

World Cup-itis: an epidemic

The World Cup is just around the corner and employers are steeling themselves against an epidemic of absenteeism. **Veronica Miller** tries to find cure.

As many as 13% of men (compared to only four per cent of women) admit they have "thrown a sickie" to either watch a game or as a result of the alcohol they consumed while they watched one the night before. The younger generation suffer even more from this terrible fever, with 16% of 18- to 29-year olds admitting they have taken a day off to watch a sporting event (interestingly, the genders are affected equally in this age group) according to a survey of 2,191 people by YouGov for HR specialist Croner.

The flexible fever

With many of the tournament's matches held during working hours, employers are being urged to make arrangements to avoid mass absences

lunch in order to leave early or to swap shifts with their colleagues.

Companies should also be prepared for a greater number of annual leave requests, Croner says. As granting all the requests could result in a practically empty workplace, these should be dealt with on a first come, first served basis. "It is important to keep communication channels open for employers to work with employees to find out what they want. After all, it is quite likely that employers will be just as keen to watch the matches," stresses Judith Watson, head of employment law at Cobbetts.

Be careful about relying solely on your HR systems to track absences, cautions Lesley Brown, product planning and research manager at Midland HR & Payroll Solutions. "Just relying on HR systems to track such issues undervalues the role of the line manager. Any manager worth their salt will know who is sick, know there is a game that day (or the day before) and take appropriate action when the employee returns to work."

The "German Jolly"

Supermarket chain Asda is hoping to avoid unplanned disruption to staffing levels by giving its 150,000 employees the opportunity to take up to two weeks' unpaid leave during the tournament. This "German Jolly" can be used to watch games at home, in the pub or even, in what must be regarded as a blessing from on-high for die-hard fans, to travel to Germany to see matches live. Any worker is entitled to take the leave between the first kick-off on 9 June and 9 July, the date of the final. This approach proved successful during the 2002 World Cup, when the supermarket giant saw no rise in absenteeism.

Asda is offering its staff up to two weeks' unpaid leave in a scheme called the "German Jolly"

on match days or, worryingly for health and safety, staff going to the pub at lunchtime to watch a game and coming back to work deep in their cups.

Richard Smith, employment services director at Croner, says that "temporarily relaxing the rules can have positive returns for business". Being flexible during the World Cup could not only cut predicted absence rates, but could also greatly benefit employee-employer relations. Employers could set up televisions in meeting rooms or the canteen and allow their employees to watch important games during working hours, urges Croner, allow workers to start early or work through their

A clash of civilisations

Living as we do in multi-cultural times, it is important to be aware that you may have employees barracking for different teams, cautions Northern Irish employment law specialists Legal-Island. If these teams meet each other in a match, passions could run

Remember, not everyone is interested in the beautiful game

high. To avoid a clash of civilisations in your office, ensure all your employees are aware of your expectations of their conduct during the Cup to avoid having the enjoyment of matches ruined by a rowdy few. It could help to circulate clear guidelines via email or memos regarding conduct before the tournament starts.

Insure to ensure all is well

All these precautions could be unnecessary if we were conducting business in the Netherlands. Dutch insurance company SEZ is offering employers the opportunity to take out insurance to cover them for the financial burden of a sudden rise in sick days during the World Cup. Considering sickness absence rose 20% on the days the Dutch national team played during the European Championships in Portugal in 2004, one could hardly blame employers from making full use of the offer!

Finally, remember not everyone is interested in the beautiful game. In order to avoid workplace tensions between the impassioned and those in whom football raises little more than a chill, make sure you offer equivalent perks for those not glued to their TVs this June.

