

Staff Finish the Job in Record-Bludging Time

By

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Time zones being what they are, the Beijing Olympics starting tonight are unlikely to result in the same number of bleary-eyed zombies wandering around offices while clutching double espressos as, say, the 2004 Athens Games or the 2006 soccer World Cup in Germany.

But the convenient time zone is still likely to reduce workplace productivity as employees call in sick to watch their favourite events at home and office workers regularly “refresh” their computer screens for Games updates.

Organisational psychologist Christopher Shen says major events need not hurt productivity as they can be good team building exercises.

“Scientific research does demonstrate that productivity diminishes during a global sports event, such as an Olympic Games or World Cup soccer,” Shen says. “Yet very astute managers, rather than prevent their staff from watching it, will actually use that and celebrate that with the staff.”

Former prime minister Bob Hawke confirmed the centrality of sport to the Australian psyche when, following Australia II’s 1983 America’s Cup win, he spontaneously declared: “Any boss who sacks anyone for not turning up today is a bum.”

Shen says managers should harness the surge of patriotism to enable team building.

Gilbert Christie, principal psychologist at Christie Consulting, says trying to prevent staff from following the Games at work will be counter-productive.

“People tend to work much, much better when they feel they’ve got control over their destiny or their work environment. Therefore, the boss, in my view, should say, ‘I’m happy for you to be flexible in your hours but I want you to get the job done’. It’s all about outcomes.”

Bosses who are inflexible with sports-mad employees are likely to find they face minor medical epidemics across the workplace.

“If you don’t allow them to make their own decisions, they’ll take sick leave,” Christie says. “Coercion is a very poor motivator.”

Morale might be all the more depleted if employees know their bosses are in Beijing, while workers are expected to plug away and maintain a “business as usual” attitude.

The chief executives of several companies will be attending the Olympics this year, including Telstra’s Sol Trujillo, David Jones’s Mark McInnes and outgoing National Australia Bank CEO John Stewart.

But just because the boss is living it up in Beijing doesn’t mean workers can put their feet up.

David Jones’s general manager of corporate affairs and communications, Helen Karlis, says the department store’s employees won’t be able to slacken off.

“You can’t have shop attendants sitting around watching Olympics if there are customers who want to be served,” Karlis says.

But Telstra spokesman Jeremy Mitchell says all employees should be actively encouraged to take time out to catch key events.

“The good thing is with these Olympics that they don’t actually have to have a television near them to watch it,” he says. “They can do it on their Next G phone. They can be at work and watch it, which, of course, we encourage greatly. We can all have a moment’s rest while we’re watching an Australian compete for their medal.”

NAB spokeswoman Kerrina Lawrence says the company accepts that employees will spend some work time keeping up to date with the Olympics latest but there is an expectation such use of company time and resources will be “infrequent”.

Should NAB employees decide to simply stay at home to watch, however, they will have only their consciences to answer to, after NAB abolished the need to provide medical certificates.

“It’s a matter of trust,” she says.

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Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers.

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