that the team had a clear mission and vision of what it eventually wanted from and for the organisation, which was to become a professional or semi-professional ice hockey team with a good junior activity programme. The strategy of the team is currently to have short term plans as they do not wish to rush into anything with too high risk. The team has clearly taken into consideration the economic environment as they acknowledge that at the moment the sponsorships needed for the EPIHL series is most likely hard to acquire, due to the current recession at hand. Social environment issues such as maintaining quality players is a problem, seeing as they are the backbone of the organisations success, thus local home grown players would be a

valuable asset to the team. Currently the organisation does not emphasize on their junior activity enough, seeing as this could be a potential solution for this problem.

#### 4.1.2. Quantitative Research Data Presentation and Analysis

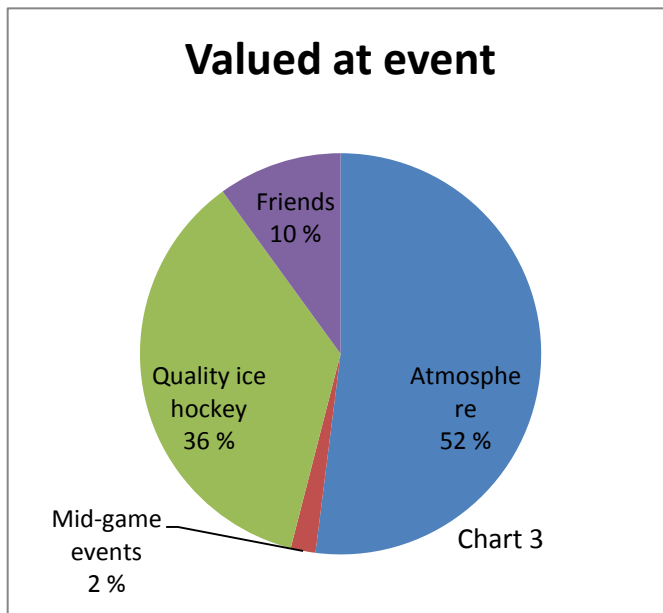
The team needs to search new marketing opportunities and come up with a new marketing plan, seeing as 90% of the subjects who answered the questionnaire had heard of the team through the means of word of mouth. The efforts made for the adult team is good, but the team needs to find its target consumers. The quantitative part of the research showed that



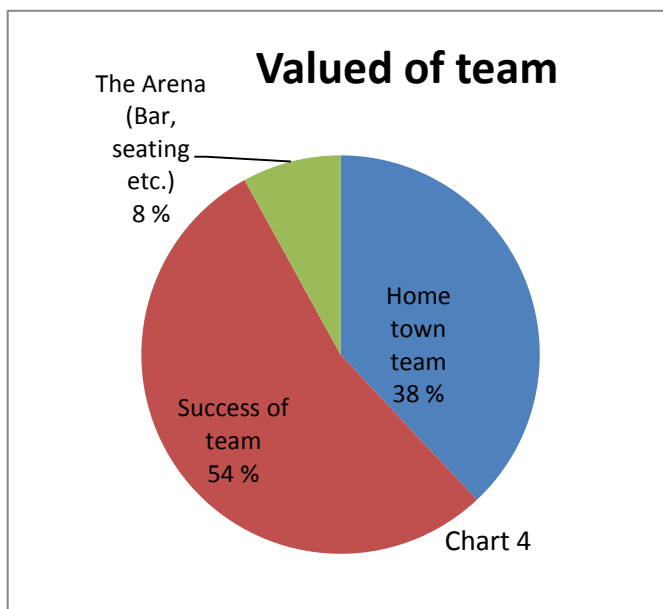
all together 88% of the people who answered the questionnaire were at the age that they potentially have a family (28 to over 48 years old), and 42% (majority) brought their family members to the games (see chart 1 & 2). Thus, the sport is considered as a family event by the consumers and should be advertised at places where families potentially visit, such as local super markets, bowling alleys or cinemas. Additionally, marketing for the junior teams at, for example schools and sporting facilities could draw more attention to the overall junior activity. This could enhance the competitive advantage over other

activities families engage in, as suggested by McDonald (1984) mentioned in chapter 2.

