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It's not only the athletes who need to prepare for the Olympics



20 February 2012 | [Kate Russell](#)

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The Olympics only come to a country once in a lifetime (unless you are exceptionally lucky or long-lived). As always, opportunities bring risk and the wise employer puts on his worst-grim-scenario black tinted spectacles and thinks about identifying and managing the risks. This isn't about being pessimistic; it's about ensuring a well-managed stress-free provision of services throughout.

One of the key issues for managers is likely to be attendance. Employees might have won tickets in the lottery and want time off to see them; they might have signed up as a volunteer and been chosen. They might just have difficulty getting to work.

Maintaining an adequate staff presence during the course of the **Olympics may be a challenge for many London-based businesses and companies**. While there, both employers and staff are bound by the requirements of the law, management needs to think ahead of the game, in all respects.

My message to employers is to pre-plan staff leave well in advance of the Olympics. In terms of the law relating to time off, all the usual rules apply. At the minimum, employees need to give a minimum of double the time they are asking for off as the acceptable notice period to their employers, though your contractual requirements may well be greater.

There is no obligation on employers to give time off to staff over the course of the Olympics. If the business already has employees away (it is after all taking place during peak holiday season), they can refuse the time off.

The Olympics also fall during school holidays which poses a challenge for employers. Many parents will need to take holidays over that time, yet other staff, without children, may well wish to

take their annual leave during this time to enjoy the Games. My advice to employers is to be fair to staff by offering, well in advance, a first come first serve basis, yet considering all circumstances, to those wishing to take time off during the Games. It will be up to their discretion but they should opt to be fair and flexible which brings on the point of logistics. If you know well in advance that you're likely to get heavy pressure for time off at the same time, you can consider making arrangements for temporary holiday cover.

One of the problems with refusing holiday is that many employees will simply phone in sick. You can of course explore this formally, but it takes time. One option may be to let staff know you will be monitoring sickness absence over the course of the Olympics as the attraction to take time off, whether agreed or not is too great a risk over this time. If you pay discretionary occupational sick pay, you can also limit any payments to statutory sick pay.

Some employees may have to take reasonable unpaid time off for unforeseen circumstances involving dependents. This covers, for example, child care. The amount of time off is not unlimited, but it does vary depending on the circumstances and the relationship of the employee to the dependent. You might consider that having loomed large over us for the last ten years or so, that time off at this stage because an employee can't take holiday can't really be considered to be unforeseen. The fact is that the courts do interpret this sort of right to leave very broadly, so even if an employee knows about something well in advance, and is unsuccessful in his or her application for holiday, it can be unfair to refuse the leave or discipline because the leave has been taken. However, each case turns on its own facts and if this happens in your workplace, take advice before doing anything irretrievable.

There is a lot of talk about employers asking staff to work remotely or from home. There will no doubt be businesses which are placed directly in the middle of the action where daily commuting will be challenging, but I feel we should not apply a blanket rule to Londoners. I would discourage employers from making general assumptions that London is a no-go area. London is a big place and there will be many areas that are not affected at all. Investigate the dates, times and locations of the events and plan carefully. Research alternative routes to work. There will be days when commuting will be affected and if employees are required in the workplace, be flexible about timings if possible. For example, they could come in and leave a little earlier or come in later and leave later. There's nearly always more than one solution to a problem and it can work with just a little bit of preplanning and flexibility.

Some employers, particularly those in industries such as hospitality, or suppliers to the Games, have a right to impose a moratorium on staff taking time off. In this instance, staff should be particularly geared and ready to get to work and do their job properly. I know of a company providing hospitality services which is set to increase its turnover by £2million over the course of the Olympics. They'll need every pair of hands available to them through the opportunity this event affords.

My final verdict: plan, be fair, be flexible and communicate well in advance.

About Kate Russell

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