

## Are you ready? Are you steady? Is your organisation in good shape for the Olympics?

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Few will be in any doubt that the London Olympics will have a major impact on employers, both within and outside the capital. Following the Sydney 2000 Games, research showed high proportions of local workers adapting their working lives and patterns to the event: 27% took leave from work, 24% changed the number of hours they worked per week, 22% worked remotely, 18% travelled to/from work at different times, and others changed the number of days worked per week. All the indicators are that London needs to achieve similar statistics for the capital to run smoothly during 2012.

In the light of research suggesting that employers underestimate the impact that the Olympics will have on their businesses, this article provides some practical guidance to help employers plan ahead.

What are the issues?

### **Travel disruption**

One of the most far-reaching effects of the Games (particularly for London-based businesses) will be the additional strain on the transport system and the significant delays resulting from the high volume of passengers. The main transport hubs, such as Victoria and Canary Wharf are predicted to be overwhelmed by passengers, with queuing systems in operation for access to platforms. Ordinary commuters and their employers will need to be flexible. This might involve:

- changes to working hours and shift patterns to avoid rush hour;
- asking employees to devise an alternative route to work;
- being more lenient than usual about timekeeping difficulties (bearing in mind the particular challenges for employees with caring responsibilities);
- introducing and encouraging alternative arrangements such as walk to work, car sharing or cycling schemes;
- greater use of technology, remote working or alternative workspaces (some large organisations, such as HSBC, are allowing staff to work from home or from alternative sites throughout the Games).

### **Requests for holiday and time off**

There is a host of reasons why employees might seek time off during the Games: to attend events or watch them on television, to avoid the congestion in London, or to follow in the footsteps of ex-Arsenal and England footballer, Sol Campbell, who has decided to rent out his home (albeit that they may not be able to match the staggering £75,000 per week rent that Mr Campbell is charging!).

Some employees might also be aiming to participate in the "Games Maker" volunteering programme, which aims to provide 70,000 people with to the opportunity volunteer for 10 days during the Olympics, the Paralympics or both. The time commitment needed to volunteer could thus potentially be upwards of 20 days, presenting a challenge to affected employers, bearing in mind that successful applicants may also require time off earlier on in the year to attend training sessions. Planning ahead and being well prepared with a consistent response to requests will help employers to cope better.

The advent of the Games does not oblige you to permit additional leave or change your normal holiday-related practices, but you would be well advised to think ahead about issues which are likely to arise – for example, lengthy, numerous or overlapping leave requests. To this end you should review your **annual leave** and related policies to make sure that they are adequate to cover issues such as:

- the allocation of leave requests within teams and departments (is first come first served the best or only system?);
- authorisation of leave;
- requests for unpaid leave;
- requests for special leave for activities such as volunteering;

- refusal of leave requests that interfere with business need.

### **Absenteeism and unauthorised leave**

Refusal of leave requests may tempt some employees to find other reasons to absent themselves from the office. Given the potential for employees to miss work to watch or attend the Games or associated ceremonies, we suggest that you formally remind employees of their obligations and confirm that employees found to have taken unauthorised absence will be subject to disciplinary action.

### **Business need**

We also suggest that you are proactive and work out how busy your business is likely to be during the Olympics and whether some areas will be particularly affected by holidays, volunteering and absenteeism. If you detect a potential requirement for additional staff then plan ahead for the engagement of temporary workers.

### **Internet use**

You may predict a surge in internet use during key Games events. If so, make sure that your employees understand the need to prioritise business use of the internet. Providing dedicated facilities for viewing might be one answer to this problem (see further below).

### Changing existing policies and introducing new policies

You may decide that it is appropriate to introduce an 'Olympics Policy' or similar document which brings together issues such as those mentioned in this article. Clear, concise and consistent provisions will be an essential part of planning.

Whilst involving and communicating with employees is always advisable, when considering changing policies or introducing new guidance, you should remind yourself of the parameters within which you can make changes to practices without employee consent (for example, handbook terms may be stated to be non-contractual and subject to variation without consent whilst contractual provisions will necessitate prior consultation).

### A collaborative approach?

Consulting with your employees on a policy for dealing with the impact of the Games may appear bold but could be very effective. Listening to employee suggestions and implementing policies that strike a balance between business need and employees' wishes is likely to lead to a better outcome for everyone.

You might also wish to offer incentives to your employees so that instead of seeking to avoid work during the Olympics period, they feel motivated to attend. Schemes such as 'employee of the month' or 'best attendance record' with Games-related awards might be welcomed. This could be supplemented by the provision of television or computer facilities so that interested employees can watch key events. You might consider rescheduling breaks to facilitate this. Providing dedicated computer terminals for viewing during the Games might also help to minimise the strain on the employer's IT systems. Employees should be reminded to use any privileges responsibly, or risk disciplinary action.

### Further Reading

This article aims to highlight some key ideas and spark proper consideration of the impact of the Games. Additional helpful reading includes the [ACAS guidance](#).

### Conclusion

The London Olympics 2012 will be an exciting time for the UK. Being an employer who recognises this may lead to generating good publicity, greater use of different working practices, improved morale, the introduction of new skills gained by volunteers and maximising new business opportunities created through networking events.

On the other hand, demonstrating a lack of flexibility or showing a lack of consideration towards employees could lead to the creation of a demotivated workforce, low morale and increased absenteeism.

Businesses cannot ignore the potential impact of the Games. ACAS advises that employers should aim to show flexibility, decisiveness and fairness in dealing with the issues and we agree. Planning ahead and consultation will be key. Taking no action or leaving it too late could be a recipe for major disruption.

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