The research also confirmed that the team had good customer loyalty as 92% came to see every home game, from which 32% were supporting at away games as well. For 14% of the subjects this was the first season they were supporting the Blackburn Hawks, but when asked if they would support the team next season, by attending games, 98% of all the



subjects answered yes. Additionally, even though 56% lived close to the arena (less than 10km), 30% of the questionnaire answerers had to travel from 10-30km in order to see a game. This shows that the team seem to be providing something of value to the consumer within the event. When asked what this was



52% answered it was because of the atmosphere during games and 36% answered it was because of the quality ice hockey played (see chart 3). The thing that was enjoyed most about the team was the successfulness it had in the ENL series with 54% of the answerers

confirming that the image of a team makes a difference, thus branding is an important factor (see chart 4). Finally, 96% of the answerers said that they would not choose football

over ice hockey, thus the sport is most likely not a threatening competition to the Blackburn Hawks.

In the last open question section of the quantitative research, 24% wrote that even more atmosphere would be something they would enjoy. Secondly, 18% wished that the seating area would be heated, as it prevented elderly people who want to attend the games, but cannot due to fact that they could not stand the coldness. This technological aspect could be quite costly for the arena. Alternatively, with a research based on how many extra seats they would fill by doing so, they could estimate if they would break-even with the extra profit they acquire and then consider if this investment is worthy or not.

## **4.2. Vuosaaren Viikingit (Finland)**

### **4.2.1. Qualitative Research Data Presentation and Analysis**

According to the manager of Vuosaaren Viikingit, Timo Backman, the mission and vision is to become the largest junior ice hockey organisation in the capital area of Finland and have a competitive semi-professional adult team. The team has made a three year plan during which it will, if successful, enter (by qualifying into) Finland's lowest competitive ice hockey sports market called Suomisarja by winning the series (Division II) in which they currently play. The league Suomisarja, although not Finland's highest competitive league, attracts a massive amount of buyers, thus suppliers are interested in sponsoring teams which play there. Even though this is not the direct goal of the team, it will, with spill-over effects of a successful adult team, attract more consumers in entering their children into the team's junior activities, seeing as having a successful adult team will

boost the organisations brand image and attract consumers in being part of the organisation. Additionally, this will attract more skilled players to the adult team, who wish to play in the capital area of Finland at a competitive level of ice-hockey, which will in turn increase the amount of supporters who want to see these skilled players play, as well as suppliers who wish to advertise to the team's supporters.

The team advertises its junior activity by putting up posters of skating schools and different age-grouped teams in all ice hockey arenas located within the capital district. According to Backman, this has worked well enough for the last 10 years. Additionally, the team upholds an internet page for the junior activity, which is frequently updated about upcoming events. The competitive advantage that the junior activity has is that it diversifies itself from its competition. Whilst other organisations with professional adult teams drop their weakest players from on their junior teams and search for only the best available in order to be more successful, Vuosaaren Viikingit have a "fair play" system, which attracts a lot of consumers as their juniors are allowed to play the game without having to worry about performance pressure. The system works in the manner that, as the team lures a large amount of juniors to its organisation with this strategy, the teams constructed are allocated to division levels where they are estimated to be at least average in terms of successfulness. Thus, parents are happy to pay to see their children enjoying themselves on the ice, rather than stressing about their performance in fear of getting dropped from a team.

"Our biggest concern is the adult team", quotes Backman, as they have not been able to have success in attracting high quality players to make them successful enough to qualify for the semi-professional series. A big deterrent is the fact that the players have to pay a



monthly fee to play in the adults, due to the fact that the team has difficulties allocating enough sponsors to cover all the expenses, such as renting the ice, acquiring new game socks and shirts and this is not common for other teams. Thus, most players, even those who play for the juniors of the Vuosaaren Viikingit, look for alternative options of where to play when they become old enough. “The market environment is very competitive and a player has a lot of options to choose from, when deciding on a team”, says Backman.

