

When sport and the workplace collide

Introduction

If the World Cup and Wimbledon have left you and your staff bleary-eyed, then don't be alarmed. The impact of sport in the workplace can actually be a good thing and the enthusiasm it engenders can boost team morale and improve productivity.

So if you are obsessively following the Tour de France or slavishly supporting your beloved AFL team, everyday sports talk can help to build relationships with colleagues, bosses and even clients.

If you have any doubt, take a look at the 2006 report from Hudson in the UK.

<http://uk.hudson.com/documents/uk-impact-of-sport-on-UK-workplace-full-report.pdf>

This extensive report - which highlights the negative but mostly positive impacts of sport in the workplace - was prepared in the lead up to the 2006 FIFA World Cup. But the findings remain relevant in 2010 as the world is gripped by another series of high profile sporting contests.

Sports talk in the workplace

The report confirms that men talk about sport at work more frequently than women with 53% of men stating that sport is a topic of conversation with work colleagues every day or almost every day, compared to just 16% of women. However, almost one in four (24%) women use sport as a way of becoming accepted in work-related conversations, and more than half (54%) display keen or some interest in sport.

Just under one third (30%) of respondents believed that talking about sport at work allows them to communicate more effectively with colleagues. Not only this, but sport talk is seen as a way to break through the hierarchy and build stronger relationships with bosses and superiors.

Naturally, sport can also be an easy and effective ice-breaker to build rapport with clients.

Teamwork on the field and in the office

The majority of survey respondents (80% of men and 70% of women) suggested that employers and employees can use sport as a tool to boost morale and productivity in the workplace.

Teamwork is often discussed in organisations and working as a team undoubtedly has innumerable benefits. But compared to a professional football team, how much investment is really made in corporate team building activities? Sport can enhance creativity and promotes sharing of ideas. It can teach strategic thinking as well as thinking on your feet – both great skills to have in a modern workplace.

So if sport can act as catalysts for communication and bonding, then should it become part of the everyday ethos of an organisation? And what is the potential impact on the bottom line for an organisation that cites and supports Teamwork as a corporate value? This report certainly suggests that when handled correctly and consistently, sport can indeed positively impact a company's results.

Positive action to bring sport and work together

When sport and work collide, there are certainly cautions to note. There is some potential for discrimination or exclusion against those not interested in sport, or aggressive competition between supporters from opposing teams. Disappointment over losses can definitely impact staff attitudes in the short term and one too many late nights can absolutely affect work performance.

However, for the organisations that commit to turning a potential distraction into positive action, the benefits cannot be ignored.

So how can employers maintain a balanced approach to sport and the workplace and take advantage of the enthusiasm and energy it can bring? The Hudson report suggests:

- Encourage staff to watch sport together such as communal screenings, possibly combined with sweepstakes and staff competitions. The energy and goodwill generated by collective support and interaction on a large scale ensures that employees feel valued and more willing to engage in work after the event.
- Enable staff to network at sporting events with customers, bonding over sport rather than product features and proposals. Relationship building with clients in this manner can prove a real advantage over your competitors.
- Encourage staff to play sport together at lunchtime or after work. Participants will get to know their colleagues outside of the workplace while they are improving their health. And the correlation between a healthy workforce and improved productivity levels is obvious.
- Use sport as the focus of team-building events. Healthy competition between staff can engender team spirit and lead to the creation of bonds between management and more junior staff.
- Sponsor staff who specialise in a sport. Be a socially responsible employer and support employees' charitable efforts. Encourage sports enthusiasts to share their successes and lessons with their colleagues.

Consider the impact sport has on your business or place of work and decide if any of these techniques might bring a positive and healthy outcome for your team.