

The World Cup and absence management: guidance for employers

The 2010 World Cup is nearly upon us and the chances are that a large proportion of employees across the UK will be looking forward to it and starting to think about how and where they will be watching the key games. It is important to remember that the UK's working population is incredibly diverse and there will be people with backgrounds from all over the world who will be hoping to watch their country in action when matches are screened.

Of course employers have no obligation to cater for their employees' interest in the tournament, but evidence suggests that where employers demonstrate they care about their staff and their interests outside work, employees are more likely to go the extra mile for the organisation. Some employers may see the World Cup as an opportunity to rebuild employee morale hit hard by the recession.

There are a variety of approaches that employers can consider to ensure that employees can make the most of the World Cup without compromising the needs of the business in any way:

Flexible hours

Allowing staff flexibility over starting and finishing work earlier or later, providing core business hours are covered, is one fairly straightforward way that employers might consider. Allowing staff to take time off to watch games providing they make the time up on another day is another possible solution.

Shift swaps

Shift swaps are another approach to providing staff flexibility to watch games while ensuring that business is not compromised. Asda is introducing a 'shift swap' scheme for all staff to allow them to rearrange their shifts around different games, provided they can find the appropriate level of cover. This approach may be particularly appropriate in organisations where it is more difficult to provide informal flexibility over hours because of the need to provide constant 24/7 service or production.

Unpaid leave

Employers might consider providing unpaid leave for staff, providing this does not interfere with business operations. During the 2006 World Cup, supermarket chain Asda gave its 150,000 UK employees the chance to take up to two weeks' unpaid leave during the tournament.

Special screening on premises

If employers have the room then they may consider screening matches on their premises. This may be particularly appropriate if firms are located out of town, for example in a business park, without a pub in close proximity. An on-site screening is a good opportunity to build team spirit; however, it should be

remembered that not everyone will be interested in watching the football so people should not be made to feel excluded if they don't want to get involved.

TV/radio on in background/matches screened in rest rooms

Some employers may allow staff to keep track of matches on a TV or radio while they work, or provide TVs or radios in rest rooms; however, it is important to consider the possible drawbacks of such approaches. For example, it is difficult for staff to keep focused on work with the distraction of a match in progress and some staff with no interest may resent that they are having to work harder to compensate for distracted colleagues. There may also be health and safety considerations with potential risks caused by staff who don't have their full attention on the task at hand.

If matches are screened in rest rooms, some employees may find it hard to leave once their breaks are over if matches are at a critical point – or they may be tempted to sneak back for an update during work time.

Employers should remind employees of their Internet use and monitoring policies. There will of course be minute-to-minute updates on the Web, and some games may be available to view live via the Internet. It is up to individual employers to decide whether they are happy for employees to keep track of games or take a zero-tolerance approach. However, the important thing is to communicate to staff what the policy is and why, in advance of any games, and then enforce it consistently.

Absence and alcohol misuse policies

The World Cup will go hand in hand with an upsurge in alcohol sales across the country. It is also important to remind staff of the organisation's policy on absence and misuse of alcohol, making clear that it is unacceptable to take time off sick, either to watch matches or to recover from the aftermath of long evenings in the pub in front of a big screen. It is of course also unacceptable to turn up to work so hung over that you are incapable of doing any work. Employers should make clear there are disciplinary consequences for taking unauthorised time off without good reason or not performing or misbehaving at work.

Employees should be aware of their limits if they are planning to have a big night out and watch the football. If they know that they are likely to be extremely hung over the day after a big match and will find it hard to get to work, they should save some annual leave that they can use during the World Cup or see if they can negotiate unpaid leave.

Source: CIPD www.cipd.co.uk