Another issue was the timetable of trainings due to the political environment. According to the law set by the Finland’s Ice Hockey Association, no adult ice hockey team playing lower than a competitive sport series (see appendix for Table of the Leagues), is allowed to rent ice times before 9 pm on weekdays from any government owned or partly owned arena, as they are reserved in these cases primarily for any junior activities (Finhockey, 2012). The games on the weekends however are allowed to be held at any time the ice is free for rent. “Seeing as our arena is partly owned by the government, this also is a deterring factor for adult players as many have jobs that start early in the morning, thus they do not want to commit and pay for trainings they might not attend.”

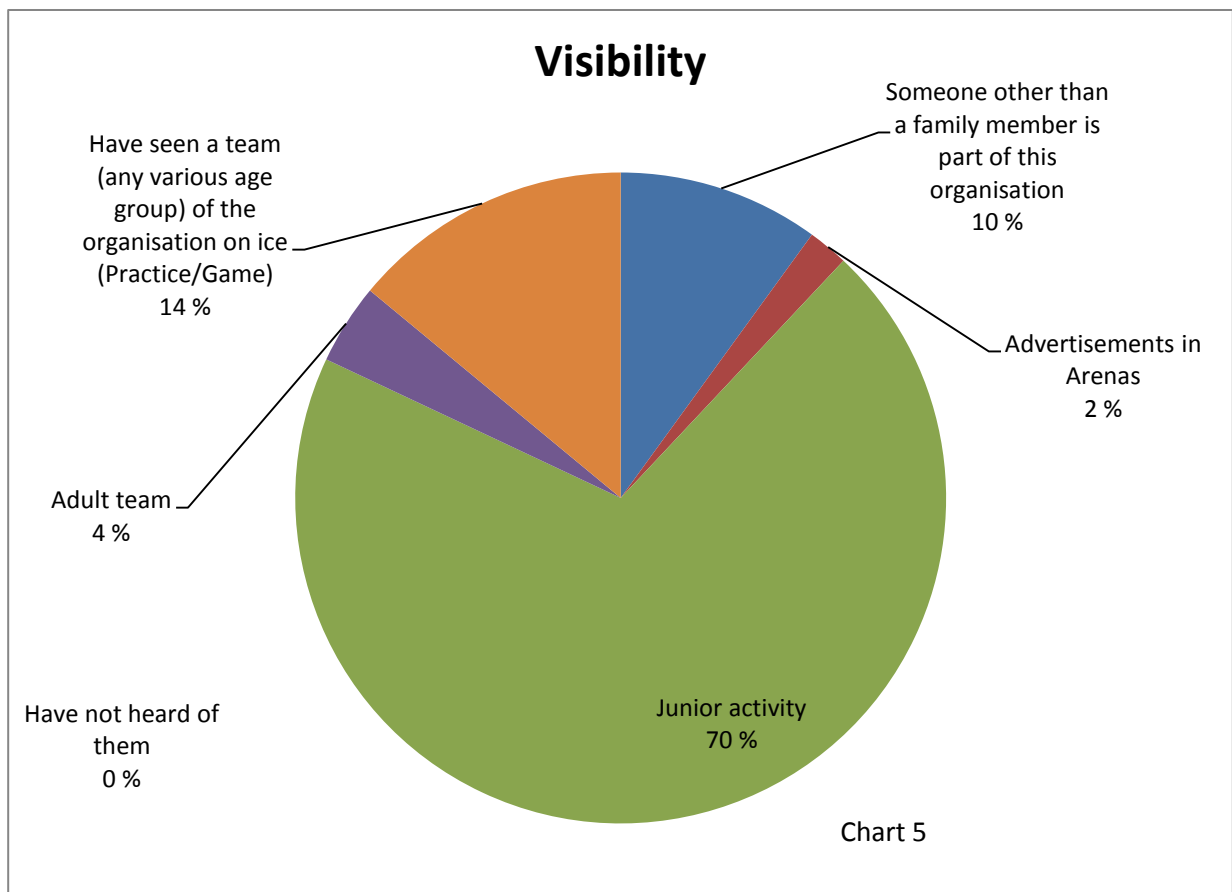
#### **4.2.2. Quantitative Research Data Presentation and Analysis**

The team has a clear vision and mission, which it has partly achieved by already having one of the most respected and largest junior ice hockey activities in Finland. The strategic plan to implement their goal is possible, but not without conflict.

