

The impact of sport on the workplace

Executive summary

This major study, commissioned by professional services recruitment and talent management consultancy, Hudson, and conducted by The Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC), assesses the impact of sporting success and failure on the workplace. The findings are based on information gathered from detailed qualitative and quantitative research, which consisted of focus groups, one-to-one interviews, and a YouGov national poll of 2000 people aged between 18 and 70.

The results reveal that sport - and conversations between staff and customers, managers and staff, men and women - can have a positive impact on boosting morale and improving mood, motivation and productivity in the working environment.

- 63% of men and 52% of women said that sporting success (i.e. their team winning) has an impact on their approach to work.
- 47% women and 40% of men said that sporting success lifts their mood and makes them more productive in their jobs.
- A fifth of men said sport increases their motivation at work compared to 12% of women.
- Only 3% said that sporting success is distracting and makes them less productive.

The forthcoming football World Cup is an example of one such sporting event which is expected to have a major impact on the working world. 70% of men and 62% of women resident in England said that it will make have an impact on their working lives - by boosting morale if the team does well, creating a team spirit and providing an environment for social inclusion. Other major events, such as Wimbledon, the Ashes, and the Rugby World Cup, have and will continue to act as catalysts for communication and bonding.

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Moreover, it is not just set-piece sporting events that trigger such positive responses amongst employees and their customers; day in, day out, ‘talking sport’ is a way of breaking down barriers. It can make or break a sale or the relationship between a manager and his/her team. In fact, sport enhances creativity and promotes sharing of ideas.

So what can businesses do to harness the positive effects produced by sport in the workplace on a daily basis in order to reap the substantial benefits of higher morale and team spirit evoked by such tournaments?

Almost three-quarters of men (71%) and 68% of women said that employers and employees can learn valuable lessons from sport: the value of working as a team; identifying and influencing what makes a good team player; the importance of commitment and dedication; the importance of collective responsibility; how talents can be developed and performance maximised; and the value of individual flair and creativity. Sport can teach managers about the importance of thinking creatively and reflect the skills that make a good manager.

The majority of respondents suggest that employers and employees can make better use of sport to boost morale and productivity in the workplace. 50% of men and 40% of women suggest that employers could encourage staff to watch sport together. Being actively involved in sport is also perceived as a good motivator; 45% of male respondents and 43% of women suggest that encouraging staff to play sport together - such as football, netball or tennis - would act as a powerful method of team bonding. Approximately one third (33%) of women and 36% of men believe that sponsoring staff who specialise in sport would achieve these aims. A third (34%) of men and 29% of women said that sport and competition could be used as the focus of team-building events.

For the passionate followers of sport, sporting conversations are an integral part of day-to-day working life, with or without the impact of a major sporting competition such as the football World Cup. Talking sport at work fulfils a host of functions, not least improving communication among team members, breaking down hierarchical boundaries and improving customer relations.



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Perhaps unsurprisingly, men talk about sport at work more frequently than women. More than half of men (53%) state 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 stated that having conversations about sport at work allows them to communicate more effectively with colleagues. Talking sport in the workplace is perceived by employees and managers to be a great leveller, particularly in terms of crossing hierarchical boundaries. Almost one fifth (18%) of men and 8% of women said that sporting conversations help to break down boundaries with their boss.

Sport's impact goes beyond the day-to-day social environment of the workplace. Famously, Harold Wilson, following England's win in the 1966 World Cup, claimed his subsequent election victory was in no small part due to the team's performance and the wave of euphoria and goodwill emanating as a consequence. As well as a political impact, improved economic performance has also been attributed to a country's team's winning streak.

Following past English football, cricket and rugby victories, a boost in productivity has been reflected in a rise in the stock market, suggesting that English success in this summer's World Cup will provide a fillip to the UK economy.

Hudson's study, the first of its kind to examine the social and economic implications of sporting success and failure in the workplace, shows that sport is woven into the fabric of working life, plays a huge part in creating bonds between colleagues and customers and ultimately impacts upon productivity and the bottom line. It is not only the large-scale sporting events that are influential; on a daily basis, sport enables managers to create links with staff, women to tap into male cultures, those on the 'sales' front line (from a retail worker selling a product to a professional person selling a business service) to persuade the customer to choose them, and all employees to establish connections with each other.