

World Cup fever brewing

Footie fans will try almost anything not to miss a big game. But will this lead to lower employee productivity?



As with every World Cup in the past, businesses tend to see an uptrend in staff applying for medical leave for reasons such as stomach ache, eye infection and other various illnesses during the month-long soccer event.

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WILL the FIFA World Cup, which is slated to kick off on June 11 in Johannesburg, South Africa, serve as a major distraction for corporations and be a drain on employee productivity? Very likely. But you'll be hard pressed to find a company that would openly admit that its performance would suffer as a result of the football fever.

There's data to prove that the World Cup period generally sees an uptick in employees taking a break from work as they catch a slice of the action, which mostly takes place at the wee hours of the morning.

According to Malaysian Employer Federation executive director Shamsuddin Bardan, in a typical year (no World Cup), the employee loss days from work per year (ELD) averages about four days. "However, when the World Cup is on, the ELD goes up to an average of five to six days," he says.

Forgiving bosses

While the companies interviewed by *StarBizWeek* were unable to provide figures on productivity levels during past World Cups, many concede that there were more "sickies" over the period compared with other months.

"More employees and even top management come in later for work than normal," says a company source.

Interestingly, some bosses are more forgiving of their employees' general lack of enthusiasm at work during this period.

In fact, one boss says it is a good time to bond with the employees as they share common interest. "It's an intangible benefit," he says.

"The World Cup takes place once in four years. While bottom line is very important, it sometimes pays to be less rigid. Bosses should have a lighter side and employees should know their limits and understand their work commitments," he says.



Shamsuddin Bardan ... "When the World Cup is on, the employee loss days from work per year goes up to an average of five to six days."

Tim Bailey, spokesperson for Continental Tyres, which carried out a poll on 4,000 Brits, says it best: "The World Cup is a massive event. It is clear that fans will try almost anything not to miss a big game." Continental Tyres is an official FIFA sponsor.

The researchers found that over nine million employees in Britain will skive an average of 3.5 days during the event.

"That means an extra 31,850,000 excuses will be made in just four weeks as fans phone or text their boss faking illness," says Bailey.

He says that while the company understands the appeal of the event, he suggests that employees plan ahead and perhaps use their annual leave rather than risk confrontation with the boss.

The survey found seven out of 10 in Britain plan to watch the World Cup matches and four in 10 supporters plan on checking scores, gossip and team line-ups from behind their desk at work for at least 22 minutes a day, or 5.5 hours, throughout the tournament.

One in 10 die-hard fans would even quit

Main reasons for absenteeism from work during World Cup



A dodgy stomach (28%) feeling sick (23%) and a headache (20%) were the main reasons blamed for keeping people away from work when matches are scheduled.

Top 10 World Cup excuses

1. Tummy ache or dodgy stomach
2. Vomiting
3. Headache/migraine
4. High temperature and dizziness
5. Food poisoning
6. Car won't start
7. Boiler broke
8. Child unwell
9. Ear ache or infection
10. Husband or wife ill so have to look after them/kids

* Based on survey results

their job if they had a ticket for the World Cup Final but were refused time off work by their boss.

One in four workers will pull a sickie this summer. One in six women will claim they can't make it to work so they can watch Fabio Capello's boys in action.

And bosses beware – a cheeky one in six workers will lie and say their car won't start, have a sudden bout of food poisoning or simply feel dizzy.

One in 20 will even blame death in the family for keeping them off work. Another two days of work will be missed by one in five workers due to heavy drinking and partying with mates.

Eight in 10 employees feel an England win would lift the mood of the nation and productivity will increase in the office, while one in five will plan work meetings around football matches and the same number will sneak out of the office early to "meet a client".

Interestingly, the survey revealed that a quarter of women won't watch the World Cup because David Beckham isn't playing.

Says a human resource (HR) director of a Malaysian conglomerate: "We don't need a fortune teller to predict the outcome of this

year's World Cup on employee productivity."

The local scene

As with every World Cup in the past, the company sees an uptrend in staff applying for medical leave for reasons such as stomach ache, eye infection and other various illnesses during the month-long soccer event.

The overall consensus from several HR directors (of listed and non-listed companies) concur with the trend.

Most companies concede that their staff performance during past World Cups were lower in terms of slower work rate and higher than normal sick leave taken, compared with non-World Cup years.

Many of these HR directors opine that the World Cup is enjoyed by people globally and as such, the actual impact on an organisation's performance, especially bottom line, is not significant.

"We see the drop in employees performance as an identifiable cause which should recover once the World Cup is over. Besides, there are 'intangible benefits' from such major events like social bonding that could impact a company's profitability positively over time," says one HR director.