One of the biggest challenges Vuosaaren Viikingit has is all of Porters Five Forces. The team currently has no buyers, no external suppliers, high competition, large amount of substitutes and for new entrants to enter the Division II league it is fairly easy.

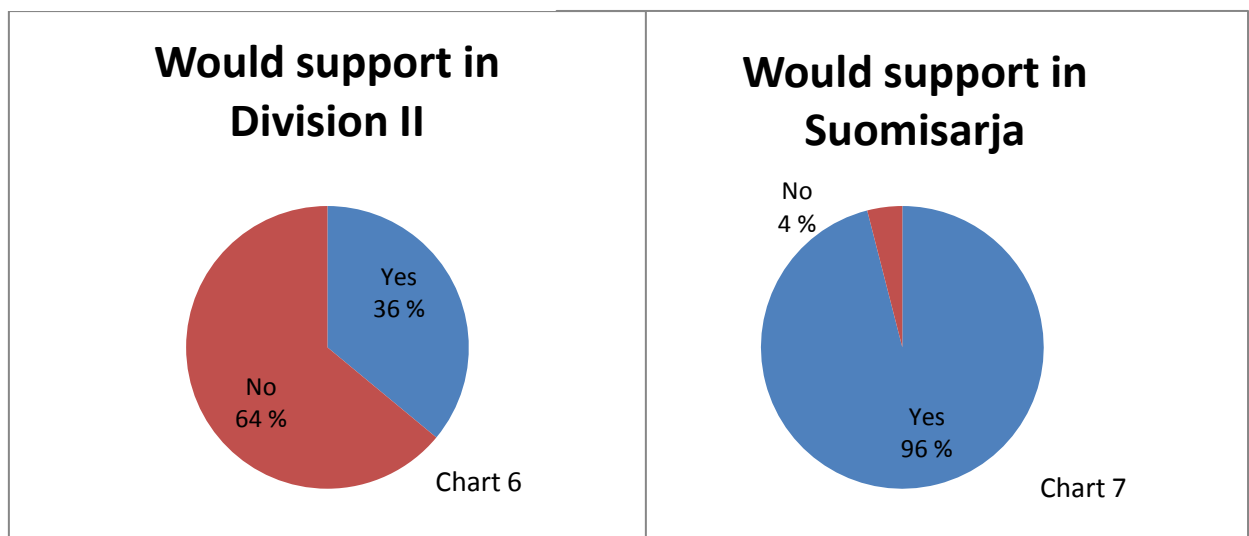
Additionally, the political factors are a negative aspect as the team must train very late in the evening due to the restrictions set by the Finnish Ice Hockey Association, which affect the social environment as it deters players from joining the team. Furthermore, the fact that the team has no supporters, no income and players have to pay to play makes the team very unattractive to all parties.

However, by qualifying for the higher series called Suomisarja, most of the team's difficulties could be solved. The political factors would not matter as they would not concern the team anymore, which will most likely solve the social issues as it would attract skilled players to the team due to the better training times as well as the chance to play semi-professional ice hockey. This in turn will attract buyers who attract suppliers to matches, as well as create a positive image of the organisation having a competitive representative team.



According to the quantitative research, a 100% of the respondents knew about the Vuosaaren Viikingit. 70% of these subjects had heard of the organisation through its junior activity, whilst only 4% heard of them through the adult team (see chart 5).

