

## The Olympic Games 2012: Going for Gold

The Olympics are due to kick off on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2012 and will continue until 12<sup>th</sup> August 2012, followed swiftly by the Paralympics from 29<sup>th</sup> August 2012 to 9<sup>th</sup> September 2012 and already Olympic fever is building. However for employers the Olympics will present a number of challenges in the workplace, not least the possibility of increased absenteeism, loss of focus and concentration and heightened emotion, which could lead to clashes. There will also be employees who may not be interested in the games but who could still be affected by the actions of others.

The key to dealing with these issues during the coming months is managing employee expectations and forming a strategy for any issues that could arise. Employment specialist Dippalli Naik of Sydney Mitchell Solicitors suggests some practical steps that can be taken to ensure a balance is struck between the needs of a business and the enthusiasm of its employees during this intense period:

### 1. Timing

On game days, events will often be happening during normal working hours. Therefore it is highly likely that employers will face pressure from employees eager to support their country at all times of the day. To deal with this, employers should consider:

- Be flexible – there is no legal right to take time off during the Olympics much to the chagrin of many people! However employers can agree, where possible, temporary flexible working arrangements such as altering start and finish times during the working day using a rota and extending the lunch hour. They can also allow employees to make up missed hours on other days in the week.
- If this is a viable option it is also important to remember those employees that are not interested in the Olympics and ensure they are not disadvantaged by the working arrangements – balance is key.

### 2. Staff Levels

Depending on the nature of the business, employers may actually need to consider whether additional staff are needed during the Olympics. For example businesses in the hospitality and transport industries may be directly affected by the games and might experience an increase in workload to deal with the influx of tourists and UK residents alike. If this is the case, employers should note:

- Temporary agency workers are now protected to some degree by the Agency Worker Regulations 2010 and will gain certain rights immediately on hiring and after 12 weeks service. It may therefore be better to avoid using agency workers and consider asking existing staff to agree to temporarily vary their contracts to allow for more hours, overtime or flexibility generally.

### 3. Sickness

It will not come as surprise to discover that sporting events like the Olympics result in increased absence levels from work, either because employees want to stay at home and support their country or because they have been out celebrating or commiserating too much! However the effects of such absences can be very serious for a business so employers need to:

- Remind employees of the sickness absence policy and the repercussions for not following it, particularly in relation to unauthorised absence.
- Reiterate the policy for alcohol and drugs use to avoid employees coming to work hung over and therefore less productive, taking time off to recover from a heavy night or drinking on the work premises.
- Determine whether an absence is related to the games or genuine – this can be addressed using return to work interviews

### 4. Communication

Talking to your employees openly about the Olympics and their plans during the period can prevent many difficulties arising and increase morale. Why not try one of the following:

- Arrange a team talk to discuss with employees what they would like to do during the working day and how they intend to manage their time. In this way employers can make informed decisions about their resources.
- Discuss with employees whether facilities can be provided or allowed at work to accommodate the employees' desires to watch certain events. Ideas such as creating a TV room for people to watch matches at break times, allowing radios to be on during the day and relaxing the internet policy so that matches can be watched online have all been entertained by businesses during previous sporting events.

### 5. Multicultural

Sports like the Olympics reflect the diverse society we all live in and will engage people from all backgrounds, nationalities and races. The Olympics presents an ideal opportunity for employees to bond with their employers and each other and encourages friendly banter and camaraderie.

However, in all the excitement it is possible for people to overstep their boundaries and comments about the games, the teams/individuals and the tactics could risk turning into racial slurs, nationalistic harassment and discrimination. To avoid this type of behaviour occurring, employers should focus on:

- Treating all employees in the same way regardless of race, sex or nationality. For example, if you allow Team GB supporters time off to watch a team event, you should apply the same policy to non-GB nationals who want to watch their own national team. Likewise, do not assume that only men will be interested in the games and remember that those who are not interested in them should still be treated fairly and not excluded from the festivities.
- Publicising the equal opportunities policy and any non-harassment/bullying policy to ensure employees are familiar with their obligations and understand that any offensive behaviour will not be overlooked and will be dealt with through a disciplinary process.

## Conclusion

You may want to consider preparing a memo on how you intend to deal with the Olympics and if you do this (with or without consultation with the workforce) please ensure you take into account the above points. Any note should avoid being overly complicated and you may want to speak to or pass the note through your solicitor to ensure it is compliant with employment law.

This year's Olympics will be the biggest sporting event to hit the UK in living memory and this will exacerbate the intense feelings that come with great sporting events. Whilst such a major event could pose problems for businesses none of them are insurmountable and it can be used to engage positively with employees, increase morale and encourage mutual respect and goodwill. If nothing else it will lift the spirits of the UK during this tough recession and encourage people to come together. So lets embrace it!