

World Cup fever: an employer's guide

A Guest Article by Joanne Perry
May 2010

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How to avoid a (financial) penalty shootout

Once again, World Cup Fever is gripping the nation. Windows and cars are adorned with flags and people are dressed head to toe in their national colours. The festive spirit seems to be just what the country needs after months of recession, a biting winter, travel chaos and constitutional upheaval.

However, the very words "World Cup" can strike dread into the heart of employers all over the country. Just as the tournament can help to lift morale among the workforce, it can also be expensive for employers as employees duck out of work early to catch the games and then come into work late suffering with hangovers. How can employers handle the situation without coming across as killjoys?

Tell your players your plans and expectations

You should be realistic in your expectations. Making unreasonable demands will seriously damage morale and demotivate employees. Although you are not obliged to make allowances for employees who wish to watch the football, putting intentional barriers in their way will do more harm than good.

Before the tournament begins, you should consider sending a memo to staff, clearly setting out your intentions and expectations. Then, when the tournament gets under way, a consistent approach should be adopted. In this way, you can ensure that employees are clear as to what they are permitted to do, and what is expected of them. This will make it easier for you to deal with anybody who crosses the line without spoiling it for everyone else.

Handling absences

Historically, sickness absences increase during major sporting events. It can be difficult for employers to distinguish between those employees who are genuinely sick and those who are "pulling a sickie" in order that they can watch football.

To try to avoid unplanned absences, encourage staff to take pre-booked annual holiday if they want to watch the football. Also, consider allowing them to take unpaid leave. However, be careful to ensure that it is made clear to employees that requests for leave are not guaranteed to be approved and will have to be considered on a "first come, first served" basis to ensure that there is adequate cover.

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Give equal priority to all requests for time off – preference should not be given to employees wanting to watch the football. Such an approach is likely to favour male staff and could therefore result in claims of discrimination.

Keep accurate records

If employees do call in sick on days when there are key games during working hours, do not assume that they are faking. Make it clear to employees in advance that absences during the tournament will be subject to closer scrutiny, and hold return-to-work meetings with employees when they come back, even if this has not been the normal practice before. Make sure that all absences are carefully and accurately recorded.

Hopefully, if employees are aware that their absences will be looked at more closely, they will be dissuaded from pulling "sickies" if they are not genuinely ill.

If you have grounds to believe that an absence is not genuine – for example, if there is a suspicious pattern of days off coinciding with football games – you should consider taking disciplinary action.

Bear in mind, however, that it can be difficult to establish that absences were not genuine and therefore it is preferable to try to avoid the situation arising in the first place.

Flexible working

In order to prevent employees from taking "sickies", you might want to consider offering employees the opportunity to work flexibly around games.

For example, you could allow employees to work through their lunch breaks, or come into work early, then leave early in order to catch the games. Again, you should make it clear that any such arrangement will need to be pre-approved by the company in order to ensure that adequate cover is available.

If your employees work shifts, you could also offer a "shift swap" arrangement, provided that employees can find somebody who is prepared to swap shifts. Again, all swaps should be subject to prior approval.

Finally, you might consider allowing employees to work at home on match days. This requires a level of trust in your employees, as you will not be able to monitor what they are doing. However, this may prove to be a preferable option to employees taking unplanned absence or causing disruption within the place of work itself.

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Make sure that any offers of flexible working, shift swaps or home working are made available to all employees, regardless of whether they want to watch the football. Limiting the offer to football fans only is likely to alienate those employees who do not wish to watch the football, and potentially create tension and resentment in the workplace.

Watching at work

You could consider showing the football at the place of work, and even making it into an "event" that all employees are welcome to attend. This can be a good opportunity to foster a team spirit and boost morale. However, you should be aware that not everybody will want to be involved and you may wish to allow non-interested employees to simply take time out rather than watch the football.

Again, you should be realistic. It will be difficult to expect people to go straight back to their desks and pick up their work where they left off after spending time socialising with their colleagues while they watch a game.

Don't forget the "away" fans

Be alert to the fact that not everybody will support the England team. In today's multinational workforce, there may be members of staff from all around the world. Be sensitive to the fact that they should be given the same benefits as employees supporting the England team.

If you have a particularly wide spread of nationalities in your staff, this may mean that it is simply not practicable to allow the employees to watch the games on site.

Dealing with alcohol

Football often comes hand in hand with alcohol. If you choose to screen the football, and perhaps turn it into an event with food and drink, make sure that employees are aware of their responsibilities.

In particular, if there is any chance that employees may need to operate machinery after the event, make it explicit to them that they must not consume any alcohol. Make sure you have an up-to-date alcohol policy and consider sending a memo reminding staff of its contents.

Similarly, you should make it clear to employees that it is unacceptable for them to come into work suffering from the effects of alcohol (including hangovers)

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such that they are incapable of performing their duties properly. You should spell out the disciplinary consequences that will follow if employees take time off for alcohol-related reasons or if they come into work under the influence of drink.

Internet policy

You should also take some time to revisit and consider your company's internet policy. You may find that employees spend significant amounts of time on the internet, getting either the updated scores or general news about the tournament. Some games are even likely to be screened in full on the internet, and employees may try to watch the football from their workstations.

Again, set out your expectations to employees clearly. You may wish to state that reasonable internet browsing will be permitted, provided that it doesn't interfere with the person's work, but that watching full games is expressly prohibited. Alternatively, you may wish to adopt a "zero tolerance" approach and prohibit all non-work-related browsing.

Take a good run-up

The World Cup can be an excellent opportunity to forge good relations with staff. Handled correctly, it can be a chance to encourage a real sense of goodwill and commitment from employees. However, employers should be alive to the potential pitfalls and take steps to avoid being the ones who lose out.

Now is the time to revisit and update employment policies, and make sure that these are issued to staff. Overall, the key elements for success are communication, clarity and consistency. With the right approach, employers and employees alike can enjoy a happy (and, with any luck, victorious) World Cup.

The above provides a general guide to issues that might arise. However, each situation is unique and different considerations may apply in your case. We would therefore recommend that you consult a solicitor or other suitably qualified person about your specific circumstances.

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If you would like more information on any of the points covered in this Guest Article, please contact **TCii** on **020 7099 2621**.