Nevertheless, 38% of the answerers had seen the adult team play at some point, so the knowledge of their existence was not as small as what was expected. The research showed that 64% said they were not interested in seeing the adult team play the Division II-League, but if they rose to the Suomisarja level it would be different, as 96% said they would be interested in seeing them play in that series (see chart 6 & 7). When asked what would be the reason for coming to support the team in Suomisarja-league, 80% of the respondents replied that the atmosphere would be better within the higher leagues games.



### *Summary*

The results of the data collected show that there is a large potential consumer demand for the products that the two organisations have to offer. There are many options available for both teams to gain a larger market share. The main issue is upholding an image as well as

gaining awareness within their markets. Both organisations need to concentrate on market penetration and identify their target consumers in order to create a better marketing plan. Additionally, the atmosphere of these events seems to be the driver for people coming to games. Thus, both teams should emphasize on creating an even better and more attractive event, which would increase the amount of atmosphere. The Blackburn Hawks have done this by having a mascot for the team, mid-game events and shows, music between breaks, a certified DJ, a service of beverages and snacks throughout the game, a fan equipment selling point and a chance to meet the players after games.

Vuosaaren Viikingit have none of these atmosphere raising methods mentioned above, with the only exception being the serving of coffee from the arena café, if it is open when the adult games are held. The team needs to invest more into the actual event seeing as what the Blackburn Hawks do attracts consumers, which Vuosaaren Viikingit desperately are in need of.

The next chapter will present a swot analysis of the two teams to clarify what positive and negative issues the teams should take into consideration when updating their strategic plans.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

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### 5.1. SWOT Analysis

In order to determine the strategic opportunities an organization has, it is important for it to acknowledge its internal factors, which consist of its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its external factors which consist of the macro-environmental opportunities and threats.

(Kotler, Keller 2006)

#### 5.1.1. Blackburn Hawks (UK)

<b>Strengths</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Arena</li><li>-Established 1991</li><li>-Media Coverage</li><li>-Atmosphere investment</li><li>-Free for players</li><li>-Entrance free</li><li>-Junior activity</li><li>-Large support group</li></ul>	<b>Weaknesses</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Junior development programme</li><li>-Funding</li><li>-Arena's policy on public skating</li></ul>
<b>Opportunities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Players willing to travel</li><li>-Potential home grown players</li></ul>	<b>Threats</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Substitute sports</li><li>-Competition</li><li>-Location</li><li>-Manchester Pheonix</li></ul>

The Blackburn Hawks have a potential to achieve their mission and vision. The team's strengths lie in having a good top management group who have a clear plan of what they are doing. The advantage of the team having an arena with the capacity to hold a large crowd is a benefit for them, especially to the point of if or when their funding is enough to play in the EPIHL league, as the series would most likely attract larger crowds.

Additionally, the top management have done a great effort in making the events atmosphere very high, which has had an effect on consumer attendance.

Another strength the Blackburn Hawks have is the media coverage they have for their adult team. The team has a very well updated and web page as well as people (fans and employees) who continuously add to conversations on Facebook. Additionally, the appearance on local newspapers and radio stations are a rare advantage for a team playing on their level.

The team is self-sustainable, with the income it makes from the affordable admittance fees they charge from their supporters, thus the teams expenses, such as payment for the import, payment for the team coach, player equipment and travel expenses for other players are covered.

The development of the junior activity is one of the weaknesses the organisation has, as this restricts them from raising their own highly skilled local players, which could be a valuable asset in attracting even more people to their events. Additionally, the marketing of the junior activity could easily be increased, seeing as the team is visible only at the arena and on the organisation's web page. Another weakness the organisation has is the arena's policy in giving out ice time. Due to the fact that the arena has to make money to sustain

itself, all the best times are given to public skating, as the income the arena makes with it is more than what the team can bring them.

