

Leveraging the WEG requires flexible thinking

By: Jess Miller
Guest Columnist

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Lexington, KY - As Lexington gears up for the Alltech FEI 2010 World Equestrian Games (September 25-October 10), many businesses want to know how to benefit from and how to prepare for the impact of the largest international sporting event to take place in the United States since the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City. The University of Kentucky Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin), in collaboration with our Innovative Employer Roundtable Partners, brings you the second in a series of articles that focuses on how businesses can prepare for the advantages and opportunities the Games offer our workforce and our region.

According to NBC President Jon Miller, the World Equestrian Games will be the second-largest sporting event in North America this year (behind the Winter Olympics in Vancouver). Recent studies assessing the Games' economic impact have upped their predictions from \$150 million to \$167 million. Exciting stuff for businesses. Important questions at the top of many organizations' minds include: "How can I best leverage this opportunity to grow my business?" and "How can the Games be leveraged to improve my organization's operations and human capital capacity?"

One answer is through flexibility.

Many host cities, such as Atlanta or Vancouver, realized the benefits of employee flexible scheduling during international sporting events, including:

- Alleviating traffic congestion and commuter stress. Although ticket sales projections have declined from 450,000 to 250,000, an influx of almost double the urban-county population for two weeks is nothing to take lightly. Lexington has hired a transportation management company to problem-solve traffic flow concerns, but through alternative scheduling or transportation, organizations can contribute greatly.
- Accommodating demand for different business hours. Not only will visitors be shopping and seeking entertainment beyond normal business hours, but they may contribute to commuter traffic congestion on their way to WEG events. Vancouver downtown offices shifted hours from 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. to 7 a.m.-3:30 p.m. to ease traffic burdens for the Olympic Games, which may make sense for some Lexington businesses. If you do change hours for the WEG, though, be sure to provide advance notice to your customers.
- Allowing employees the ability to volunteer/attend the WEG. The Games offer an opportunity for Lexingtonians to rally their civic pride and celebrate their sense of place in the presence of thousands of viewers and visitors.
- Reaping the business advantages of volunteering. Promoting volunteerism in employees has been shown by recent studies (by both Deloitte and the Corporation for National & Community Service) to improve physical and mental health, life satisfaction, job satisfaction and retention. Enabling workers to volunteer by offering work-time or flexible scheduling is a business investment.
- Helping parents manage child care. Fayette County Public Schools will not be in session October 6-8, leaving many parents in a potential work-life debacle that could be alleviated through offering schedule control, paid time off, or the ability to work remotely.

Well, why not? If flexible scheduling is a success, then the structure is in place for a perennially flexible work environment, which has been shown over and over to be highly advantageous for attracting and retaining talent. If

it has kinks, you'll know what needs to be ironed-out for the next period of business-not-as-usual.

The benefits of flexibility are persuasive, diverse and applicable in far more industries than anticipated. However, implementing flexible work arrangements requires planning. If you are considering a pilot program during the WEG, please consider the following:

- Facilitate alternative transportation. WEG traffic administrators estimate that for every bus filled, 20 cars are taken off the road. What barriers prevent your staff from commuting by bike or bus? What can management do to overcome them? Investing in bike training workshops, bike racks, onsite showers, or helping employees demystify the bus schedule are a few possibilities. Such initiatives can ease traffic burdens during the Games, but they are also seeds for comprehensive wellness and/or sustainability programs long after.
- What workplace? Set up tele-commuting systems now. Perhaps the most radical form of alternate transportation is none at all. And perhaps your organization — with a few simple steps — won't need to come to the office at all during the WEG. Remote work systems can be utilized for other emergencies that render transportation unfeasible (like bad weather, for example). By taking the time now to foresee the roadblocks, you may be able to mobilize your staff so they can work without wasting a minute in the car. A few questions include: Can staff utilize a secure mobile VPN to access their work computers? Are staff equipped with laptops or other mobile devices? Can you collaborate on large projects or files through software such as SharePoint or GoToMeeting? It's not too late to acquire and become acquainted with the systems that can open up your "workplace."
- Reassess your goals: hours or outcomes? When transitioning away from a facetime-focused work setting, tracking or confirming hours can be tricky. So consider this: what is the value of working hours aside from the output? Is it possible for your organization to shift focus away from hour-logging and toward outcome-generating? Employees with control over their schedule can work when they're at their peak, whether it be noon or midnight, optimizing energy and productivity.
- Communicate. If flexible work arrangements are new to your organization, be aware of the culture change involved. Stem potential problems resulting from employee misunderstandings or jealousy by ensuring all employees are on the same page in advance of implementation. If one team member will be at home for all or some of those two weeks, make sure that coworkers understand it's a work arrangement and not vacation. Communication is key in any work transition, and flexibility is no exception.

Jess Miller is project coordinator for the University of Kentucky Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin).

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