

Bulletin Board: March can be maddening ... or not

by Maggie_Reed

March can be madness for some, but there are ways for employers to tweak it to benefit themselves and their employees.

To begin with, yes, there are millions of dollars lost in productivity in the workplace because millions of U.S. workers come down with March Madness every year, an annual affliction caused by the excitement over men's college basketball. The NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Championship tournament begins March 15 and ends April 2 in Atlanta.

With some workers spending up to two hours watching NCAAsports.com's free March Madness On Demand streaming video, just the first two days of the tourney could cost employers up to \$260 million in wages paid to unproductive workers, according to an estimate by Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc., a global outplacement consultancy.

The estimate includes MRI CyberStats that show 36 percent of Americans, or about 79.1 million people, have access to the Internet at work. A Gallup Poll shows 29 percent of Americans consider themselves college basketball fans. So, Challenger estimates 22.9 million workers are likely to spend time surfing March Madness-related sites during the tournament.

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics led Challenger to believe these workers earn an average of \$671 a week, or about \$16.80 an hour. That breaks down to \$3.78 every 13.5 minutes, the average spent by visitors to ESPN.com, according to Internet research firm Hitwise.

If all 22.9 million working college basketball fans with Internet access spend just 13.5 minutes during the work day on the tourney, the cost to employers is \$86.6 million in unproductive wages. The cost of all of these workers spending 13.5 minutes each business day over the course of the entire tournament would be \$1.1 billion.

And this figure fails to include those watching live streaming video on March Madness On Demand. This free service, introduced last year by NCAAsports.com in conjunction with CBS Sports, gives fans the opportunity to watch the first 56 games over the Internet.

A post-tournament report from CBS last year indicated 1.3 million signed up for the online video feeds. And, about half of the games are played during business hours. At that rate, based on \$16.80 an hour earnings and an average of two hours of online time, the amount adds up to as much as \$43.7 million in lost wages.

"Add those losses to the minimum \$86.6 million lost each day for 13.5 minutes spent surfing regular sports Web sites, and the total impact on employers during the first two days of the tournament could reach \$216 million to \$260 million," said John A. Challenger.

Still, there is a bright side.

"Companies rightfully figure that many workers are going to be distracted by March Madness, so why not take advantage of the situation to build morale and camaraderie among the staff," Challenger said.

"By allowing workers to watch the games on a centrally located television, for example, employers could at least keep fewer workers from accessing live streaming video at their desks. Streaming video uses a lot of bandwidth, slowing everyone's Internet connections and possibly dragging down productivity for those actually trying to get work done," he said.

Challenger offers these suggestions for workplace morale boosters during March Madness:

- Pick 64 MVPs. Companies could bestow MVP honors to exceptional workers symbolizing the 64 teams in the tourney. Fewer employees? Designate MVPs for the Sweet 16, Elite Eight, or the Final Four.
- Team sweat shirt day. Relax the dress code, unless meeting with customers, for the employees the first Friday of the event. Let them wear their favorite college team's sweat shirt, even if the team is not playing.
- Offer anti-tournament prizes. Give them a break. Let non-basketball fans enter their names in a special raffle drawing for an afternoon off or a gift certificate.
- Offer flexible schedules. On the four days when games are played during work hours, allow employees to arrive early to work a full shift and still leave in time to enjoy the games.
- Organize a company pool. Employees enter free of charge and the winner receives a gift certificate.
- Keep a bracket posted. For those without Internet access, or to keep them away from it, keep a large,

updated bracket in a common area.

- Keep the television in the break room tuned to coverage.

For more information, visit www.challengergray.com.

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