The opportunity the team has is the fact that they have a junior activity programme that can be developed as stated before. With proper investment and a proper marketing plan the organisation can attract junior ice hockey players to their organisation. For example the team could invest in a highly qualified junior coach, who has a history of having been the coach for nowadays successful adult players and market this accordingly. Another opportunity is the fact that the team is successful enough to attract quality British players from distances away. Thus, with proper research of the quality players available, the team can construct an even better group, seeing as these players are willing to travel due to a very well managed team as well as the high amount of supporters the team has compared to what level of ice hockey it plays.

The sport soccer is always a threat, as the town Blackburn has a team which plays in the highest series of football in the world. This definitely has an effect in attracting new consumers.

Another threat to the organisation is the location of the team, which is close to the competition in Manchester who also has a team, but it plays in the EPIHL league. The team has the ability to offer players more than what Blackburn currently has and this could lead to the loss of valuable players who want to play at a higher level of ice hockey.

Additionally, if Blackburn is successful in raising local quality players with their junior activity programme, they most likely will be intrigued to play for the Manchester Phoenix team.

### 5.1.2. Vuosaaren Viikingit (Finland)

<b>Strengths</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Established 1970</li><li>-Successful junior activity</li><li>-Well known organisation</li><li>-Junior website</li><li>-Arena</li></ul>	<b>Weaknesses</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Funding</li><li>-Adult website</li><li>-Marketing</li></ul>
<b>Opportunities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Arena cafeteria</li><li>-Potentiality of growth</li><li>-Located in the capital area of Finland</li><li>-Skilled players available</li><li>-Training sessions</li></ul>	<b>Threats</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Competition</li><li>-Political issues</li><li>-Technological aspects</li><li>-New entrants</li><li>-Economic environment</li></ul>

The strengths of this organisation are its long history, newly built home arena, successful junior activity and well-known brand.

Their weakness is the organisations continuously failing attempts to produce a successful representative adult team. The fact that the team has to charge its players for playing is something that must be developed as it discourages their own skilful juniors, who could help make the adult team successful, in leaving the organisation and playing for another team. The marketing of the team is non-existent and needs to be developed in order for the team to even have a chance of attracting any potential quality players or supporters to join the activities this team runs.



The team has the opportunity to be self-sufficient as the organisation has the rights to the cafeteria in the arena, which could be very profitable if invested in. This could lead to the team becoming attractive to skilled players who are looking to play for free and could potentially contribute to the goal of playing in the competitive series Suomisarja.

The threat of new entrants and competition luring the skilled players to represent them is something the team has to acknowledge as they cannot at the moment offer any compensation, which could be considered as an attractive benefit.

Political issues as well as technological aspects are continuously changing and it is important for the organisation to keep track of the environment. Political issues such as new regulations on renting ice time have changed (for the worse when considering lower level adult teams) and technological aspects such as new equipment (laptop, programmes etc.) required in order for hosting games are expensive. Additionally, the economic environment has raised the prices of renting ice time, which in turn will raise the amount the team has to charge from its players.

## **5.2. Conclusion**

Looking at the SWOT analysis, both teams can adopt from one another as well as add to their current activities. Finland's Vuosaaren Viikingit adult team struggle with the facts that they face massive competition within their market, a small arena with the capacity to hold only 100-150 supporters, which means that eventually they will have to build a larger stand for the supporters or relocate the team to another ice hockey arena, if they wish to play in the competitive level of Finland. This would have to be done, because the arena does not qualify for the political standards that the Finnish Ice Hockey Association has set

for teams that play at a competitive level. Additionally, the team needs to provide a source of income for the adult team, as without it, they cannot act on attaining any valuable players that would be skilful enough to help them succeed in their goal, as the players themselves will have to pay for the service they provide. The team also needs to make a marketing plan for the adult team as it may prove to be valuable in the long run.

Blackburn Hawks on the other hand have a great opportunity to achieve their goals with the adult team, already within the next few years. The team's only current obstacle is attaining the needed income, which seems to be getting closer and closer to what they need, with the success they have been achieving.

The junior activity of the Vuosaaren Viikingit is admirable as they have diversified themselves from the rest of the competition and have been successful in doing so. The marketing of this programme could be better planned and widened, but it seems that the organisation is doing well as it is. The Blackburn Hawks junior activity is still quite small, but most likely the operation will spread, as soon as they achieve what they are after with the adult team.

