

## In This Issue:

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As the World Cup soccer tournament begins, employers may face challenges with absenteeism and efficiency, but can consider ways to turn concerns about productivity losses into an opportunity for morale boosting.

## Copa Mundial: World Cup and the Workplace

By Michael Manke

On June 11, 2010, the largest sporting event in the world begins. For four weeks, football, or, as we call it in America, soccer, will take center stage as the world's best players and teams compete in South Africa for the World Cup. Soccer fans will be riveted...at home, in bars and restaurants, and, yes, in the workplace. As muffled shouts of "GOOAAAALLLLLL" permeate the office or manufacturing facility, employers may be concerned about how best to deal with this global party and distraction.

### Concerns About Absenteeism, Low Productivity and National Origin Discrimination

In the United States' time zones, most of the World Cup games are scheduled to take place during the work day, between 7:30 a.m. ET and 5:00 p.m. ET. As a result, the biggest concern for many employers is how to address absenteeism. Employers who foresee this being a problem should make sure that they are familiar with their absence and vacation/PTO policies, including required notice procedures, and should consider beforehand how strictly these policies will be enforced. For example, with respect to your vacation policy, how will you deal with last-minute vacation requests? If you have multiple requests, how will you handle them? Will you consider approval based on the order the requests are received, or will you rely on some other factor, such as seniority? With respect to your absence policy, how will you treat suspicious absences? What does your policy require in terms of documentation? If absences will create significant operational difficulties, employers should consider distributing a memo or email to employees making clear in advance that the company's absence policy will be strictly enforced.

For employees who do report to work, the concern will be their productivity, especially with respect to employees who have access to computers, as the games will be streaming live online. As a further concern, employees watching the games online could cause a slowdown or worse for the company's technology infrastructure.

Employers therefore must also be familiar with their internet usage policy and decide beforehand how strictly to enforce the policy. If the company is going to monitor employee internet access, it should consider warning employees of this beforehand. Note that unlike many of the individual online distractions your policy may be designed to curtail (such as social networking), the World Cup only lasts four weeks, every four years. In the broader view, as outlined below, employers can use the tournament as a way to bring employees together.

Regardless of how a company enforces its policies during the World Cup, it is critical that policies be enforced consistently, otherwise the employer's actions may give rise to complaints of unfair treatment or claims of national origin discrimination. For example, if employees of Italian heritage are permitted to take time off when Italy plays, but employees of Mexican heritage are not afforded the same opportunity when Mexico plays, this could lead to the perception of favorable treatment based on national origin. Employers must also be mindful of employee behavior during the Cup, as conduct intended as playful teasing based on a particular nation's success or failure on the soccer pitch could potentially give rise to a complaint of national origin hostile work environment harassment. Employers should monitor the workplace and ensure that employees do not go too far in expressing their national pride or act disrespectfully to others based on their nationality.

## Suggestions for Getting the Most Out of Your Workforce

While there are legitimate concerns tied to managing the workforce during the World Cup, management can try to use employees' interest in the tournament as a healthy workplace distraction and an opportunity for team-building and fostering office or plant camaraderie.

The following are a few guidelines for making the most of your employees' interest in this event. Moreover, these ideas are applicable to other similar distractions in the workplace, such as the "March Madness" college basketball tournament, baseball playoffs, or a major political event.

- Bear in mind your absence and internet use policies. Enforce rules consistently throughout the workplace.
- Use the tournament as an opportunity to give a benefit and boost morale. Turn on a television in a break room or conference room to allow for group viewing. Consider ordering lunch. Ordering ethnic food or organizing a potluck lunch could be a good way to celebrate both the games and your workforce's diversity.
- Consider allowing flexible work schedules so that employees can take off a couple of hours to watch their favorite team. They can make up the time by coming in early or leaving late that day. This may help avoid excessive absenteeism.
- For workplaces without companywide web access, consider announcing or posting the scores of the games in the break room.
- If casual dress is appropriate at times in your workplace, designate a Friday during the tournament where employees can wear their favorite team's jersey, from soccer or any sport.
- Maintaining a respectful workplace is, as always, a priority. Soccer passions can run high, but employers must be aware of and have zero tolerance for inappropriate behavior.

With some advance consideration and planning, employers can be ready for the possible challenges the 2010 World Cup may pose in managing a workplace and perhaps can turn the world's biggest sporting event into an employee relations win.

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