Both teams have reachable goals and are not far from succeeding in them. Basic issues that can make great differences, such as finding out the target group of who they should be marketing to, using every last asset available to them and emphasizing on making a proper strategic plan that considers all the internal and external factors in play, could potentially speed up their process in achieving what they have set out to do.

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# 7. Appendix

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## 7.1. Blackburn Hawks Questionnaire

This questionnaire is for a dissertation work conducted by Sami Narkia. All participants will remain anonymous. All answers will be handled in confidentiality. Please know that you must be over 18 years of age for your answers to be valid. Thank you.

Please check the box next to the answer which reflects the best on your opinion.

**Gender:**

Male  Female

**Age:**

18-27  28-37  37-48  48+

**Q1. How did you hear about the team Blackburn Hawks?**

Advertisement  Word of mouth  Social Media (Facebook, Twitter etc.)

**Q2. How often do you come to watch the Blackburn Hawks play?**

Every Game  Every Home game  1-2 times a month  Once a month  
 Occasionally

**Q3. How long have you been coming to these games?**

First Season  Few years  More than 5 years

**Q4. Do you think you will come and support the team in future seasons?**

Yes  No

**Q5. When you come to games, do you usually...**

Come alone  Bring family member/s  Come in a group of 2-4  
 Come in a group of more than 4

**Q6. How far do you have to travel in order to see a game? (1.6 km = 1 mile)**

1-10 km     10-30 km     30-60 km     60 km

**Q7. Is Blackburn Hawks the closest Ice-hockey team to from where you live?**

Yes                   No

**Q8. What do you enjoy the most about the event?**

Atmosphere    Mid-game events                   Quality Ice-Hockey                   Friends

**Q9. What do you enjoy most when coming to see the Blackburn Hawks play?**

Home town team                   Success of team                   The Arena (Bar, good seating etc.)

**Q10. If there was a Soccer match at the same time as an Ice Hockey match, which would you rather go to support and why? (Assuming both games have the exact amount at stake considering the overall series they play in.)**

Ice-Hockey    Soccer

**Q11. In your own words, what would you develop within this event in order to make it more enjoyable?**

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## 7.2. Vuosaaren Viikingit Questionnaire

This questionnaire is for a dissertation work conducted by Sami Narkia. All participants will remain anonymous. All answers will be handled in confidentiality. Please know that you must be over 18 years of age for your answers to be valid. Thank you.

Please check the box next to the answer which reflects the best on your opinion.

**Gender:**       Male                                       Female

**Age:**

18-27                                       28-37                                       37-48                                       48+

**Q1. Have you heard of the ice hockey team Vuosaaren Viikingit?**

Yes                       No

**Q2. How have you originally heard of them?**

- Someone other than a family member is part of this organisation
- Advertisements in Arenas
- Junior Activity
- Adult team
- Have seen a team (any various age groups) of the organisation on ice (Practice/Game)
- Have not heard of them

**Q3. Have you ever seen them adult team play?**

Yes                       No

**Q4. Would you be interested in coming to watch the team's games (again/ for the first time), which are played in the Division II series?**

Yes                       No

**Q5. If Vuosaaren Viikingit would play at a higher level, for example Suomisarja (semi-professional level), would you be more interested in coming to games?**

Yes                       No

**Q6. The reason for this is, because...**

- Atmosphere
- Level of ice hockey is more enjoyable to watch

## 7.3. Table of the Leagues

### United Kingdom

The leagues are listed from highest to lowest:

EIHL

EPIHL

ENL 1

ENL 2

Rec Hockey

### Finland

The leagues are listed from highest to lowest:

1. SM-liiga
2. Mestaruus sarja
3. Suomisarja
4. Division II
5. Division III
6. Division IV
7. Division V
8. Division VI
9. Stadin liiga
10. Harrastesarja

(Elite prospects 2012)